



The Rustavi Choir

Simon Broughton marvels at the polyphonic singing from the Georgian ensemble soon to perform in the UK

The Rustavi Choir are the only Beginner's Guide artists we've featured whose music might be heard not only in this world, but in others. In 1977, two Voyager spacecraft were sent up with 27 tracks of earthly music on a golden disc (read more in the feature in #87). Alongside Bach, Beethoven and Stravinsky were Chuck Berry, Louis Armstrong and Blind Willie Johnson, as well as Native American chanting, Javanese *gamelan*, Chinese *qin* music and Georgian polyphony. The spaceship headed beyond our own solar system and is supposed to show, in Carl Sagan's words, what there is 'about our world culture that we would want others to know about, that we would be proud of.'

The Rustavi Choir's recording of 'Chakrulo' was suggested by Alan Lomax and it's a fantastic piece of vocal polyphony from eastern Georgia, full of slow-moving drones and harmonies with clashing discords, like colliding tectonic plates. This music sounds natural, elemental and other-worldly, like

Georgia's amazing mountain landscapes – higher than the Alps, or their exotic, cursive script – unintelligibly fascinating to those of us who can't read it. Georgia is positioned where Europe and Asia meet, and while the music sounds European in its rich polyphony, it also sounds decidedly alien in its angular melodies and strident discords. I'm sure it was for these reasons that Georgian polyphony, and 'Chakrulo' in particular, was picked as one of the musical glories of human achievement.

The choir was created by the singer and musicologist Anzor Erkomaishvili in 1968. After studying at the Tbilisi State Conservatoire, Erkomaishvili invited singers from all over Georgia to contribute their repertoire and regional styles, resulting in the most celebrated exponents of Georgian polyphonic singing in concert halls around the world. The choir appeared at the BBC Proms in 1997, with every piece listed as a 'Proms premiere'! Although Erkomaishvili is no longer singing with the ensemble, he's still

the guiding light of the group and was very much present at their last UK performance at the Barbican Centre in October.

"My family – the Erkomaishvilis – has a 300-year music history," he says. "I inherited a huge treasure from my predecessors which by this time, was not sung. At that time folk songs were not so popular because people were more interested in the popular music from Europe. So I felt it was necessary to establish an ensemble which would perform the oldest traditional songs and sacred hymns."

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, it's often suggested that national music was banned or discouraged in Soviet times. That's not the case, and Erkomaishvili says they had no problems from the Soviet government. Indeed, their music was recorded, exported to the West and the ensemble toured all over the world. The only problem was with religious hymns, which were strongly discouraged.

The 'table songs' that come between toasts during feasts are still often sung in Georgia, but other songs for ploughing and harvesting don't have a traditional function any more. What the Rustavi Choir have done is keep them alive by adapting them for live performance.

Previously, choirs in Georgia might perform their own regional repertoire, but what Erkomaishvili did was bring songs from all over the country into the repertoire of one choir that could demonstrate the many styles

of Georgian song. It was the Rustavis that came to represent Georgian polyphony in a professional way and showcase it around the world. Just featuring male voices – which is the tradition in Georgia, although there are now female choirs – they dress in patriotic woollen tunics called *chokha*, with rows of bullet cartridges, these days just for show.

There isn't only one type of polyphonic singing in Georgia but several, usually in three independent styles. In the east, around the capital Tbilisi, and in the wine-growing region of Kakheti, it's a powerful choral style with intertwining upper lines and a strong drone bass. 'Chakrulo' and many other favourites come from this region. In the western regions of Megrelia, Guria and Adjara, the singing is more virtuosic, showing off solo voices in a fast-moving, yodel-like style called *krimanchuli*. These tend to be epics and heroic songs. From Svaneti, Georgia's most remote territory in the Caucasus mountains, comes a



more rugged and primitive-sounding style of singing. Many of the Svanetian songs hark back to pre-Christian traditions and they really sound primeval: strange and severely discordant at first, but then captivating.

Does Anzor Erkomaishvili have a favourite regional style I wonder? "As a choirmaster and ethnomusicologist," he says tactfully, "I respect and love the songs of all the parts of Georgia."

In addition to these broad regional styles there's the church music that is also richly polyphonic and probably originated in the folk tradition. No one knows why Georgians have such a strong polyphonic tradition, so different from the more European Russian polyphony to the north, while their neighbours – the Armenians, Azeris and Turks – are distinctly homophonic in their traditional music.

While the Rustavi Choir are impressive when belting out their Kakhetian drinking songs, they can also sing extremely softly, which is breathtaking. Most of the repertoire is a *capella*, but sometimes there's instrumental accompaniment from *panduri* or *chonguri* (lutes), or *changi* (harp), the latter to be found in Svaneti. The full Rustavi Ensemble also includes dancers who can put on an incredible show of choreographed athletics. But it's the male choir that is at the heart of what the Rustavi do.

The Rustavis first recorded an LP for the Soviet label Melodiya in 1973. But their first international release was *Georgian Voices*, a CD of 14 songs compiled for Nonesuch by Ted Levin and Anzor Erkomaishvili from their 100 *Georgian Folk Songs* recorded in the 1980s. They have taken part in various collaborations over the years – recently the acclaimed *Songs of the Wanderers* – featuring a recording of The Rustavi Choir – with Taiwan's Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, and they're working with a Welsh choir in June. But their recorded output is consistently of traditional Georgian song. ♦

+ DATES *The Cloud Gate Dance Theatre's Songs of the Wanderers is at Sadlers Wells, from May 4-7. The Rustavi Choir appear at Llandaff Cathedral, Cardiff, Wales, at the Festival of Voice on June 3.*



BEST ALBUMS

Georgian Voices

(Nonesuch, 1989)
Probably the best single album of the Rustavi Choir. Thirteen songs from all the important regions of Georgia, including the interstellar 'Chakrulo' plus a couple of church pieces. These are old Melodiya analogue recordings but they stand up well.

Rustavi Choir & Duduki Trio Georgia

(Network Medien, 1991)
Eighteen songs from the Rustavi Choir including the main regions and genres, recorded live in Bonn. Plus half a dozen instrumental pieces for a trio of *duduk* (oboes), which are very common in Georgia as well as Armenia.

Alilo: Ancient Georgian Chorales

(St Petersburg Classics/Sony, 1994)
Rather harder to find than the ones above, but this album is dedicated to church and sacred music, recorded in Tbilisi after the fall of communism and the dawn of independence. Some wonderful clashing harmonies.

Mirangula: Georgian Folk Songs

(St Petersburg Classics/Sony, 1994)
A companion volume to the one above featuring their regular folk-song repertoire. It's a terrific recording and opens with the best recording of 'Chakrulo' that I've heard.

An Oath at Khidistavi

(Shanachie, 1998)
The title of this album comes from the lyrics to 'Chakrulo', which ends this 18-piece selection of heroic songs and hymns.

IF YOU LIKE THE RUSTAVI CHOIR TRY:

Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares

Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares

(AAD, 1986)
The Bulgarian voices are all female in contrast to the Rustavi Choir. But once again there's an exotic and interesting harmonic palette. It's not folk music but composed, based on traditional roots. They too will perform at the inaugural Festival of Voice at Llandaff Cathedral in Cardiff, on June 10.