

Voices of the Ancestors Transcript



1. Connection and Isolation

Interview with Jen Morris

Co-hosts Susan Thompson and Holly Taylor-Zuntz.

Preamble

(Holly speaks) Welcome to voices of the ancestors, where we explore Georgian polyphonic songs and the women who sing them.

Welcome to the podcast. The voices today are, Holly Taylor-Zuntz that's me and me Susan Thompson and our very special guest **Jen Morris**, founder and musical director of [Onefourfive](#), Seattle's Georgian singing ensemble.

We are so excited to be launching our first episode at the Tenth International Symposium of Traditional Polyphony. So welcome listeners if you are tuning in from the Symposium, online or wherever and whenever you are listening to us.

This interview was recorded, actually during 'lockdown' on the 26th of June 2020, so I was at home in Oxford UK and

(Susan speaks) I was at home near Cambridge UK, whilst Jen was across the pond in Seattle USA.

So Jen and I first met on a [singing tour](#) in Georgia. It was led by a renowned musicologist [Malchaz Erkvanidze](#) (მალჩაზ ერქვანიძე). We were in a very small village in Georgia and it goes by one of those Georgian names that has lots of Georgian consonants all together so I'll give it a good show - it's Bukistikhe. It was a delight - we spent the evenings being entertained by members of [Sakioba](#), eating wonderful Georgian food and just sinking into village life. And there was a particular evening, that Jen will tell you about in the podcast, where we met another extraordinary singer, [Zoé Perret](#) (ზოე პერეტ) who now sings with the group **Kimilia**, but on that even she got to sing with members of **Sakioba**, and that's the ensemble that **Malchaz** founded.

(Holly speaks) It was so great to get to talk to Jen about how she came to Georgian song and her kind of introduction into this world, especially how she fell deeply into it and ended up sort of creating her own ensemble '145' in Seattle.

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(Susan speaks) If we carry on chatting like this our listeners are going to know all the interview before they hear the podcast.

(Holly speaks) Lets' not give any more away. OK so without further ado here's Jane Morris

Interview

(Holly speaks) Hi Jen, welcome it's so great to have you as a guest on the podcast. How is lock-down for you, are you singing during lockdown?

(Jen speaks) Oof - that's such a loaded question, so yes I am singing everyday day in different ways I guess. Very different than I ever imagined how I might be singing. So there's this wonderful group that just started close to the beginning of this whole pandemic experience and so we're all people who love Georgian songs and some of us have met together in real life and some of us haven't - which is kind of the magic of it, right. So we meet every day and we attempt to sing over the internet - which as you know - it's a challenge.

(Holly speaks) And have you been singing with anybody in real life? From a distance in real life?

From a Distance - at the very, very beginning, I sing in a Balkan women's choir called [Dunava](#). In March after being separated from each other already for 2 or 3 weeks we decided to gather in a tree circle and stand 6 feet apart (or 2 m for you guys) and one of the singers actually brought a measuring tape and made sure we were. And at that point we weren't wearing masks and we weren't really thinking about aerosols and distance and all of that, we just knew that we needed to keep distant. So we did that and that was nice. Nice to see each other. There was already at that point one singer who said "I don't want to do that, it would be like licking ice cream through a window" I was so desperate to sing with my friends that I haven't seen them in 2 or 3 weeks and if we have to stand to 3 metres apart in the woods then I'll do it. "Licking ice cream through a window" what an amazing way of describing singing during lockdown. How's the singing whether it's online or from a distance? - Has it been some comfort to you during lockdown? For sure, yes. So I was already in a place where I was not sure what I was going to do when I 'Grow Up'. (Susan speaks - You know, I'm still waiting and I have more grey hairs than you.) I was in a transition period with my work. I'm a teacher of the deaf and I left my job at the school that I worked at for 18 years. I left at the end

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of last school year and then there's a whole series of events that cascaded after that. You know I was supposed to go to Georgia in the fall and my cat was diagnosed with a terrible cancer and that trip was cancelled and I tried to go to Georgia again in April and of course we know no one was flying or going anywhere in April so it got cancelled another time. So being able to do the things that I wanted to do in Georgia anyway - so meet up with fun singers from all over the world who love Georgian songs like that's number one. And then be in Georgia together then that would have been ideal and practice Georgian language and eat Georgian food and also sink more into the culture and the meaning behind the songs and all of that. I feel like I've been doing that, probably even more than being in Georgia. Because I can meet up with new singers and friends I already know and there's all these off shoots like we are suddenly taking a language class together, somebody is writing a paper for their PhD, someone is doing a podcast. So the fact that there's so much like growth and movement out of this really terrible terrible worldwide thing - definitely is very comforting. Yeah I mean I'm stuck at home. I have to stay here I can't really go to the grocery store and and I mean I could but it would be a big risk for me personally as an immunocompromised person. So if I had to stay home and had no like social interaction and no, no projects to work on, I think that I'd probably just go crazy. So meeting new people, singing songs with new friends and old, working on the language that's really quite difficult - that's been, that's literally saved my life. Yeah

(Holly speaks) So through that celebration you're not just celebrating Georgia and songs together you're meeting new friends, having a social life all be it online and you're celebrating birthdays and having all these fun games on screen and having social interaction so the reason that you're all in that meeting is because you love Georgian songs - right.

(Jen speaks) And it's really interesting I think it's sort of evolved. At the beginning of it, it seemed like - What can we sing together? That's what you do when you meet someone that you know you have the shared background and so within half an hour of meeting you go so what, what songs do we know in common? Like what can we sing? And I think that we did approach it that way in the beginning and it's really shifted into like it could have been going on for an hour and someone will show up and be like have you sung any songs yet and I'm like no, no, no, it's been entirely laughing and it's all like a lot of it actually is stimulating and thrilling and interesting conversation. It's not just fart jokes. It's actually like.

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(Holly speaks) Oh yes us Georgian singers are known for fart jokes.

(Jen speaks) It's continued to be fun for over 100 days at this point. Because everybody has such interesting €€things to contribute to the conversation, I guess.

(Holly speaks) And it's a surprisingly big pool of people who are involved as well. I think a lot of times when people hear about Georgian polyphonic songs it's a niche but it's one of those things that once you get into the niche it's really wide.

(Jen speaks) yes yeah. I would say that at the beginning, in the beginning of my journey with Georgian singing I did find it quite isolating because you'd like discovered this new thing and it's so exciting and you think - I'm going to find a Georgian panduri teacher in Seattle and then you look, and there just aren't any. But I want to find somebody whose going to teach me Kakhetian and ornaments - like I want to learn that singing style. At the time I was in Shoreline, which is a suburb outside of Seattle, and it took me a while to kind of make connections with local people and made connections with local Georgians but none of them were folk singers. One woman, one Georgian woman who's a piano teacher and there's another who, you know, there's some people who have skills, you know, like great Georgian cooking skills. But there's like nobody who could do that very specific thing that I was interested in learning. So I guess I'm trying to connect the initial isolation of being excited about this niche thing, and then, once I travelled like once I went to Scotland for a [Frank Kane](#) workshop and I met many of the wonderful people who are in our group now and then I travelled to Georgia and met more people and more people and all that. But and that helped with the isolation as well because I would bring back songs and I would learn them and then of course I would share them with singers that I knew here that had not yet been converted.

(Holly speaks) So you converted your friends in order to sing Georgian songs with other people, so you converted your singing friends into Georgian singing friends.

(Jen speaks) Basically there were few people who had already been bitten by the bug, I guess, maybe not quite to the same extent as me but yeah. I was singing in a group called 'Mini-Phinny' so we were in the Phinny [Neighbourhood Community](#) Choir together and we were singing American shape note songs and traditional gospel or South African, so many genres of songs and

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there were a few Georgian songs buried in there in the repertoire. But then several of us went to this camp this [Village Harmony camp](#) in Oregon, on the Mackenzie river actually and so we went down to this camp and it happened that **Frank Kane** was there as one of the teachers and it was a 10-day camp at that point. So we spent 10 days singing, learning and singing these wonderful Georgian songs and after that there were five of six of us we went from Seattle so after we came back from that, well we've got 10 songs, we have the basis of a repertoire like we can do something with this.

(Susan speaks) So was this the beginning of your 145 group.

(Jen speaks) yeah yeah yeah that's kind of how that all started.

(Susan speaks) We had this idea that and I know I've read what you said about 145 and that the name of it is a bit of in-house musical joke. So for those people outside the musical joke, do you think we could sing a 145 chord and just demonstrate it.

(Jen speaks) What over the internet?

(Susan speaks) Well yeah even with the time delay we might manage to establish a cord - yeah. You're the 145 leader so you're proposing the notes.

(Jen speaks) Oh OK - So I would say Bahhh, bahn, bahn - is that too low for you guys?

Chonguri Music by [Mtiebi](#)

(Jen speaks) I was and still am a teacher of the deaf. I had the skills to teach children with hearing loss but not necessarily musical adults and so I thought like oh this is not the same thing. Those are not skills that are transferable. But it turns out they totally are, you can use those skills in both areas.

Chonguri Music by [Mtiebi](#)

(Jen speaks) So one of the things that I discovered, kind of by accident, so I've always known that I was quite musical. Like when I was 3 year old I was listening to the Boston pops Orchestra and I was going like "Mummy I hear the violins" and so it's no surprise that I'm doing something musical as an adult. But what I hadn't really understood until about 10 years ago. And in my introduction to Georgian singing was that I actually learn quite well by ear, so I am actually a very auditory person.

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Zedashe singing - *Bindisperia*

One of the things that happens here - and this is more in like a Children's Choir or some kind of ensemble that's not exposed to traditional Georgian folk music. One thing that can happen is that if you only find the sheet music but you don't have any of the background behind the song, you are left to make your own interpretation of what you're supposed to do with this. So if you're looking at the sheet music, you wouldn't have the nuance of like the bases are supposed to push it sharp or this ornament doesn't have that exact precise timing that you can't document on paper you know that kind of thing. And also the transliteration issue of getting Georgian script transliterated into a script that we, us westerners can read and pronounce and there's just so many opportunities for well, to really mess it up yeah.

(Susan speaks) And I've probably taken every single one of them.
(Jen speaks) And I definitely would say that because I, I mean, even now, I'm learning, like there's a song that we sing in the Finny chorus for quite a while that came from someone that came from someone that learnt it from a Georgian. But there were so many so many

(Holly speaks) 'Chinese whispers'

(Jen speaks) that so anyway there's definitely something lost in translation and we ended up singing it as a very jubilant song and it turns out it's a funeral mourning song. It's a song that would be sung at someone's death, but how would you know that if without the context yeah so when I am either transmitting or being the conduit or whatever, I try to really learn the background of the song, make sure I'm pronouncing the Georgian correctly and I'm maintaining as much authenticity as I can being a non Georgian, I mean there is that obvious issue.

(Susan speaks) Yeah so I'm aware you know of one of the Georgian songs books - [99 Georgian Songs](#). When did that pass through your life?

(Jen speaks) So I - so the original, the original bite, when I was bitten by the bug in 2008, and I was looking for resources and I'm not sure if Frank Kane or maybe [Carl Linich](#), I'm not sure if someone actually told me about it. I think I may have actually just found it on the internet, as like one of the only things that was available. So I bought it online around 2009 or so and then I kept it as like 'one should have this' but I

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didn't actually really use it for very many things and then now coming back 10 years later here I am singing with some of the people who were involved with translating it or met [Edisher](#) or worked with [Mtiebi](#) singers and they can say, like you Susan, "I was there I remember this workshop" or I know this from Edisher da, da, da then there's even more background on the songs. But I actually owned it and just kinda put it away because I because I'm not as great sight reader and I don't really access Georgian music mostly through sheet music. I just kind of kept it on the shelf, like this is a resource and then now now we've suddenly sung like almost all of those songs and it turns out that I know a lot of them from having been interested in Georgian music. But not from reading it in the book, from learning it out in the world and then going oh look that's the song that I already know. And oh hey, there's a text that I didn't know was in there, oh hey there's other people who know these songs. So it actually has been a really great connector between the songs that I know in my head and the songs that other people might have in their heads and then going oh look it's on page 44 let's sing it. Fantastic.

(Susan speaks) I'm going to cry this is ridiculous, I would so love **Edisher** to be here and see where that germ of an idea got to. Yeah. I met the guy once, but I know the story, I want to create this book for westerners for non-Georgians so that it's accessible and the idea was to have a progression of difficulty through the book so the first song is the easiest and the last is the hardest and it was very important, it was my understanding, to have the context of the songs and it be a way in, that it was not trying to be super accurate even, just accessible.

(Holly speaks) And it's so wonderful that [Magda](#) you know Edisher's daughter-in-law can see the effect it's having and I'm sure that she would be really happy to know that so many people around the world have this book.

[Zedashe](#) singing - *Bindisperia*

(Jen speaks) These songs are so old and so rich and they and I feel like I am rooted in the earth when I sing them. And I feel like I am connected with not only the beings that are in our time but that generations before us and I feel like that's really there in the songs that you can feel what life must have been like for them, you can feel that energy in the music and you're kind of recreating it, reliving it as you're singing, so I feel like the voices of the ancestors are very present when we sing these songs there's definitely a rich richness there.

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And also when I hear the word ancestors I, I, what was one of the biggest compliments to me was from **Malchaz Erkvanidze** (who I know you both know) when he said to me I think your ancestors must have been Georgian (wow) and as far as I know they aren't. My ancestors actually are from England so yeah yeah but but yeah that was such a huge compliment that he said that and there's the weight that's underneath, behind that, yes, right we don't even have to verbalize it.

(Susan speaks) You mentioning **Malkhaz** reminds me of something we talked about previously that sharing of songs at the table that happened in Georgia when we met. But unusually for both of us it being a table entirely composed of women at the table. I was trying to remember when you mentioned it the other day was **Zoé Perret** one of those people?

(Jen speaks) I don't think so, she did show up, but I don't think it was on that night. Her being there, at another supra that was a mixed gender supra was a really formative, poignant experience for me. Because I remember hearing Dideba Chvens Shekrebasa, possibly for the first time, and the men of **Sakioba** lead it and they sang one verse and then they modulated up one note and they sang the next verse and then it seemed like they might stop and then she just launched right in and she very quickly said "will anybody be my second voice" and she said it in Georgian and like Boss, and then just launched into it and I went - you can be a woman at the table and you can sing like a 'Boss' and you can really own it and I want to do that yes so that of course I called **Malchaz** on the phone and say please can you sing these parts for me and I have this recording of him. I think we're singing over Skype and I'm holding my cell phone up to the Skype and it's a really bad recording and then of course I passed that on to two singers in 145. We learnt it and we sang it as a trio and it was a most wonderful thing.

*Singing at the table - **Sakioba** and **Zoé Perret** - Dideba Chvens Shekrebasa*

(Jen speaks) But back to the women supra thing though, I don't think she was there particularly. But what was remarkable about that moment was that the Georgian women of the house sat down with us. And that and I feel like that doesn't often happen. It just felt like a really special moment that we could just sit down at the end of the evening, as women, and just toast and we were toasting to different things I noticed, yeah, Different to the men you mean? Yes it wasn't like "to Brotherhood" or "to being a manly man" katsi katsoba - somebody always toast to
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"manly manliness" and while that's great and important there are times when that's not the flavour of a toast a woman might make, if they were to initiate it. It did feel very special to have that intimate time with just women and there were only six or seven of us I think and did really break down the barriers between guest and host - yeah - that was a special time.

(Susan speaks) - Yeah it really was.

(Jen speaks) Well it's been so lovely to meet with you. Yes thank you so much Jen. Yes thank you.

(Susan speaks) A final toast to health I think is required, to all of our very good health, particularly for your health Jen, at this time of Covid, we talked earlier about your immune... - I can't speak this evening your 'condition'.

(Jen speaks) Thank you, you had to pick a word with several consonants in a cluster - right - janmrteloba.

Janmrteloba gaumajos

(Susan speaks) I can't manage the word immunosuppressant tonight so there's no way I'm trying that one in Georgian. I might manage a nakhvamdis or a droebit.

(Jen speaks) Right, yes - we could say aba kargad or kargad ikavi - be well.

[Ialoni](#) sing Shemo shvilo

(Susan speaks) Thank you for listening to Voices of the Ancestors with me, Susan Thompson and Holly Taylor-Zuntz. Our guest was **Jen Morris**. With music from [Ialoni](#), [Sakioba](#), [Zoé Perret](#), [Zedashe](#) and [Mtiebi](#). For more information about this and other episodes visit www.VoicesoftheAncestors.co.uk.

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