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**Episode Title: Joan Mills on the continuum of Theatre and Song**

**Interviewee: Joan Mills**

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### **Joan Mills 0:00**

I would say, I've not just enjoyed them as they are and singing, and you know teaching, and so on, but in my theatre work they've been an amazing inspiration for making work and I've created work and also for the creative way of developing an ensemble when I'm working with actors, with student actors, creating an ensemble, through, actually using these songs

*Music* [Makharja](#) by [Ialoni](#)

### **Holly Taylor-Zuntz**

Welcome to Voices Of The Ancestors, where we explore Georgian polyphonic songs.

### **Susan Thompson**

And the women who sing them.

### **Holly Taylor-Zuntz**

Hello! The voices today are Holly Taylor-Zuntz

### **Susan Thompson**

And Susan Thompson, and our guest .... well she really made us shake up this episode for you. Our conversation was so wide-ranging and emotional, - there were tears and laughter from all 3 of us. She's done such a lot in her career that we've been energetically editing our chat, pulling out the very best bits for you. Our guest today is Joan Mills!

She is the Voice Director at CPR - that's The [Centre for Performance Research](#), in Aberystwyth, Wales and she's well known for curating the CPR's, Giving Voice Festival.

### **Holly Taylor-Zuntz 01:27**

Oh yeah, that's a festival I would have loved to have been at, so many experts in the field of voice, people like [Kristin Linklater](#), [Helen Chadwick](#). And then of course Joan's a big part of the Natural Voice Network, she's worked closely with [Frankie Armstrong](#) there.

And of course some of our listeners will know Joan because she's the editor of the book [99 Georgian Songs](#). Which she worked on with [Edisher Garakanidze](#), and [Joseph Jordania](#), two ethnomusicologists - who you'll hear about in the episode.

And there's her theatre work, which I was really interested in, influenced by Grotowski, and companies such as [Gardzienice](#), [Teatr Zar](#) and [Roy Hart](#) Theatre.

And then there's all her teaching too.

### **Susan Thompson 02:15**

Oh yes, I would love to have been a student taught by Joan. She's taught voice and performance at [Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama](#) and [Aberystwyth University](#), and was a Theatre Director at the [Royal Court Theatre](#) and at [Theatr Powys](#). She is currently co-leading the Georgian choir [K'ak'ali](#) as well as singing with her trios Bright Field and Papermates.

### **Holly Taylor-Zuntz 02:39**

Now if you want to hear everything Joan said, in the order she said it, we will be releasing the full uninterrupted interview as a piece of exclusive content for our [Ko-Fi](#) monthly subscribers. So for more information about that you can go to [ko-fi.com/voicesoftheancestors](http://ko-fi.com/voicesoftheancestors) or drop us a line at [voiceofancestors@gmail.com](mailto:voiceofancestors@gmail.com) and we'll help you access it.

But here we're going to hear the golden nuggets of our conversation, so let's dive straight in with Joan talking about tradition and innovation.

*Music [Makharia](#) by [Ialoni](#)*

## **Tradition and Innovation/Voices of the Ancestors**

### **Joan Mills 03:31**

You know this Voices of the Ancestors title is very interesting to me. I've always thought that phrase was very, very important. I know that, I think it was [Sheila Chandra](#) CD is called [voices of the ancestors](#). Many years ago I bought this beautiful CD of Celtic Indo Celtic connection and she writes about it very beautifully on that CD. And I think that, you know, when I listen to the podcast that Magda gave the other week and she talked about Voices the Ancestors as being a bridge. And I thought this was very beautiful, very exact, it's perfect. And it made me think too about something I've been, I've thought about too, which is how it does definitely connect you to the past, these ancient songs connected to the past, but for me and I'd say certainly... this again relates to the [CPR](#)'s whole philosophy, which is about tradition and innovation. All of their work has been about that, how tradition leads to innovation and so I feel it's not just a bridge to the past, but the Voices of the Ancestors take us to the future. And that's why it's very important that we do share these songs especially with the young people, because they are our future, and they should be allowed to, to you know step on that bridge. Innovation is really important, you cannot live in the past and recently I interviewed [Sam Lee](#), the wonderful British traditional singer, [Sam Lee](#) and he spoke about his heritage, his legacy from [Stanley Robertson](#) wonderful traditional singer, who taught him and he spoke about 'tending the flame' you know this notion of 'tending the flame' not 'reviving the ashes' or messing about in the ash.. - it's not about ashes you know it's dead things, it's about the living tradition and so these songs and I have to say other songs of course, the don't you know, I mean there are other songs I'm very. But nothing has touched me more than the Georgian songs, I would say. But the Georgian songs they do,

they kind of link us, back into very ancient er.. performance, song, and, and ways of being with the voice, and they take us to the future.

**06:05 Music: Shen Khar Venakhi - Mtiebi**

### **Joan's Ghost & Edisher's Ghost**

**06:28 Joan Mills**

But this sense of a continuum, this sense that behind us are the past singers and ahead of us are the future singers and I'm just on that little path somewhere so this is like a bridge but it's also like a wheel it's like a strange turning and that has strong effect on you - of feeling not only very aware of them, the past, and you know some of those really old singers - 'specially from the traveller community, that [Sam Lee](#) knows, for example, they talk very much about this idea of the 'amysie' or the 'mysie', it's past which is this moment when they're singing and they're singing one of the old songs, in the old way and then they know that those singers are in the room, and they really feel that, and I have to say that you know there are times when I am teaching and singing, I'm singing particularly with my, with my choirs whatever, it's very often [Shen Khar Venakhi](#) and I feel - I know it sounds strange but I feel Edisher is in the room with us - and he's happy, I have to say (*laughter*) I feel he's delighted because, you know and he doesn't care when we make mistakes or fail or mispronounce something, he doesn't care, he's just pleased and I see that wonderful smile of his, you know that there it is, we're doing this. So this sense of the ancestors, or those who have gone before, are somehow helping us along and I know it's kind of strange notion in away, specially from someone who says I don't really believe in the afterlife or you know er, from a truly religious point of view, but I do have a sense that everything we do in the world is affecting everything else. I've always really felt that since I was a very small child and I remember asking somebody, "but you know in the universe what's the other side of it?" and the person laughing at me and I said no no no no you have to understand if it's like this and then there's galaxies and also stuff but they've got to be inside something else, no one explained anything to me about it, you know, we have to go to quantum physics to get anywhere near it. So you know, we are all atoms made up with other atoms and when I'm dead and I, I often say to my students - Listen, you better do this properly because I'm depending on you because you are the future, I'm gonna be dead soon - Ah Joan please. Well it's true. I didn't do that when I was perhaps pre-40 but I do it a lot now, because I want them to feel that sense of responsibility in a good way, not not too much pressure, but I say to them that what you do is so going to matter, you know, I've got every faith in you and I'm God.. and I said and if you're not good at this, and you don't carry go on singing these songs you know - I'm going to haunt you! A bit. So I mean hopefully that's not too threatening a version of 'Voices of the Ancestors' going back. But I think yes it is about this sense that if you're going to make something new, I think you really do have to understand, take as an example something wonderful from the past, we can't do everything, life's too short I mean we wouldn't get through it all. Even one thing that you really go into anything more what were those people about that, that did that in the past. It doesn't matter if it's painting or it's making pottery or singing or writing something. Just don't leave the past behind and say well that doesn't matter it's all finished - it's not, it's influencing everything that's happening now. And therefore really, as I say, not treating it like ashes you know as Sam and [Stanley Roberston](#) have said. It's not about ashes, it's about

the flame, that we all pass on into the future and you know I, I'm delighted to, if I've been part of that, and you are obviously part of that and so my being in this podcast, you know is an example of this, because there are people you know you're younger than me, but you are, you are the future, so you know I want you to do this podcast and I want you to be very good at - otherwise I'll haunt you. Do that again - or I'll appear on the airwaves going - "that wasn't a very good podcast - do a better one" (*Laughter*) Well hopefully not - if we take Edishers example he'd go - well it's Ok but er ...

### **Holly Taylor-Zuntz 11:25**

It's not about how perfect it is, it's just about the fact that we're doing it, and we're enjoying doing it, and spending time on these songs and that's going to make, it would make him smile so thank you for that.

### **Joan Mills 11:39**

He would be delighted - I mean the fact that this is going out and people may be, anyone can access this. And you for me when I listen to Magda who spoke so beautifully er the other week, on this podcast. To hear her voice and see her picture there coming across the airwaves to me. And knowing that, of course, I want to encourage all my, the people singing in my choir to listen to these podcasts, and hear these glimpses into you know, how the other people are enjoying and working with these songs. It's very very important

**12:19** Music - Sakhioba, Khorumi

### ***Voice Teaching & Edisher***

#### **Joan Mills 12:30**

I was very struck by something Holly that you and Susan, Susan you sent me, that Susan actually sent me that was this translation of the article by Edisher Garakanidze about education and how children learn. It's so fascinating because I learnt a great deal from Edisher about, not just about the Georgian Songs and how wonderful they are and loved singing them, but the moment I saw him teaching I was immediately both touched and really delighted see it the way he worked and also it sounds strange but it felt as if it confirmed something in me that I had been doing but wasn't really.. I suppose I didn't have other people around who felt the same as me and especially actually in a Theatre conservatory where a lot of people really felt that one size should fit all, otherwise it wasn't fair, the teacher wasn't fair, somehow, and you know it had to be. It didn't matter who was teaching that particular type of voice work and somebody actually said that in a staff meeting - it doesn't matter who's doing it it should be the same.

### **Holly Taylor-Zuntz 13:44**

Wow.

### **Joan Mills 13:45**

Yeah absolutely. I had a huge argument in that, well, I tried not to shout but I was very annoyed in that staff meeting. I remember it distinctly. And trying to explain that it's incredibly different, each body voice auditory system that was working with another human being, it will be different

and you can't standardise these things. So I was, you know er I was always very aware of this and how individual it was, both between me and each student, and between me and each group and so on, and the methodology in another person's body and voice would be different even though it seemed to be similar and er anyway there was just something about the way he did this and taught this that I thought was really inspirational and you know at the same time I recognised it, so I felt very glad. And I think that you know teaching a kind of, in the essence, in the working away what it's all about, is that allowing people to absorb and listen. To absorb - this is the other phrase I used to use it with my students because I use it with the choir so no we don't know this song because we haven't absorbed it fully, you know the words, it's like it needs to become part of your whole body and soul before you really know it. You can't just listen and by rote, and as Edisher says, learn by rote.

Music

### **Holly Taylor-Zuntz 15:24**

Now, in the next section, Joan talks about using Georgian songs in theatre and theatre training, which I was excited to hear about because my background is in theatre - I'm an actor and theatre maker. When I was training in [Gardzienice](#) in Poland, I was introduced to Georgian songs, and I was just completely blown away and fascinated. Later that year I went to Georgia and of course fell in love with the country and the folk songs. And here Joan talks about theatre being one of the ways we can pass folklore onto younger generations.

### **Theatre/Holly's epiphany**

#### **Joan Mills 16:05**

And they do stimulate innovation and certainly I would say, it's not just that I've enjoyed singing them as they are and singing and you know teaching and so on, but in my theatre work they've been an amazing inspiration for making work and I've created work and also for the creative way of developing an ensemble when I'm working with actors, with student actors, creating an ensemble, through, actually using these songs. So the actual process of learning them, and very much in the way Edisher speaks about in the article you mentioned, very much in the way of really allowing young people to develop. That also develops commons, er ..it develops a kind of sense of community, like a family, for that production we become a family, we become a little village and we, we are full of common sanity, we even eat together, in that sense and people want to sing together and I can tell you that the some of those processes has been the best processes in my life. They've just been extraordinary and sometimes they've involved students and my community choirs together. I've made a number of theatre pieces where 16 students work with 16 members of [Heartsong](#), or the Enthusiasts, that's another choir of mine, and have made this theatre work together and the respect that they gain across the age gap, the love, the shared love of the songs, the shared love of the process of rehearsing and fine-tuning, absorption, makes an extraordinary bond, so that actually the parting at the end of those productions has been heartbreaking, unbelievably heartbreaking, people have wept and wept your know, so something has happened and I would say I don't know because those students and members of [Heartsong](#) and Enthusiasts and [K'ak'ali](#), have often mentioned these things. "It

was so extraordinary doing that production” - but that's why, it's keyed into something that's in these songs, without a doubt, and their power.

### **Holly Taylor-Zuntz 18:12**

Yeah and now you're making me go when you talk about it being so linked to ensemble and theatre, no - in a good way, in a good way. Because I've had that experience too and that's how I came to Georgian songs and I think it's about it must be something about, it's awakening something in us as humans as well, it must be, because these very ancient songs, we don't have Georgian ancestors, but there's something in them (Joan - no) waking up this community spirit within us and it's when you use, either in a theatre piece or just in training to bring a group together, it's um, (Joan Yes) it can be really powerful and really magical and I guess that's also what you were saying about passing it on to younger generations, that can be a way of doing it ..in theatre.

### **Joan Mills 19:10**

Yes, absolutely, yes it is, It's certainly something that I've found as a fascinating journey. I've been very lucky really to be in a situation to have been teaching in a theatre department of a university, well several actually. Its very very powerful and the confidence that it gives young people the sense of belonging, doesn't exist in society anymore, you know. It's, we don't actually in the UK really, our ancient traditions are solo traditions. It's true in Wales, people think of Wales as the land of song and harmony, that's a nineteenth century thing and later, I don't disparage it, but, I'm just saying but all the old songs and the old songs in Welsh are solo songs, so you know, we don't have that. And they are incredibly beautiful and ornamented and very special. But we don't, we don't really have that deep seated harmony tradition in the UK. And I wonder if it's a sort of thing that's sort of....it's hard to explain but it's as if really, all humans do long for harmony, for some kind of harmony, they're aware of harmony and dissonance, dissonance. It's in the world, so when it appears in the songs it seems right and it certainly does mean something to do, it makes a big difference to how a community bonds, I think. So when these students meet this - that sense of being floating free and nobody quite knowing who you are, no sense of being particularly in a place, it is suddenly overcome. Because suddenly you do have your place, you have exactly your part in the whole and your connection with others and it's all about support, I mean, the lovely ways, when you work in this way that I'm talking about - that people learn to be supportive of each other - not to accept anything you know, oh well you tried so that's fine. No not at all. It's not right the students were saying - no, no, we haven't got this right, let's do it again, do it again, you were a bit flat on that bit, but it's loving and supportive and everyone has their part to play and also - not everything depends on you. What a lovely thing when you sing and it's not all depending on you. You know that you're just part of something and that's an incredible feeling of security and love. Of course with these songs, also, something very special about them. I know that sometimes when I start to sing, I have no idea what I'm going to sing next, until I'm doing it and I read this exact thing said on a, on a CD by I think they're called the Georgians. I think they used to be called The Journalists that, that ensemble that group there's somebody written very well I think it's on my one of my CDs and he says when I stand up I have no idea what I'm going to do until the others start doing it. Of course you don't - because actually the second you hear one band of, and again Edisher

really spoke about this, but I didn't quite understand at the beginning. So if you hear those three notes you know where the next three notes are going to go - you just know! And that's really fascinating (Susan - Yeah) when that happens that's what we call locking in the, you know, the sound, the sound is locked in. It's a very extraordinary .. and I've heard time and time again when I'm teaching and somebodies got it - they are going - wow this is so weird because I thought I must be wrong because it was so easy and I couldn't hear myself - all of that - you couldn't hear yourself because you're actually in the sound. The person is no longer aware of themselves. I'm singing, their listening and being

**Holly Taylor-Zuntz 23:08**

Well exactly, and that's where you want to get to with Theatre and improvising isn't it? Like you want to not be your own head - all you have to do is not be in your head.

**Joan Mills 23:43**

Yes, Yes.

**Holly Taylor-Zuntz 23:19**

My friends are great, I'm just gonna be with them and they'll know what to do, and we'll all know what to do together - so actually that's - Sorry, this is me having a slight epiphany here! Like Georgian Polyphonic songs are really such a great example of what you search for in playing games in theatre and improvisation, in that way.

**Joan Mills 23:44**

Exactly, they precisely are a kind of microcosm of what you want. So that's why, if they are used in training, as you're working on a production it has a very strong effect on the production.

**23:56** MUSIC - Sakhioba - khorumi

**Holly Taylor-Zuntz 24:02**

So that was my kind of lightbulb moment. Because for my dissertation I researched the connection between Georgian songs and play in theatre, playing games, and gender constructs. I was influenced a lot by NINO TSITSISHVILI, who has written on the subject of gender in georgian polyphony.

I guess I was thinking about play in a performance context, and didn't come to a satisfactory conclusion, but what Joan says about training really made a lot of sense to me.

In fact, it was when I was creating that show that I got in touch with [Maspindzeli](#), the Georgian choir in London, to see if anyone wanted to get involved. And that's where I met you Susan!

Music - Sakhioba - khorumi

**Susan Thompson 24:46**

Yes, and I remember you got a bit more than you expected. You came to a rehearsal and thought you were just coming along to a community choir!? But it was one of those rehearsals that moved on and spread into an evening 'supra' with delicious Georgian food, and toasting and you got the whole backstory, starting with a man called [Edisher Garakanidzee](#). And here Joan tells us how it all started.

Music - Sakhioba - khorumi

### ***The Foundation Story, Voice Teaching and Edisher***

#### **Joan Mills 25:12**

Because it is a rather strange story, it's nothing to do with singing originally. It was to do with a project that my husband was directing. Er I should explain that the [CPR](#) did a lot of projects were about juxtaposition. And in fact the Giving Voice project is developed on that model later. But the projects would be things where you would put together um I don't know Travel, Tourism and Identity or something. You know there would be interesting collisions. This one was '[Performance Food and Cookery](#)' and it's actually an area of research that my husband's extremely interested in and you know has developed hugely over the years. And again it's very early, this is, I mean now it's a very well-known subject, it had never been heard of pretty well I think when he began doing that. So in 1994 he created one of these projects. They were called Points of Contact er series er, and so we had all sorts of things like, you, wonderful people like [Bobby Baker](#), wonderful performance artist, baking a whole, I think she bakes actually a Viking set of armour and wore it. You know that was one incident in the project. But Richard wanted to have an interesting, he always had a banquet of some sort at the end, a feast or banquet for the delegates. This time it seemed obvious that what he should have is a Georgian Feast really. He, he he'd got [Dara Goldstein's book, The Georgian Feast](#) and he's an avid reader of books on recipes and so on. And then by chance he met Nigel Watson who was the director and a director friend of ours in Wales and he'd just come back, I think very recently from Georgia I think maybe the year before. And he travelled a lot and why he'd gone to Georgia I don't know. He just wanted to and he was in [Tbilisi](#) and he was at the Conservatoire going to Edisher's lectures. He was sitting in the freezing cold, I mean there was no heating. Things were pretty dire at this point as you know in Tbilisi um following all the strife and the difficulties and he was sitting in the freezing cold. And in fact in the introduction to [99 Georgian Songs](#), Edisher describes this beautifully in his introduction - this strange British man sitting in his overcoat listening to his lectures in the freezing cold.

So Nigel said - ooh I know just the person who can help you set this up. And Richard said really? He said, in fact I know two people, Yes um Edisher Garakanidze and Joseph Jordania they are at the Conservatoire, the Folk Conservatoire in Tbilisi and I can get in touch with them. And so he gave us their contact details somehow - oh I don't know - I guess we wrote I those days, I'm not sure, um, and we were able to arrange it. It was difficult, very difficult, to get the visa, to get the visas for them, to get the flights, to sort it out. Edisher had been travelling to Germany and he'd been doing some teaching there in collaboration with an ethnomusicologist there but er he'd not been to the UK nor had [Joseph](#) that time. Anyway we invited them, they came, and in the meantime they said what we really need is a choir 25 people to sing songs, er

between the courses. So Richard asked me if I would get together, obviously because I sing and I was teaching voice, and I know a lot of people, and had been singing for example with [Frankie Armstrong](#) and Venice Manley and other people, [Helen Chadwick](#). Helen was a member of the [CPR's](#) company, she was in the performance group of [CPR](#) for a while, quite a long while. So er yes, so I did. Meanwhile Richard got together the chef who would make all of the, I think it was 13 courses, for the Feast and by the time Edisher arrived and Joseph we had to get - I had 25 people - 11 of them were my students they were first year students, in my first year students the very kind of students I described earlier, who'd never heard of this in their lives, knew nothing about it. But they liked working with me and thought it would probably be rather good fun and they said OK. we'll do it. And the others were people I knew. Some people who'd bin to 'Giving Voice' and I'd got to know and I was already running a little workshop, class of my own, called '[Heartson](#)' in the college in the evening so for example, there were all sorts of people like I remember um Graham Dod. Graham worked for BT, he was, British Telecom, he was nothing to do with singing at all really, but joined my workshop class and then he said - I'll do it - I think he took the week off work to do it actually.

### **Holly Taylor-Zuntz 29.56**

Wow

### **Joan Mills**

So this strange motley group turned up at [Chapter Arts Centre](#), in a studio there, and we met you know, I think I had met him the night before. But then we all gathered, Edisher, Joseph, they were there. The first thing they asked for, it, - well actually could you um, we would, um, perhaps it would help people to have some of the music written so we will give that. Is there a place to photocopy and we said yes of course and they wrote the score out, from memory, just jotted it down, as we were going if you see what I mean. And I was pretty impressed by that and then we got into the space and we're all very excited and they were dealing with that and I got someone to help them deal with that. So I said to, I remember saying to Edisher and Joseph, would you like me to, um, as I thinking what to do for a minute as there was a little bit of a hiatus, so I offered to do a warm-up and they look very surprised at me. "Warm up?" - I said yeah, you know, 'cause a lot of these, perhaps it's a bit cold and um - It was January by the way so er. So they went Oh yeah, and Joseph went er yes -good, good. Right so we did and they looked a bit bemused, while they finished off writing the score, and I warmed everyone's voices up and then we began. And actually they were just. Um, er, He, The first thing I noticed was that he did actually what I'd always done, which is never teach a whole great big line. He taught a small phrase, just a bar almost. I think the first song maybe, one bar. And I can, **I can feel the hair at the back of my neck now**, of just that bar in the fifths or fourths or whatever it was, I think it was either, the song was either Erekle Mravaljhamier. I think it probably was actually. And it was followed by [Asho Chela](#) and I just know that I, you know, they just introduced that and just got the three voices doing it and I just found it extraordinarily exciting immediately. And this, er, after and then he'd do a bit more of the phrase and a bit more. I noticed how encouraging he was, I noticed that whenever he spoke to us, when we were sitting he crouched and if you see photographs even in the [99 Georgian songbook](#), there are several pictures in there, where you see, one where he is with some children and he's on, you-know he's crouched

right down, to be at the same level, he doesn't tower over everybody. I had students in that group who really, one guy, had a terrible, terrible problem with intonation. My belief in everybody being allowed to sing and everything, of course I wanted him to be there. But I knew it could be difficult. He was so lovely - I remember him saying to him, Oh - and this was often through translation - he would be in German and Helen would translate it. But he said that er, so you have, you're having difficulty with this. And the poor boy yes yes, yes I know I am, I know I am not really in the right place. And he said Oh - right, good, sing louder. (*Laughs*) And immediately again I thought YES, because I'd always said to my students, if you are not sure you need to be louder because then you can feel the resonance in the body, not just hear it, and you hear yourself in relation to other people - that's the only way you can tune. And he just got him to do it straight away. And um really by the end they don't sound too bad at all - it's amazing.

But its, um, it gave such confidence, he gave people confidence. And he was so kind in his teaching, um, not then, but later in the first Giving Voice Workshop that he gave somebody piped up very near the beginning of Edisher teaching and said Oh excuse me can I just say something. And he said yes. And he said, I'm afraid there's a mistake here - but this isn't quite right, because they're singing in, with one flat, and there's some people singing here with two flats. (*Laughs*) And Edisher, now a not such kind, good teacher, might have felt rather offended. I remember I flinched, when this person did this, thinking hang on you're telling the guy who collected the song and notated it, excuse me. But he just said Oh excuse me but do you sing a lot, you know, you must sing a great deal. And the man said uh, uh, yes I do actually. And he said oh you're in choirs, he said - I thought so you must be very musical I think because you would expect that if you were a musical person of course and that's why you think that. But actually in Georgia, and that' when he explained. Well, of course this person was completely disarmed and said oh how interesting, I never knew that. Nothing confrontational. So kind, so encouraging and so gently done and charming, but not in a sort of, I mean charming because it's so human. Such a brilliant teacher. And I think it taught me is great deal about,.. he reminded me about how patient you have to be and also, you know again, I think, I hope I've always done this in my own work now, I think I was, but I think it gave me confidence, small steps, a little somethings, very simple, and then you build and you build. You don't demand, and having said that, I should say I am told by students 'I am so demanding' - 'God you are so demanding Joan'. But that's true, but they always say, but I learn so much. And actually it's because I have a very high standards, I think anyone can do pretty well anything, but not if they don't work at it but if you want to work at it and you want to be critical you must be helping them to achieve that, you must be supportive, and you was never lie to them, you have to be absolutely honest but kind and let let their development flourish like something truly growing gently.

**Susan Thompson**

And so

**Joan Mills 36.12**

Sorry that was a long answer to that.

**Susan Thompson**

Thank you for a truly beautiful answer and really encapsulated for me why so, My background in all of this is, is coming to this from somebody who had learnt a song from one of those people who had learnt directly from Edisher. So second hand. But my feeling was that the reason the Georgian repertoire spread, there was something about, Edisher's manner and his ability to teach that enabled other people to feel comfortable, empowered and wanted to pass it on. Because it seemed..

### **Joan Mills 36.55**

Yes, yes you're right. I mean he thoroughly encouraged me to. Er know. There was something I remember being very, extremely moved, you have to understand me we were working through either or, a translation or very small amounts of English at this point, whatever. But he actually said something to me about - well it's making me feel it now, I mean, just... no one had ever really said you're a singer Joan. No one. Because I grew up in a, you know, working-class family. I was bright and went to grammar school. But all the kids who were really good singers had proper teachers and they knew how to read music properly. I was, if anything, I've always just been from the oral folk tradition and all my early singing was from that. Songs my grandmother taught me and songs that I learn gradually and then songs I actually learned from the Joan Baez folk song book that my auntie from Canada gave me when she also gave me an acoustic guitar when I was 14 or 15.

But anyway in essence it wasn't just about technically knowing about it - what he meant was in your heart, in your soul, the most important thing is that you sing. And I was moved to tears by that. Because I'd sort of denied that a little bit, or never really quite acknowledged that's how I really feel about it - and I think he did that for a lot of people. And some of the people who went on to teach after learning from him and Joseph. But I think particularly from Edisher because there is just something about his method that he, then and at Giving Voice afterwards, subsequently, where he came back twice. And also a workshop that we did here in Aberystwyth with him the year before he died. Those people had a sort of recognition from him that allowed them to feel it's OK for me to also share this. It won't be the same as a Georgian doing it, but it will be as good as they can get until they get to that stage of being able to learn directly from a Georgia.. from a Georgian or in Georgia. You're right

### **Holly Taylor-Zuntz 39.18**

Maybe that's the success behind Georgian songs being spread in the UK. Um because a lot of the Georgian choirs now are sort of community choirs and there's no audition to get in and in fact the way that you describe it. Having some kind of musical background or education can even be a hindrance sometimes, because you

### **Joan Mills**

Oh absolutely

### **Holly Taylor-Zuntz**

notation when actually, that doesn't have anything to do with the notes that you're actually singing in a Georgian song. (*Laughter*)

**Joan Mills 39.47**

Not at all. And also the tuning is often very different.

*MUSIC - from Joan's recording*

Chela

**99 GEORGIAN SONGS (Before Edisher died)****Susan Thompson 40.26**

um, when the teaching, how much of the teaching, how much of the context of the songs came across. Because you were saying that some of the songs were sung by a trio of men, some of the songs by women. Whether there was, um, I know in the early days, that there, you know you were being taught through translations over. Some of the detail doesn't always come across. But I just wondered, what did come across?

**Joan Mills 40.50**

Well er, a great deal. Partly because we were so curious and we asked questions. People were not just content just to try, and I mean, I think the qualities of the people there helped. We asked and um. It wasn't just that, they wanted us to know, so we looked on the map where Georgia was. I have to say I didn't even know where Georgia was. I freely admit that I'd not really, um

**Holly Taylor-Zuntz 41.15**

*(laughter)* Because I thought it would be the Georgian period in history the first time someone taught me a Georgian song I thought they would start singing a really old song and then they started singing in another language and I was like - what - strange

**Joan Mills 41.27**

No they did and they, they, well they each time said where it was from, the region, why it was sung and so on. So from the beginning that was very well understood. But that's why in fact Joseph, er sorry that's why, that's why Edisher then approached [CPR](#) about the book that he wanted to create. Because actually after he'd been to us several times and now this was in 1996 and he was at Giving Voice. We sat down together and he spoke to Richard and I and he said that he would like, erm, He would like to create a workbook for western singers, for singers in The West. And he felt it was important because now he'd started to be invited to other places in the UK, you know, Helen and, for example had invited him and Venice, and so on. He realised people really did want to know what the song was about, what it meant, where it's from, who would have sung it, is it still sung. All of these questions and also some help with you know pronunciation and so forth. So he spoke to us about it and said that he'd like to - He knew that Richard was the [CPR](#) was beginning a publishing h...well he didn't really know that, but we were at the time, we started our own publishing house [Black Mountain press](#). But we were always involved in creating good documentation and booklets about the work that we did, and so on. Richard knew immediately that this would be very difficult to get this published in this country by a er big publisher and not.. He immediately said that er we'll do it. We'll do it for you. And so it

began and it was for just the reason that you said. People really wanted to know these things. And we felt that was very important because you know, in a way the whole of the [CPR](#)'s work is about cultural access. It is about people understanding each other's cultures. Not just looking at them like tourists, but really understanding something about it and making connections across performance. So in fact that's what we did, so we began it, and we were working on it together, erm he'd written, erm Edisher wrote the introduction and sent, had a sort of translation done and sent to me, and it was all very slow, because it's not like it would be now, it would be so easy you know just send it on the internet but no it wasn't like that at all. I think it arrived in the post and then I had to edit that because it was, I'm afraid not, it wasn't a very good translation. So I had to do a lot of guessing and thinking about what he'd said and reworking and just correcting the grammar and stuff and sent it back and so on. And then in actually 1997 Edisher came to the UK. He came to us in Aberystwyth and I organised a workshop with my choir and other people and he stayed with us for a few days and by then he was speaking some English it was still all a bit slow. We had to use a German dictionary where he would work out slowly what it was in English he'd use a German to English dictionary to help, you know. Anyway we spent all this time together and by that time we'd also moved on to what would be included, all the different parts of the book, you know, what he felt was important for people to know, which sort of songs we thought would be good in it, and I was making lists and notes on all of this, and then he, he left and it was a lovely time, by the way, I was very glad, you know. I'm so delighted that we had that bit of time together. There were so many nuances about things that I learnt from that. Er I also have a little tiny thing from that, that's always been very useful for me when I'm speaking to people, when they're worried about pronunciation, and so on. Because obviously I don't speak Georgian and by the way Edisher.. I just want to say one thing about his teaching. He absolutely believed that if you started to really learn the melody, the harmonies, the lines of the parts of the harmony and you perceive that, and you began to and you got that, everything else would follow. He did not spend a lot of time, in fact he made deliberately simplified versions of the words - so you know it might have 5 letters in it and he said yes but when we sing it sounds like it's just - this - you know and to be fair if you listen to recordings you'll hear that very often. But actually he, he really want, knew that if you really loved the song, eventually you will get better and better at the pronunciation, but he didn't want that to put people off at the beginning. And not everybody thinks that in Georgia I know. I know because having been to the Polyphony Conference and so on. I've heard people complain bitterly about people not wanting to learn the words properly. But you know I've also seen ways of teaching that people have done where they teach the whole of the top part and then the whole of the second part and the whole of the ... and so people are sitting there for ages not doing anything. This was not how he taught.

*46.38 Music: Batonebo Sabodisho - excerpt from Joan's original rehearsal recording from the morning of the Feast performance, 15th January 1994, with Joseph Jordania and [Edisher Garakanidze](#).*

***The Dog Smudge***  
**Joan Mills 47.11**

While he was with us we had a dog, a black labrador, which he liked a lot and tha would like to come up and sit on him and things ...He asked, of course, what is its name? And I said Smudge. And he said Oh, sm.. Sm.. and he tried to look it up and he spent ages going through dictionaries - and coming up with possible, what it might be Fleck, Spot, "Is it spot" no it's not that, and I'm trying to explain what it was, and eventually he found the right word. He went ahhh "Smud'u'ger" and I have never - we howled. Our dog was called Smud-ger ever since that, 'til it died, that dog was called that. And actually if ever I'm really stuck and I'm saying to someone I think you need to bounce off that consonant its' a more important - it will really help you I'll just tell - all my choir know the Smud-ger story because it helps.

### **Edisher's Death & 99 Georgian Songs**

#### **Joan Mills 48.11**

But then, of course, sadly he er left and um, as we know the following year, very sadly, he and (*big intake of breath*) most of his family died and we, er then we were left, I was absolutely reeling when I heard what had happened. This terrible accident had it taken him and his wife and his daughter from us and I. But my husband and I Richard, you know, within a few hours really, said we absolutely have to finish the book, it's absolutely imperative.

*48.49 Music: mzetamze zruni*

49.19 And we gradually began to contact everybody we thought could help with it. And then the following year when, er well in fact it was that year, I think, or it might have been the following year, that year be later in the year, when Mtiebi came to Giving Voice we were able to have a conference with them and with people like [Caroline Bithell](#), [Helen Chadwick](#) and so on, to discuss. To try and say, if you've got any copies of music that he taught you at your workshops, please send them to us so that we know what else would have probably been in the book. And gradually we agreed on the 99 songs. He was absolutely insistent - that was Edishers title by the way, not ours. He said from the start it would be called, because I said, would it have a title, and he said he said [99 Georgian songs](#). And when we did the revised and expanded edition Joseph said well it really now it needs to be One Hundred and Eleven - I said no, no we'll just call .. a) it's so difficult to say, but b) it's Edishers book really - I mean Joseph has contributed to it massively we would have never been able to do it all without [Joseph Jordania](#) and everything he did for you know his friend, his colleague. But no - it's still [99 Georgian Songs](#) in brackets the revised and expanded edition. And that's because that's Edisher's title. But that book, I think, was what Edisher wanted, I very much hope so. It's for the beginner. You we've had other people say, you know, when you revise it you need to do this, you need to put this in Georgian, you need to do that. But no, I resisted it all. - I said yes we will revise and improve everything we can. But this is not a book for people who are now travelling regularly to Georgia and working and doing ..... Write your own book! (*laughter*) This is Edisher's book. You know, if you want a more sophisticated book for high level learners - good. This is a 'way in' for so many people and hopefully the little CD that my little group, Bright..my own ensemble Bright Field made - I know it's helped tremendously my choir. It's very simplified but it's a 'way in' for people who don't read music at all. And the book I know has spread. Well we've sold it throughout the world, quite literally. And where we just done a reprint 2-weeks ago of the revised book. Yes, so it's on its second reprint or maybe it's third actually of the second book. And a very important aspect of

this was right from the start, the point of doing it wasn't just that, but we did want it to raise even a little money for the for the family, for Gigi, Edisher's son who survived this terrible accident that killed the rest of his family. And er, we knew that he, you know he was only 17 and that happened, so it provided a little bit money towards him in those days because of the difference in currency rating even that little was worth a lot in Georgia .....and it's still providing money towards the family, and it's still goes to er Magda and Ilia, so this is Edishers daughter-in-law and grandson and that always was part of the reason for doing it. Because it was Edishers book and we wanted to make sure that the family received the funds from it. But I think it has been very helpful for choirs all over the world, we know, and people write to us and how much they use it and er - it's his Legacy and you know. I feel if I've done nothing else in my life, I think, er, contributing to these songs e,r being heard and sung by people throughout the world is something. er having, Richard and I having helped Edisher do what he wanted to do, which is to make this workbook for western singers and spread the word and give people that support that you've mentioned, you know to know more about the songs where each one comes from etc this is something, so I'm you know I'm content that's something to have done in a lifetime.

**Susan Thompson 53:42**

Wow. Well I'm going to say directly to you Joan thank you, because I am one of the people who without your work and I would never have come across these songs.

*Music: Ialoni - Sabodisho (Batonebo)*

**Joan Mills 53.52**

Well thank you. But it's, it's, it's of course the work of all those wonderful people who continue this tradition in Georgia that we really have to thank.

**Holly Taylor-Zuntz 54.07**

Joan thank you so much for our conversation

**Joan Mills**

thank you for inviting me and letting you speak so freely really appreciate it and good luck with all the future podcast I think it's a very important event actually that these have been recorded and that we're actually making something that will be useful for that forward bit of the Continuum for the future because I suppose we are the Voice of Ancestors whether we like it or not.

*54.38 Music: Ialoni - Sabodisho (Batonebo)*

**Holly Taylor-Zuntz 54:54**

Thank you for listening to Voices of the Ancestors with Holly Taylor-Zuntz and Susan Thompson. I hope you enjoyed our conversation with Joan Mills. If you'd like to continue the conversation with us, we've opened a facebook group called Voices of the Ancestors Community. So can join us there for discussions all about Georgian polyphonic songs. And you can share videos and photos and stories and all sorts. I'll put the link in the show notes.

**Susan Thompson 55:22**

Or you could leave a comment on soundcloud, and start a conversation there. We read and appreciate every comment and like on [Facebook](#), instagram and twitter, it really makes our day, so please come and say hi on social media, we'd love to see you there

**Holly Taylor-Zuntz 55:39**

And again, if you want to hear the full conversation, where Joan goes into more detail about her approach to voice teaching and she's got some great anecdotes about her theatre directing work, then go to [kofi.com/voicesoftheancestors](https://kofi.com/voicesoftheancestors). And sign up as a monthly subscriber from as little as £3/month, but you can give us more if you feel so inclined! I have to say we needed a lot of tea and coffee for this episode, so any one-off tips are much appreciated too, even if you don't want the unedited episode.

If you'd like to buy a copy of [99 Georgian songs](#) and support the Garakanidze family, you can buy it on the CPR website, and I will put a link in the show notes for that.

By the way, the music you are listening to now is from [lalonis new album](#), available on bandcamp. Other music in the episode was by Sakhloba, Mzetamze, Mtiebi, and Joan's recording of Edisher, Joseph and the CPR group. Bye for now.

END.

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