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Interviewee: Susan and Holly

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Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Hello Happy New Year and welcome to Voices of the Ancestors 2025. The voices today are me Holly Taylor-Zuntz,

Susan Thompson: And me Susan Thompson and it's January and as we head into our 5th year of podcasting we figured we take a moment to reflect on the past year and talk about what's ahead for Voices of the Ancestors.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: But the biggest thing on our minds right now is of course the political situation in Georgia. And little did we know when we started this podcast five years ago how current and political folk music could be. Um so we've been in touch with some of our previous guests to see how the situation is affecting them and also how folk music is playing a part.

Susan Thompson: Yeah now I know some of you will have been following the situation in Georgia very closely but not everyone will and so it seemed appropriate over to scene setting um I was in Georgia during their last elections and it was clear to me that these elections were not free and fair and outside body to confirmed that there were irregularities in process and then about a month later in November, um Kobakhidze the prime minister announced that Georgia would suspend talks on accession to the EU for four years and that sparked mass protests - thousands of people took to the streets in Georgia, not just in the capital Tbilisi but all over the country of Georgia.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Yup and the er Salome Zurabishvili (Susan - that's it) um she was the Independent president of Georgia and she has been a vocal critic of er Georgian Dream that's the party in power. Of their policies and legislation, she's disputing her replacement by the government because she sees the government as illegitimate. And she has also been on the streets with the protestors.

Susan Thompson: She has yeah. Yeah and the detail of this is it's really shocking, I mean people are losing their jobs because of their political views. Many of the women singers we know are teachers or work in State funded institutions - so fear of losing their, and fear losing their jobs for being too outspoken.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: And meanwhile there are still state funded, State Ensembles who are still performing in concerts and most, if not all of the State ensembles are men interestingly...

Susan Thompson: And yeah and as usual things in nuanced I've heard of some ensembles that have taken part in concerts but then have donated the money that they were given to protests so you know things, things are much more complicated - it's not black and white.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: It's not black and white.

Susan Thompson: It so isn't black and white.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: And as we record this it's the 42nd (Susan: Yeah) day of daily protests so Georgians have been out in the cold every night even over their festive period. And didn't we see amazing scenes of a giant supra table being set up on I think it was new Years Eve all along Rustaveli the main avenue and that really - my heart was so full because that is such an important part of Georgian culture and it is there right in the centre of the protests. (Susan: Absolutely, yes)

Susan Thompson: And the protests. Different people have organised - so one night it will be the protest of The IT specialist (laughter) and another night it would be the techno musicians and then and I'm so in awe of people like the techno musicians and those in the civil service who've been out protesting because you know - they are at risk and then there will be grandparents protesting it's extraordinary

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: yeah all these specialized groups and then they come together and also from the different regions come together as well. So if you get our newsletter you'll know that we shared the distressing news that our friend Data was arrested at the protest and he was beaten and he ended up in hospital. But we are really glad to say that he's out of hospital and he's been acquitted.

Susan Thompson: Yeah and if you don't know Data you might know his Mum, Nana Mzhavanadze. She was our guest in episode 10 of the first series and she's been out on the streets too, she told us about the songs that are being sung at the protest. She said they were most patriotic songs like Shavelgo, Ra Kargi Ram Khar, Tsa Piruz, Chakrulo and Mravaljhamier.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Of course.

Susan Thompson: Of course. And I think between us there's only one of those we know a little bit of

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Apart from 'mravaljhamier' - I think we could do a little bit of 'Ra Kargi' which is a very patriotic song and the translation is "How beautiful is my homeland, the more beautiful it is, the more my heart breaks".

Susan and Holly Sing bits of Ra Kargi Ram Khar

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Obviously there are just the two of us here with our voices so as we sing you can add in the third voice.

Susan Thompson: Yeah and if you can send us all the words please do we realise we've forgotten the second line - it's like what's those words then.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: But when we sang that at the protest in London you could see that is was bringing a tear to the eye of those Georgians (Susan - it sure was)

Susan Thompson: Yeah and there's been so many solidarity protests around the world, outside of Georgia. Um So we attended I've attended one in London the Holly's attended them in Oxford as well um and I caught up with Zoé Perret from Episode 4 in the first Series and she's been organising weekly protests in Toulouse in France.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Yeah so as a French person, who had lived many years in Georgia it was really interesting to hear Zoé's perspective on how folk music is playing a role in this moment. And she said that the party 'Georgian Dream' is using this rhetoric of traditional values, including folklore, to kind of serve their aims and at the same time outside on the streets the demonstrators can be found singing and dancing to show how they love their country and its culture and they could be even more of that happening.

Susan Thompson: Yeah and I was identifying that she felt because music and folk it has such a huge political power um, that it can strengthen people's fight their own freedom and democracy. Um and she was afeared that it didn't want to be associated with this particular government or any one party, she really wanted it to be for the people.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Yeah and actually another really powerful video we saw from the protest was this dance. It's a war dance and it's a war dance called Khorumi from Ajara and it was absolutely incredible to see that it was led by professional dancers (Susan: yeah I think so) But behind the professional dances there were thousands of regular everyday people performing this this war dance on Rustaveli at the protests and that was really like a moment of folk, being for the folk, (Susan: yeah) not just for trained performer and having a purpose and having a moment (Susan: yeah yeah)

Susan Thompson: Yeah and Zoe because she's just got such a depth of knowledge of Georgian folk music she was saying that she didn't think there was, that there isn't a category of Georgian folk music called 'protest songs', it just doesn't exist. But there are these defiant battle songs that people associate with these moments of protest and I was surprised hear that 'mamli mukhasa' that some people say is an allegory of Georgia being a strong oak tree um while the enemies which in the song were named midges attack so yeah I've never thought of 'mamli mukhasa' being a battle song.

Susan and Holly sing mamli mukhasa

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Oooh I'm missing the bani (Susan: - I know, I know) So who else have we heard from, of our past guests? Well you checked in with Nino

Susan Thompson: Yes Nino Naneishvili she's been in the UK this last week teaching and um she's the leader of the the Independent ensemble Ialoni and just hearing the difficult position she found herself in. She is often approached by, by both sides, the politicians and the protesters, almost daily asking, you know, wanting her to throw the weight of the ensemble behind their particular cause and she said she's just feeling completely exhausted with the whole, the whole thing. Um She's, she has no hope or faith that any of the futures offer any person or party is likely to happen. And you know I just really felt for her.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: And as for our other guests - some of them have been at the protests and they've been singing, some of them are waiting at home worried about their children coming home and others like we said are at state run institutions.

Susan Thompson: And we've been asking ourselves what can we do - which is partly why we're doing this video right now.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: And I think yeah, making this mini episode, kind of shining a light on the situation, but coming at it from a Folk music perspective - (Susan:yes) because these traditions are living, they are alive. And listening to this you might be thinking well what can I do. So that might be keeping up to date with news, sharing information with your friends, if there is a local protest near you going to it, maybe you want to write to your political representative, but mainly I think checking in with your Georgian friends, it's really important for them to know that we, you know, that we're with them and that we believe in them and their country. (Susan:for sure)

Susan Thompson: and as the protests continue we are kind of asking ourselves where does that leave the podcast - Voices of the Ancestors. Well we decided very quickly that we definitely want to continue bringing songs and stories from Georgia to a worldwide audience. And we kind of took that moment to reflect and look back on 2024 and it really had some great moments in it didn't it.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Yeah so we created an episode about the Myths and Stories of Svaneti and we were trying a new approach because we brought in our friend Annalie as the co-creator there and that was something that definitely couldn't have happened without our Ko-fi and Patreon supporters because we were obviously able to pay Annalie as a creative. Um so yeah trying new things (Susan: yeah) I think it was a great success, really exciting.

Susan Thompson: And it's you know, although we only put out one new episode, it's certainly be a very full year in terms of getting the existing catalog of episodes to reach a, new people, and a wider audience.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: yeah we presented the podcast a few different academic um events. So we were at the University of Oxford and at the Symposium on polyphony in Tbilisi and then we also

wrote an article for the magazine Sound Sorceresses which is a podcast magazine in the US. You know, so all of these, you know, very different spaces where we're basically sharing the, what we've created with new people.

Susan Thompson: yeah and this year in the UK um it was really lovely to welcome Magda and Amer-Imeri on their, as part of their UK tour. They went to a Festival, called the Tsutisopeli festival, so this is Magda Kevlishvili and she was in our first series and that she has a whole episode where she was chatting about the New Year and Christmas traditions so this is a great time of year, if you happen to be listening in January, to listen to tha episode. Um yeah I mean we've just spoken about earlier, about this dance that was all the way down Rustaveli and Amer-Imeri performed that Khorumi, on stage and you know they told us what it was about, this was a war dance. This was long, well I say long - it was about 3 months before these protests (Holly - yeah it was in May wasn't it) became so live.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: You know it's a great memory yeah and for me it's been a really fulfilling year of teaching Georgian songs and workshops around the UK and leading a singing tour to Georgia and I think having the podcast as a reference point and a place to give people who are new to this music, like more of the background context, because they are just meeting this music and they've got questions and want to know the stories behind the songs I'm so glad that we've got that.

Susan Thompson: So looking ahead - what will 2025 hold?

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: Well we've got our new, next episode already recorded and er that's with our friend Teo Lomsadze. So it's a really brilliant chat, it's about supra and tradition, but kind of holding that tradition in the context of a modern life (Susan: Yes) but then since we recorded that and during the editing process obviously all of you know these things have been happening and then we learnt that Teo had actually done some research into protest and folk music. So we might just have to pay another visit to her.

Susan Thompson: I think so - I don't think that episode is going to be complete and all it can be for our listeners without just touching on that subject - you know.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: So watch this space and hopefully we'll get back to you in the next few months. And I'll be leading another singing tour in August - so I'll be catching up with our previous guests the Chamgelianis and Khatia.

Susan Thompson: Yeah so there two mountain areas - the Chamgelianis in Svaneti and Khatia in Ajara

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: yeah and when we interviewed Khatia she was only 17 and so if you haven't listened to the episode do you go back - it's a real moment in history.

Susan Thompson: And as always we have so many more ideas than we have time, energy or money to put things together. But we do hope to bring you more than one episode this year and your support it's a great motivator for that. (Holly: yes) And as always thank you.

Holly Taylor-Zuntz: So just to close our mini New Year episode we just want to bring it back to Georgia of course and to wish peace to the country.

Susan Thompson: Yeah and then the past few weeks we've been hearing quite a lot of the song Alilo or different styles of the song Alilo being sung by the protesters and usually in those songs there's the phrase Aka mshviodba - Let there be peace or (Holly: Peace be here) yeah so...

Susan and Holly sing: Aka mshvidoba

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