Eurasian folk vocal polyphony traditions

PRELIMINARY DRAFT CIRCULATED FOR COMMENT

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1. Introduction

Three types of European folk polyphony are listed as examples of intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO, but it is only very vaguely defined on its website, which lumps together very different styles[1]. The most comprehensive overviews of these traditions come from Georgian authors, where a yearbook of folk polyphony is published. Much fresh information is to be found in the notes accompanying ethnomusicological CDs, since professional journals are largely now given over to theory. Even so, the exact extent of Eurasian traditions and their place vis-à-vis other world traditions has not been reviewed in the light of recent knowledge. Hence this paper, which tries to both synthesise the academic literature and the recordings now available. One part of understanding this tradition is through listening to the CDs which are available, as well as reading, though much of the literature is highly local. A sample of key recordings is given as an appendix to the main text.

Folk polyphony is a broad category and the paper outlines a series of musical structures which underlie the different architectures. These turn out to form an intricate mosaic, geographically speaking, rather than to be confined to particular regions, which suggests a pattern of dynamic change and constant reinvention. Although the Eurasian traditions are most commonly vocal, in contrast, for example, to Africa, they clearly interact with instrumental traditions, notably the bagpipes, the triple pipes and more obscure ensembles such as the Lithuanian *skudučiai* one-note whistles. We typically assume that vocal traditions must precede instruments, but the paper argues that the imitation of instrumental styles may in fact stimulate innovation in vocal polyphony.

For listeners familiar with medieval music, in particular the *organum* of the early schools in Notre Dame, the two traditions exhibit clear structural parallels. Classical histories of Western music typically trace early polyphony back to the Ancient Greeks via Byzantium, and with the exception of Manfred Bukofzer (1940), seem to have been uninterested in the probable folk roots of these traditions. This is surprising in some ways; in Corsica for example, liturgical music is structured along exactly the same lines as secular songs, and both resemble the polyphony of Perotin and his successors in twelfth century Paris.

The core area of folk polyphony is in Western Russia and in areas which fell within the boundaries of the former Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was very tentative about publishing recordings of unedited and unarranged folk music of any type, although some material is now emerging. However, Russian scholars were very active in publishing monographs and papers on these minority traditions. In addition, countries which fell within the Soviet orbit, such as Georgia, Armenia, Lithuania and several Eastern European countries, also published extensively. This material is difficult to access and could only be read in its entirety by a scholar with extreme polyglot skills. So the claims made in this paper inevitably depend on summaries in languages I can read. An additional major source is the Europe volume of the Garland Encyclopaedia of World Music (Rice et al. 2000) which has the advantage of providing some coverage for all European countries. I have also depended heavily on Jordania (2006) for references to the Eastern European literature.

2. Basic structures of folk polyphony

Five major types of vocal polyphony can be distinguished in Europe and West-Central Russia. These are;

I. Heterophonic polyphony

where there is a single underlying melody, which is decorated by a group of performers in different ways. This is particularly found in Russia and the Caucasus, for example among the Mordvins, Mari, Udmurt, Tatar (cf. Adler 1908).

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[1] Links to the relevant pat of the website are given under individual countries.

II. Drone polyphony

where a drone or pedal note underlies the top voices. Most typically this is a single note, but there are also examples of double and even triple drones. In Russia this is present in some isolated areas in the western (Bryansk district) and the southern (Voronezh and Belgorod districts) regions. There is a special subtype of drone polyphony in Belgorod district, with a double drone on the fifth, framing melody from both sides. The Komi in Northern Russia also have drone polyphony. Outside Russia proper, the Chechens, Mordvins, Abkhaz and Ossetians are known for two-part drone polyphony, also sometimes with a double drone. The Bashkir practice a type of drone polyphony based on overtone singing, the westernmost occurrence of this tradition, known particularly from Mongolia and Inner Asia (Zemtsovsky 2000). Drone polyphony is similar in Sardinia (where it is undoubtedly related to the triple pipe, *launeddas*) and Sicily, where it draws on bagpipe, *zampogna*, traditions.

This lies at the origin of European art polyphony, which began with the *organum* chants of twelfth century Paris. Léonin put together his compositions into a book, the *Magnus liber organi*, around 1160. The even earlier source of the 1020s and 1030s, Guido d'Arezzo (*Micrologus*, XIX) gives musical examples of polyphonic two-part singing with a drone. By the time German popular polyphony is being written down in the 14th-century, Hermann, the Monk of Salzburg was composing polyphonic songs. Two of these, *Das Taghorn* and *Das Nachthorn*, require the accompaniment of a wind-instrument, a single note drone.

III. Parallel polyphony

is where the music moves in block chords, also known as *parallel voice leading*.

Polyphony among the Chuvash, a Turkic-speaking people in the Volga-Ural region of Siberia, have a type of parallel line polyphony where the lower voice skips between a third and a fifth below the main line (Almeeva 1988). Lithuania has a type of parallel polyphony sung by antiphonal groups, which is also part of the distributed whistle ensembles. These are;

> Dvejinės ("twosomes") are sung by two singers or two groups of singers.
> Keturinės ("foursomes") are sung by two pairs of singers.

These also develop a type of polytonality, unusual in these traditions.

Albania/Kosovo[2] is also well-known for this type of parallel harmony, especially in Kosovo and Western Macedonia where older women sing monophonic lines, duplicated a second or a third below, whereas men in the same area is in unison (Sugarman 2000). As late as the 1930s, *Tvisongur* duets were still sung in Iceland, which consisted of two-part polyphony in fifths (Hornbostel 1930). Giraldus Cambrensis[3], writing in the latter part of the 12th century, says that in the north of England they sang in two parts and in Wales in many voices.

The anonymous 9th-century treatise, the *Musica Enchiriadis* (Manual of Music)[4] suggests that common practise at the period was parallel movement in fourths and fifths, quite distinct from the later development of *organum* (Bukofzer 1940). The earliest examples of this popular music, the *gymel*, date from ca. 1280. The pieces are at first mostly for two voices, while those in contemporary 'art music' indicate three.

In the *Quatuor principalia* (1351), an Englishman, Simon Tunsted(e) (died 1369) describes an unusual form of improvised polyphony. Here organum, with four voices at the exact distances (fifth-octave-twelfth), is

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[2] Albanian folk iso-polyphony - intangible heritage - Culture Sector - UNESCO
[3] *Descriptio Cambriae*, I, VI, 189, Rerum Britannicarum Scriptores I, XXXVI.
[4] Erickson, Raymond 2001. Musica enchiriadis, Scholia enchiriadis. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. London: Macmillan.

combined with a voice that proceeds, principally or exclusively, in thirds (hence in fauxbourdon style). The Italian theorist Franchino Gafori (Gafurius) condemns, in his *Practica musicae* (1496), the two-part singing still in vogue at Milan which he calls *falsus contrapunctus*. Instead of the fifth and fourth, the sharpest dissonances; major seconds, ninths, and sevenths-predominate. This is strongly reminiscent of the Istrian dissonances still heard today, where parallel movement in seconds is common.

IV. Three/four part polyphony

usually combines a drone line, tenor and bass lines, which are independent melodies.

This is found in central and southern Russia (Belgorod, Voronezh, Riazan districts) and among some Cossacks, the Balkarians and the Karachaevi. Other minorities in the region, such as the Ingush, also have three part systems, as well as in Georgia and Armenia. The Georgian philosopher Ioane Petritsi (ი თა ნ ე პ ე ტ რ ი წ ი) (floreat 11-12th. centuries) the author makes symbolic parallels between the Christian Trinity and the three parts of the Georgian church singing tradition, and mentions the then-existing names of three parts: *Mzakhr*, *Zhir*, and *Bam*.

Sardinian folk polyphony also has the distinctive double drone, *bassu* and *contra*, with two lines above it, *boghe* and *mesa boghe*. Vocal polyphony is unknown in Ireland today, but in the medieval saga text, *Saga on the Sons*, describes the practice of three-part male polyphony. Gruber (1941:507) notes that the Saga contains the names of all three parts; *andord* (tenor), *coblach* (baritone) and *dord* (bass). It seems likely it was this type of folk polyphony which was the inspiration of the *Ars Nova*, or the new polyphony which became popular in Europe from the 13th century onwards and is described in the *Scientia artis musicae* of Elias Salomon, submitted to Pope Gregory X in 1274.

The multi-part European polyphonic style has in turn influenced folk traditions, for example on the island of Corfu. Long in the Venetian sphere (only becoming part of Greece in 1864) they developed 'Romantic serenades (*kantadhes*), still popular, are the only Greek folk music that uses western harmony: men singing triadic three- and four-part harmonies, accompanying themselves on mandolins and guitars" (Cowan, 2000:1014). The same is true in England, where the rich traditions of group singing, for example the Copper Family, is ironically not really 'traditional', but almost certainly betrays the influence of classical European polyphony.

V. Canons or imitation polyphony

Canonic structures, where each singer has the same melodic line, but enters after the first singer in a determined sequence, is not common in Eurasia, although the 'round', appearing in published songbooks in England from the sixteenth century onwards is clearly a descendant of this principle. Two- and three-part imitation polyphony was recorded in one Russian village (village Foshchevatogo in Belgorod district) as a part of the wedding tradition (Shchurov, 1985:14-15). Another area where canonic styles are well-developed is Lithuania, where the *sutartines* tradition involves three performers singing the exact same melody but coming in separated by several bars, in some cases at the halfway point in the melody (Slaviunas 1972).

3. The distribution of different types of polyphony

3.1 Synchronic attestations

If vocal polyphony is archaic, then it was probably more widely distributed in the Eurasian area than it is today. Table 1 tabulates the evidence for its presence and category in historic times and then make a proposal for its original distribution. The Roman numerals are keyed to the numbers in the outline in §2.

Table 1. Vocal polyphony in the Eurasian zone by country and peoples

Country	Population	I	II	III	IV	V	Source(s)
Russia	Mordvin	+	+	+			Vaisonen (1948); Boiarkin (1985); Boiarkina (1985); Uritskaya (1973)
	Mari	+					Gerasimov (1988)
	Udmurt	+					Jordania (2006)
	Tatar	+	+				Almeeva (1985, 1988)
	Komi Permiak	+	+				Zhulanova (1989); Zemtsovsky (2000: 774)
	Chechen/Ingush		+				Rechmenski (1957)
	Abkhaz		+				Ashuba (1986); Khashba (1977, 1983); Jordania (2000b)
	Adyghe		+				Gippius (1980, 1981, 1986)
	Ossetes		+		+		Galaev (1964)
	Dagestan[5]		+				Jordania (2006)
	Bryansk district		+				Zemtsovsky (2000)
	Voronezh		+		+		Zemtsovsky (2000)
	Belgorod district		+		+		Zemtsovsky (2000)
	Riazan				+		Zemtsovsky (2000)
	Cossack				+		Zemtsovsky (2000)
	Balkarian		+		+		Jordania (2000)
	Karachaevi		+		+		Jordania (2000)
	Chuvash			+			Almeeva (1988)
Belarus		+	+	+			Kutireva (1985:38); Mozheiko (1983); Mozheiko and Survilla (2000:794)
Ukraine		+	+				Lineva (1905-1912); Iashchenko (1962); Noll (2000)
Georgia[6]	Georgian[7]		+	+	+		Araqishvili (1905, 1908, 1950); Ashuba (1954, 1956); Aslanishvili (1970); Iashvili (1977); Jordania (1982, 2000a)
	Svaneti				+		Araqishvili (1950)
Armenia					+		Barsegian (1988)
Poland	Carpathians			+			Elschekova (1981)
Lithuania		+	+			+	Slaviunas (1958-1959; 1964; 1972); Chiurlionyte 1938, 1967)
Estonia	Estonian		+				Tampere (1938)
	Seto	+	+				Sarv (1988)
Latvia			+				Vitolin (1976)
Romania	Romanians	+?					Apan (2000)
	Aromanians	+	+				Marcu (1977)
Bulgaria[8]	Southwest	+					Stoin (1925); Kaufman (1963, 1968); Katzarova-Kukudova (1962); Kaufman & Todorov (1967); Stoin (1970); Messner (1980)
	West-central				+		Rice (1977, 1988, 1994, 2000a; 2003)
Slovenia			+	+	(+)		Omerzel-Terlep (2000)

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[5] Based on unpblished material in Jordania (2006) and admittedly incomplete
[6] Georgian polyphonic singing - intangible heritage - Culture Sector - UNESCO
[7] Georgia is probably the most well-studied tradition of all those considered here, with a lengthy bibliography, which is only cited in part here.
[8] Bistritsa Babi, archaic polyphony, dances and rituals from the Shoplouk region - intangible heritage - Culture Sector - UNESCO

Country	Population	I	II	III	IV	V	Source(s)
Czechia			+	+	+		Zelinska & O'Connor (2000)
Slovakia				+			Elschekova (1963, 1981)
Croatia			+	+			Forry (2000a)
Serbia			+	+			Forry (2000b)
Bosnia			+	+			Rihtman (1953, 1958, 1966)
Montenegro			+				Petrovich (2000)
N. Macedonia		+	+	+			Bicevski (1986); Rice (2000b)
Albania	Kosovo		+	+			Shituni (1989); Sugarman (2000)
	Lab		+	+			Shituni (1989)
Greece	Epirus		+	+			Baud-Bovy (1983); Cowan (2000)
	Rhodes			+			Cowan (2000)
	Corfu				+		Cowan (2000)
Austria	Carinthia				+		Messner (1973)
Switzerland					+		Hoffman & Delorenzi-Schenkel (2000)
Europe	Early Europe			+			Hibberd (1955)
England	English				+		Gammon (2000)
Wales	Wales (†)			+			Hibberd (1955)
Iceland	Iceland			+			Hornbostel (1930); Hopkins (2000)
Italy	Abruzzi		+				Keller et al. (2000)
	Venetia/Genoa			+			Leydi (1973)
	Calabria		+				Ricci (1993)
	Sardinia				+		Lortat-Jacob (1993; 2000)
	Sicily		+	+	+		Collaer (1980); Macchiarella (2005)
	Liguria	+					Balma & Angiolini (2007)
France	Béarn	+		+			La Novem (n.d.) [CD]
	Brittany	+					Kuter (2000)
	Corsica				+		Bithell (2000a,b); Laade (2000)
Spain			+				Ayats & Martinez (2005)
	Albacete		+				Schneider (1969)
	Basque			+			Ghvacharia & Tabagua (1983)
Portugal					+		Castelo-Branco (2000)

3.2 Original distribution

The pattern of current distribution is clear. Eurasian folk polyphony is largely confined today to Southern and Eastern Europe and Russia. However, historical evidence suggests it was formerly widespread throughout much or Europe, plausibly attested in Iceland and Britain. Map 1 plots out the occurrences within recent eras and the hypothetical distribution across early Europe. It should be underlined that this is speculative, as there is almost by its nature, no direct evidence.

There is some textual evidence for the now empty zone including Scandinavia and the British Isles. Writing in the twelfth century, Giraldus Cambrensis thought that the polyphonic performance styles he describes had been introduced by the Vikings. He says;

> Since the English in general do not employ this method of musical performance but only the northerners, I believe that it was from the Danes and Norwegians, by whom these parts of the island were more frequently invaded and held longer, that they contracted this peculiarity of singing as well as their manner of speaking (Hibberd, 1955:8).

Map 1. Hypothetical and actual distribution of Eurasian folk polyphony
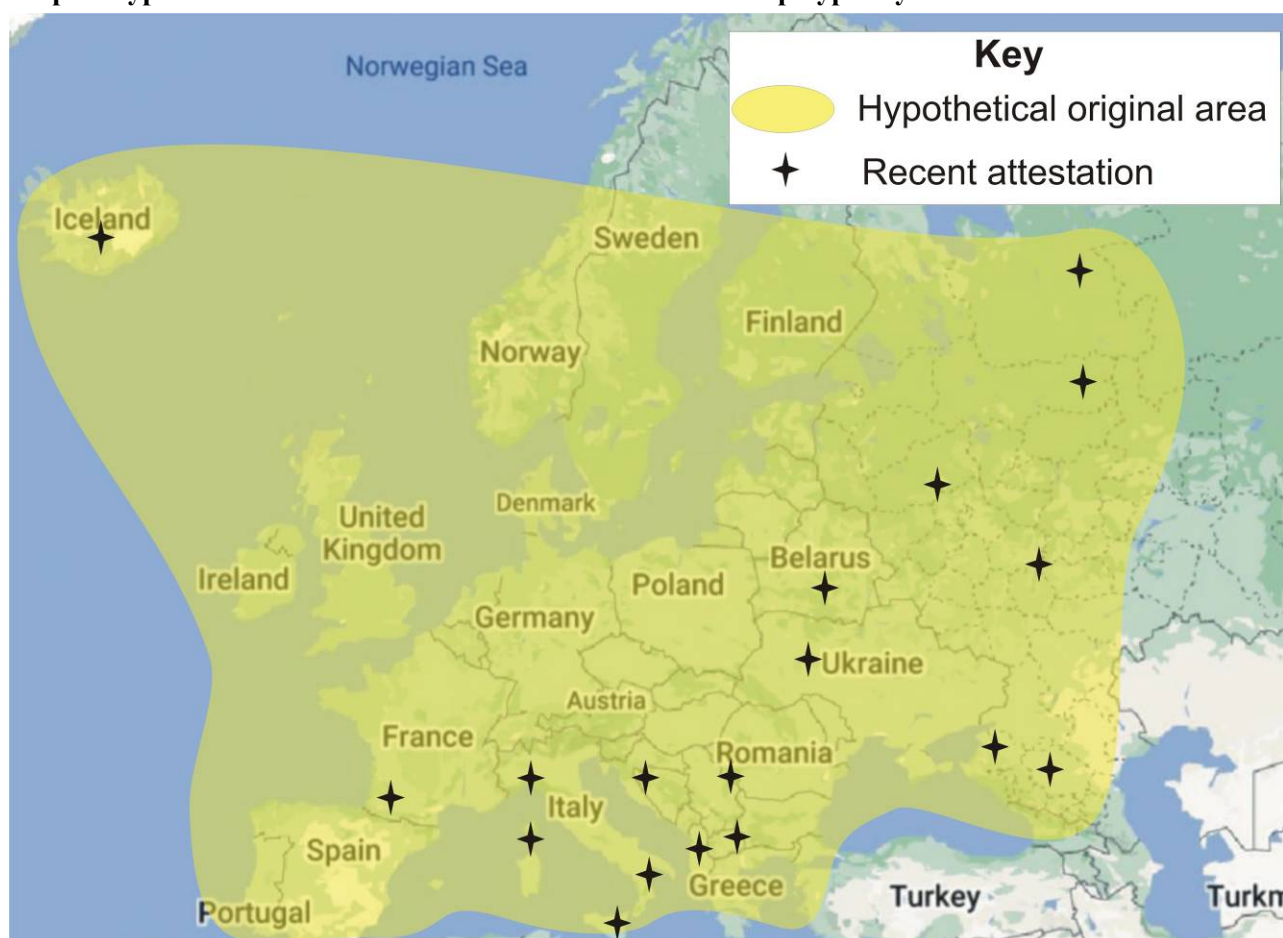
Even though such polyphonic music is now not known in Scandinavia, this is intriguing evidence that it must once have been common there. The question is the why it should have died out in so many areas. The most likely explanation is related to the growth of the nation state and the different patterns of social integration this implied. This hypothesis is considered in more detail in §5.

4. The interaction with musical instruments

Throughout this review, there is a constant theme of the similarities with instrumental polyphony. Such a relationship is often more direct in African music where voices and instruments often mingle or substitute for one another (Arom 2004). In the Eurasian polyphony area, the instruments are typically as shown in Table 2, which also presents the likely vocal ensemble association.

Photo 1. *Zampogna* in Italy

Table 2. Instruments associated with polyphony in Eurasia

Instrument	Structure
Bagpipes	drone and double drone polyphony
Triple-pipe	drone and double drone polyphony
Jew's harp	drone and single upper voice
Double duct-flute	drone and single upper voice
Skudučiai whistle ensemble	heterophony, two-part polyphony

The bagpipes, which are spread from Ireland to western India (Baines 1960), are usually provided with double reeds, and combine a melody pipe with one or more drone pipes. In Southern Italy, the instrument is both large and highly developed, is integrated into Christmas rituals (Photo 1). Styles of vocal polyphony, including double drones, are strongly co-associated with the bagpipe.

Source: CC

The *launeddas* (Sardinian triple pipe) is a multi-tube clarinet, similar to the *mizmar* in North Africa. Similar instruments are represented in stone carvings widely across Europe prior to the Middle Ages, but it seems to have vanished elsewhere. One of the pipes functions as a drone and the other two play the melody in thirds and sixths (Mercurio 2015).

Photo 2. *Launeddas players*

Source: CC

The Lithuanian *sutartinės*, sung by women, are a localized phenomenon, found in the northeast and east. Men perform instrumental versions on the *skudučiai*, a single-note whistle ensemble, as well as wooden trumpets (*ragai* and *dandytės*). Photo 3 shows a typical *skudučiai* ensemble photographed in 1913.

Photo 3. *Skudučiai* ensemble (1913)

Source: CC

One of the most characteristic instruments of the Balkan region is the double duct-flute (Photo 4) known by a variety of names in Albania (*cyladiare*),
Bulgarian (*dvoyanka*), Greece (*disavli*),Maedonia (*piska*), Romania (*fluierul gemanat*) and Serbia (*dvojnice*). The two pipes can be arranged to play parallel melodies, or else one pipe is a drone and the other used for melody. Nikoladze (1986, 2003) has described the inter-realtion between the double flute and vocal polyphony in some detail.

Photo 4. Balkan double duct-flute

Source: CC

The question of whether the jews' harp is linked to vocal polyphony is more complex. Like the bagpipe it has a drone and a melody is performed on the harmonics of the fundamental, similar to a natural trumpet. This is certainly connected with the throat-singing typical of Mongolia and adjacent regions. But this is a distinct tradition and probably not connected with polyphonic vocal ensembles.

Laurence Picken (1953-54), in a paper on instrumental polyphony in Eastern Turkey, points to both the polyphonic fragments played on bagpipes, and the tunes of the *kemençe*, a three-stringed fiddle. The *kemençe* is tuned so that it can play elaborate melodies in parallel fourths, as well as a drone with an upper voice melody. Picken points out that the dominant model that homophonic monodic music is somehow how primitive and that sophisticated polyphony developed from it may well be completely false, and an inversion of the actual historical sequence, a view also espoused in this paper.

5. Folk polyphony and social structure

Musical forms which require the co-operation of a number of performers to play a broadly equal part in a musical performance presumably reflect specific social structures. They require an egalitarian ideology, where everyone has an equal part to play. This implies that populations do not have a sense of social hierarchy which is interconnected with a perception of differential musical excellence. It is notable, for example, that across the world of Islam, where social hierarchy is pervasive, a culture of master musicians and monody has driven out any tendency towards folk polyphony. There is textual evidence that some type of polyphony was known to early Islamic music theorists. From passages in the surviving treatises of Al-Kindi' (c. 801–873 AD) and Ibn Sina (c. 980 – 1037 AD) it is known that these authors were familiar with fourths, fifths and octaves and their use; and in the *Muriṣtus* mss. quoted by Farmer, triads are mentioned and their affective properties described (Picken 1953-54).

In Western Europe, the rise of the nation state and the feudal system has also acted against any similar trend; the account of Giraldus Cambrensis of early England and Wales (§2.) appears to correlate neatly with the rise of the feudal system and thus in some way with economic individualism. Such an explanation is not global; most of the traditional populations of the New World and Highland SE Asia were also small, acephalous, egalitarian societies, yet did not develop polyphony (§6.). Nonetheless, it is notable that Mediterranean island outliers, such as Corsica, Sardinia and Sicily, retained these traditions, whereas they largely disappeared on the Italian mainland. Albania, for example, is divided sharply vertically between the North, where musical performance is monodic and dominated by professional performers, and the south, where the vocal polyphony of the Lab links to other East European traditions.

6. Some historical hypotheses on the origin and former distribution of polyphony

These forms of vocal polyphony, despite the subclassification given in this paper, all seem to be related to one another, and indeed many traditions include several forms. Moreover, the extent of this tradition seems to be geographically constrained. The other main regions of the world where vocal and instrumental polyphony are practised are;

a) Sub-Saharan Africa. This is so common as to be near universal, although instrumental polyphony is far more common than vocal versions.
b) Papuan zone, stretching from Flores into New Guinea and offshore islands such as the Admiralties. Although the westernmost islands are Austronesian speaking today, there is little doubt these styles derive from a Papuan substrate. Intriguingly, singing in eastern Micronesia, in parallel seconds, resembles the Admiralties, whence they may have been settled.
c) South China zone encompassing southern China, northern Vietnam and Taiwan. This distribution points strongly to polyphony being an early Austronesian practice and perhaps linked to the multi-tongue jew's harps common to both areas[9]. Taiwan is particularly diverse for unknown reasons, given that these traditions are absent in the nearby Philippines.
d) This is possibly a further connection with the polyphony implied by the single-note whistle ensembles in Nagaland, which in turn resemble the block chords of the mouth-organ.

There seem to be nowhere in the traditional cultures of the New World where vocal polyphony was practised, although there are limited instrumental ensembles, for example in Guyana and nearby regions in northwest South America (e.g. Broere 1993; Estival 1993).

Map 2 shows the global distribution of folk polyphony, approximately following the zones set out above. The Eurasian zone is hypothetical, as outlined in Map 1.

The large areas of the world where polyphony is effectively absent argue there is nothing fundamental to these practices, i.e. they are not somehow intrinsic to the coming together of people to sing. Nonetheless, the fact that they *are* common to some of Africa's most ancient populations, the Khoisan and the Central African pygmies (Demolin 1993; Poole 2018), does suggest considerable antiquity. It is possible then that they were once part of the cultural repertoire of early humans. Mithen (2005) despite being a monograph on the potential of Neanderthals and early humans to make music, has nothing to say about this (or indeed any other topic related to musical structure). If so, then we are faced with the curious possibility that polyphony was later eliminated from the spectrum of musical strategies in many places, as suggested above for Western Europe. In which case, Alan Lomax's speculations on the inter-relations between polyphonic ensembles, including panpipes, egalitarian social structures and tuber cultivation, should be taken into consideration (Lomax & Berkowitz 1972).

There is another, obverse, possibility that folk polyphony arises as a result of co-evolution with musical instruments. This may seem unlikely at first, as presumably the human voice preceded the development of instruments. Yet it is the case that folk polyphony is usually co-associated with instruments capable of multiple voices, such as the bagpipe, triple pipe, jew's harp and one note whistle ensembles. The bordon

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[9] Whether the remarkable Ainu *rekuhkara* (レクッカラ), a type of multi-voice throat-singing, should be included in this is doubtful, and it probably relates more directly to Inuit practice.

structures found widely in bagpipe-playing areas are clearly influenced by its sound, and notably in areas such as Sicily where double-chanter bagpipes are played, double drones occur in singing. The same applies in Sardinia, where the triple pipe substitutes for the bagpipe. This is an area where the correlations need to be explored more rigorously.

Map 2. Global distribution of folk polyphony

7. Conclusions

Folk polyphony in Eurasia has been studied for a long time, and yet we still remain surprisingly ignorant about its exact distribution, musical patterns, and historical origins. Much important source material in Russian remains untranslated, and information contained on the sleeve-notes of recordings is not stored in any consistent way. In many places folk polyphony is under threat, either of disappearing or of being replaced by a staged version of itself. Compare the 'Mystery of Bulgarian Voices' involving arrangements, choirs and stage shows, with actual field recordings, and it is clear this is entirely unreliable for any other purpose than entertainment. Georgian music, with its surprising sudden popularity, is liable to become a steamroller, overwriting the diversity of polyphonic styles within Georgia. More hopeful are traditions of those like Sardinia, where village groups are kept going by the evolution of small local folk festivals, with little pressure to commercialise. Given the richness of its history and its still poorly understood relationship with the polyphonic music in the European written tradition, it deserves greater scholarly attention.

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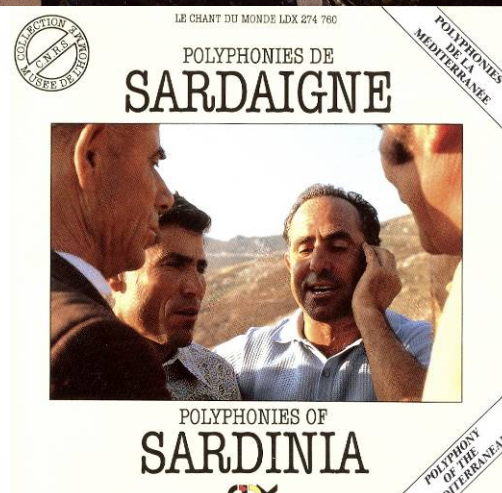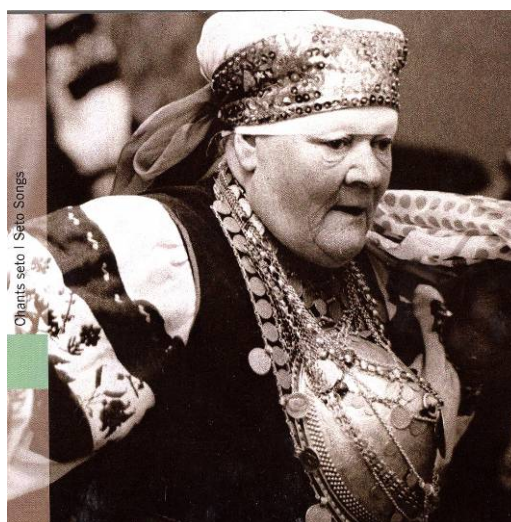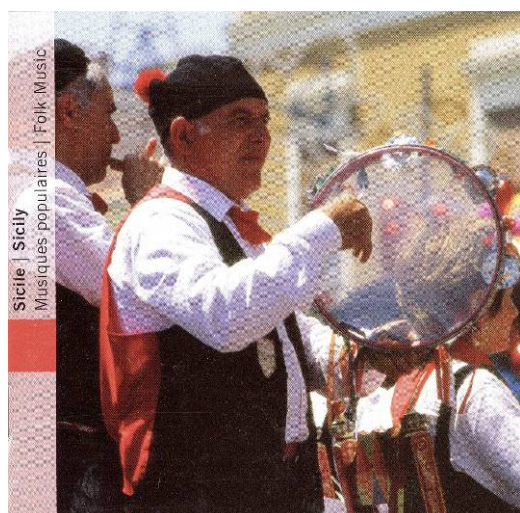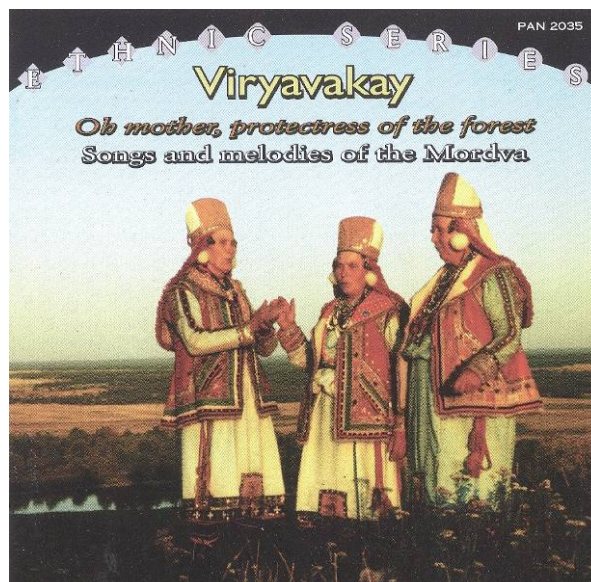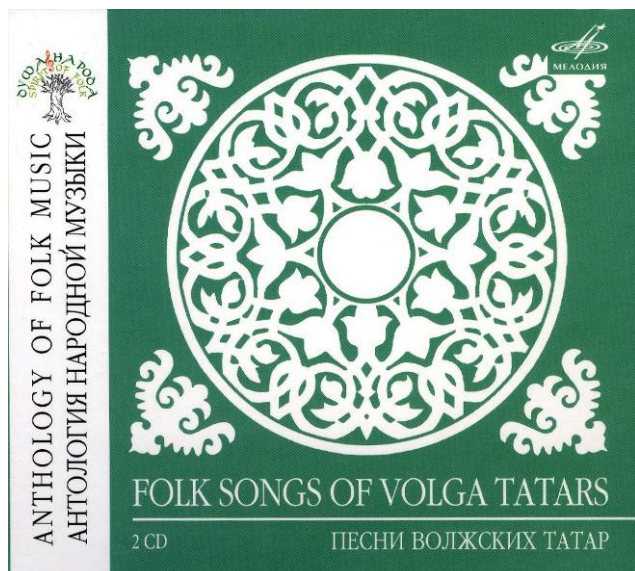
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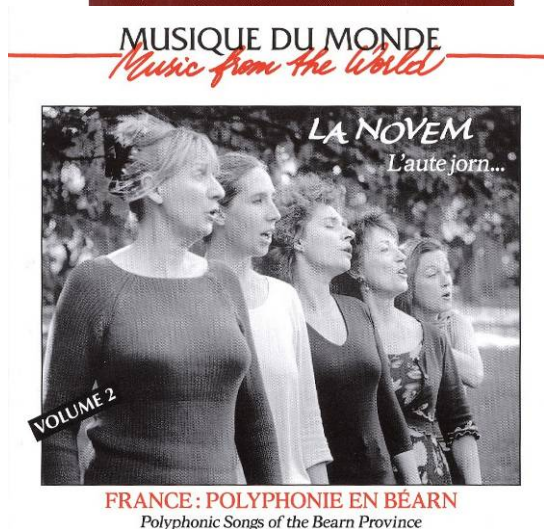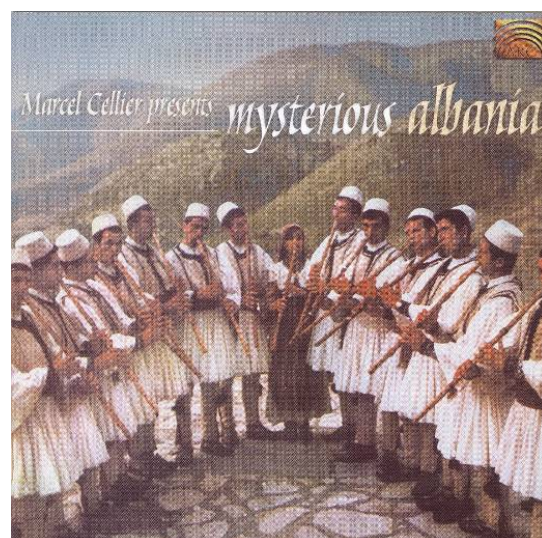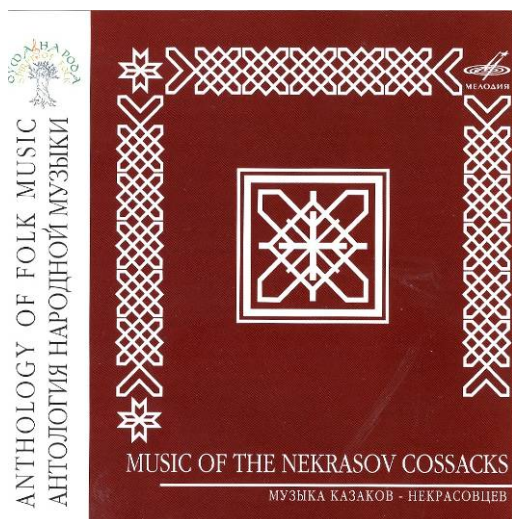
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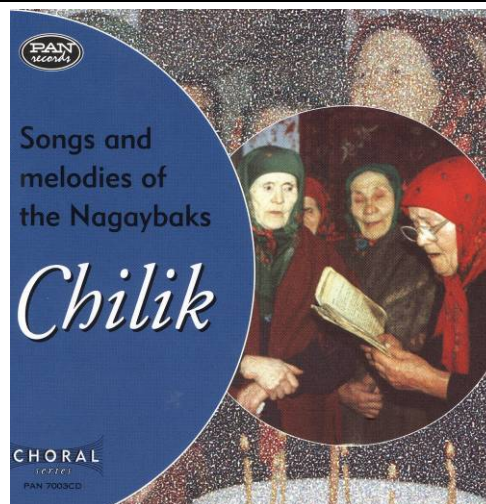Sorce Keller, Marcello, Roberto Catalano & Giuseppina Colicci 2000. Italy. In *The Garland*

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