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Heritage

Iso-polyphony: the song everyone holds up

What makes Albanian polyphonic singing unique and why UNESCO protects it

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Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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Anyone who has heard a group of men from Labëria or Gjirokastra singing remembers the sound: one voice rises alone, another answers it, and behind them, like a wide bed, a group of voices holds a single, sustained note. This is iso-polyphony, one of the oldest and most distinctive forms of folk music in Europe.

How the song is built

The word "iso" is related to the *ison* of Byzantine church music and refers to the steady note, the drone, that accompanies the song. According to UNESCO's description, songs

usually have two solo parts, one that "takes" the melody and one that "turns" or "cuts" it, over an iso held by the chorus.

In Albanian, the roles have their own names. In Lab singing people speak of the *marrës* (the one who takes), the *kthyes* (the one who turns), the *hedhës* (the one who throws) and the *iso*, depending on the number of voices and the region. Nobody is superfluous: without the iso, the solo voices are lost; without the soloists, the iso has no meaning.

Labs and Tosks

UNESCO distinguishes two main stylistic groups in the south: the Tosks and the Labs. Among the Tosks the iso is continuous, usually sung on the syllable "e", and the singers breathe at different times so that the sound is never interrupted. Among the Labs the iso sometimes becomes rhythmic and is sung to the words of the song. Lab songs are often harsher and more dramatic; Tosk ones more drawn-out and lyrical. In the north, among the Ghegs, there are also polyphonic forms, but iso-polyphony is typical above all of the south.

Iso-polyphony is sung mainly by men, though there are women's groups too, at weddings, feasts, religious celebrations and laments, and at festivals such as the National Folklore Festival of Gjirokastra.

> *In a song with iso, nobody sings alone. Even the one who takes the first voice is held up by the others.*

The words of the songs

Iso-polyphony is not only a vocal technique. The songs carry stories: love and emigration, wars and uprisings, early deaths and weddings. The emigrant's song, about the man who leaves to work far away and the woman who waits for him, is one of the most frequent themes, and this is no accident: for centuries the men of southern Albania worked in Istanbul, in Greece, in America and later in Italy. In laments, sung at funeral ceremonies, polyphony takes on a different tone, slower and heavier. In this way a single musical repertoire preserves the memory of a whole society, with its joys and its wounds.

The scholars and the festival

Systematic study of this music began in the twentieth century. The musicologist **Ramadan Sokoli** was among the first to describe its structure, in his work *Albanian Musical Folklore* (1965). Later, scholars such as **Vasil Tole** collected and classified hundreds of songs and regional styles. A major role in preserving it has been played by the **National Folklore Festival of Gjirokastra**, first held in 1968, where groups from

every region perform in the town's castle. During the communist period the festival was also a political showcase, and the repertoire underwent changes to suit the ideology of the time. Scholars today therefore try to distinguish the old songs from those created or reworked later.

Polyphony in the Balkans and beyond

Albanians are not the only people in the Balkans who sing in many voices. Related polyphonic forms are also found among the Greeks of Epirus, the Aromanians and in some areas of Macedonia. This points to a shared cultural space in the mountains of the southern Balkans, where different peoples have lived side by side for centuries. Further away, in the Caucasus, Georgian polyphony is another tradition recognised by UNESCO. Comparing them is a lively field of research.

Recognition by UNESCO

In 2005 UNESCO proclaimed Albanian folk iso-polyphony a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity". In 2008 it was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

UNESCO's own text does not hide the danger: poverty, the lack of legal protection and of financial support for practitioners, and the migration of young people from villages to cities and abroad. Transmission, once carried out within the family and the village, now relies more and more on professional artists, which puts the richness of the repertoire and techniques at risk.

How to listen and keep it alive

- **Hear it live** when you have the chance, at festivals, weddings or regional gatherings. No recording fully conveys the feeling of the iso in a room.
- **Ask the elders** in your family about the songs they know. Record them on your phone, with the singers' names, the place and the year. That too is protection.
- **Learn it.** The iso is the easiest way in: it needs no solo voice, only an ear and patience.

Iso-polyphony teaches us something that goes beyond music: a single voice, however beautiful, sounds fuller when it is held up by others.

Sources

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