

## SERGEI TCHEREPNIN

IN MAY 1917, with Russia in the throes of revolution, a group of Georgian cultural patrons established the Tbilisi State Conservatoire, the first institution of higher learning in the Caucasus. My great-grandfather Nikolai Tcherepnin (who composed the score for Diaghilev's first *Ballets Russes*) served as the conservatory's director until he emigrated to Paris in 1921, after fleeing Petrograd in 1918 for Tbilisi. This momentary "Paris of the East" attracted composers, writers, and performers from all over Europe who, alongside Georgian artists, were enamored of the cultural hybridity the city offered. On leaving the country in 1921, a young Alexander Tcherepnin (my grandfather) composed *Georgian Rhapsody* using a nine-tone scale derived from the music of the Transcaucasus.

To tell you the truth, I actually didn't know very much about this particular section of my family's history before I went to Georgia. Yet I had been attracted to the film scores of Sergei Paradjanov and the Georgian folk music introduced to me by a friend in 2001; sound seemed to be constantly heightened in Paradjanov's world, foregrounded in his depiction of mountain communities, the way that music fit into life, the funeral scene with long *trembita* horns, the tableaux animated by sing-speaking voices. This sonic and visual history could be linked to my composition *Rainbow Spirals*, a piece that would be performed (without me) in late 2008 as part of "Tbilisi 5: Wednesday Was Thursday," curated by Daniel Baumann. The score used graphical notation that indicates not just changes in pitch and rhythm but

also various gestures and entrances and exits made by the performers. The physical movement of the players and the changes in sound create a fluctuating center. The last layer of the Tbilisi interpretation of this piece was its recording by cell phone, which was ridiculously lo-fi but nevertheless produced a surprisingly wonderful sound. At this point, I had yet to meet Gela Patashuri, the Georgian artist who had been working closely with Baumann, but it was in Gela's studio that *Rainbow Spirals* would be performed.

This work may have seemed strange to some of its Georgian listeners, as the conservatory had shifted its mission during the intervening decades toward a literally conservative program of technical mastery and the preservation of tradition; the institution's idea of what it is to be a musician had been so carefully sheltered that it seemed those identifying as such could now function only within its walls. Meanwhile, the rest of Tbilisi was undergoing massive change and constant reterritorialization—underground passageways giving way to minimalls, markets serving as nightclubs, a new casino built right next to the seventeenth-century sulfur baths. (The next year, all of this would become the background of a week-long sound festival I organized with Ei Arakawa, which involved realizing a series of scores by composers and artist friends at various impromptu Georgian venues, including a library of Futurist manifestos, the city's main subway station, a private house/hostel, and, amazingly, the conservatory.)

One interesting thing about going to Tbilisi for

the first time was that it always seemed as though showing work required creating the very space in which it would be exhibited. In turn, I felt a sense of baroque ceremony seeing art there; the moment viewers arrive, they become conductors of whatever is being put on display, their bodies acting as transistors of how the work appears, feels, and sounds—or maybe this is just what can be projected onto Tbilisi. Like the city's constantly reconfigured architecture, its contemporary art might best be characterized as form in motion, work that is never fully complete. It is collectively constituted, archived in the personal, physical memory of human beings, and only through playing and listening and retelling does it circulate.

When Gela and I finally met, just being in his presence, hearing his voice, activated many of my own ideas about music. In his dark yet soft Georgian timbre, he would relay stories of his father, a builder but also a poet who wrote despite the restrictive conditions of the time. Gela also recounted his own experiences fighting in Abkhazia in the early 1990s and his decision to enter the art academy following the war. We would talk about notions of construction versus composition, physical combat versus conceptual acts of resistance, the melodies of the spoken word. All of which informs *Bakhneli Archive*, a new work, made in collaboration with Arakawa, that we will present this summer at the Georgian pavilion of the Fifty-Fifth Venice Biennale. □

SERGEI TCHEREPNIN IS AN ARTIST AND COMPOSER BASED IN NEW YORK.

## GELA PATASHURI

IN PRE-SOVIET TIMES, art in Tbilisi was freely shown in cafés and taverns, but until very recently, nothing comparable had existed. When my friends Sergei Tcherepnin and Ei Arakawa came to visit in the summer of 2009, I gave them a tour of my favorite new art spaces: a car-parts market on the edge of town and a monument in the mountains near the Russian border. I also took them to Shindisi, an open area outside the city where curator Daniel Baumann owns a plot of land. The site is home to the Tbilisi Center for Contemporary Art, which, having no fixed building or borders, is, to my mind, a Georgian institution for our time.

A friend once told me that in a Western context,

TCCA might recall relational aesthetics. But an important distinction must be made: TCCA isn't a service. And it isn't a product; it doesn't aspire to be in global circulation. It's meant primarily for Tbilisi and its friends. For decades, my country had no place to show contemporary art, and so TCCA was magic, a meta-venue possible anywhere, but especially in a place where there had been none.

So it is very special that this year TCCA will open in Venice to represent Georgia at the Fifty-Fifth Biennale. There, we will show *Bakhneli Archive*, a work based on my father's poetry—an oeuvre of more than 250 poems—written during a period of drastic change in the Caucasus, 1978 to 2003.

*Bakhneli Archive* can be likened to something we still perform in the mountains: *kafia*, the spontaneous spoken-sung articulation of old texts. In this genre, every kind of sound is conjoined—ancient words and family memories with living bodies and ambient tones that exist only in the present. I am now translating the title and first line of every poem, with which Sergei and Ei (who do not read or speak Georgian) are creating a series of songs, thereby shuffling the social and psychological transformations that my father was recording in ink into a non-chronological collection of voices and sounds. □

GELA PATASHURI IS A GEORGIAN ARTIST AND MEMBER OF THE TBILISI CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ART.