

BUILDING AUDIO PRESERVATION CAPACITIES FOR GEORGIAN ETHNOGRAPHIC RECORDINGS AT THE TBILISI STATE CONSERVATOIRE

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Abstract

From October 2021 to December 2023, the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and the Vano Sarajishvili Tbilisi State Conservatoire (TSC) embarked on a multi-year project to build institutional capacity for preserving and disseminating critically at-risk audio recordings of traditional Georgian music. Funded by the 2021 U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation, the project "Conservation of Endangered Georgian Traditional Music Recordings at the V. Sarajishvili Tbilisi State Conservatoire, Phase 1" focused on safeguarding more than 200 hours of Georgian musical heritage on endangered media formats, established infrastructure and workflows for specialized media conservation by TSC staff, and ensured continued access to these rich cultural resources for generations to come. Promoted through various televised and streamed channels, this project laid the groundwork for future cultural heritage preservation activities at TSC, strengthening it as a regional leader in this preservation and access work.

Keywords: collaboration; audiovisual media conservation; magnetic audio tape; Tbilisi, Georgia

Introduction

The Tbilisi State Conservatoire (TSC) maintains the recorded audio legacies created between 1960 and 1980 by the premier Georgian ethnomusicologists Grigol Chkhikvadze, Kakhi Rosebashvili, Kukuri Chokhnelidze, and others. TSC's Georgian Folk Music Laboratory, also known as the Grigol Chkhikvadze Ethnomusicology Laboratory, houses these audio legacies that exemplify the rich variety of Georgian polyphonic singing traditions. Recorded on deteriorating magnetic audio tape, these unique performances and oral histories are in danger of being lost forever if left undigitized. Prior to this project, TSC staff lacked the equipment and technical expertise to perform this preservation work and ensure access by future generations.

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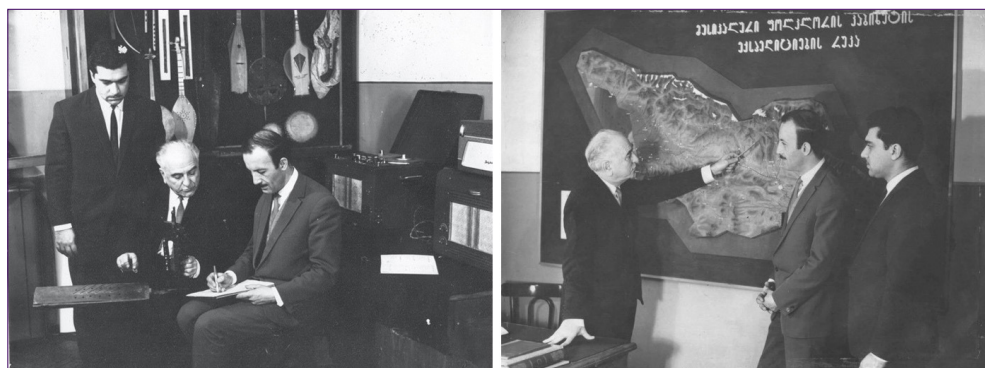


Figure 1. Georgian Ethnomusicologists Chkhikvadze, Rosebashvili, and Chokhnelidze, 1966. Photos courtesy of the Tbilisi State Conservatoire.

Traditional Georgian polyphony is a cultural practice that holds high significance in Georgian culture. Having been recognized by UNESCO in 2001 as a Human Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage and inscribed in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, this singing style plays a crucial role in shaping and defining Georgian identity (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2008). The recordings at TSC captured in the mid-to-late 20th century represent the tradition as it existed before influences brought on by globalization and convey the vast regional differences in the tradition as practiced across the Kakheti, Kartli (East Georgia), and Mountainous regions. The intonations used, specific songs performed, and song variations are some of the features showcased in these recordings that shed light on the tradition's development over time. In most cases, these recordings were captured by Georgian ethnomusicologists at the Conservatoire (Figure 1) and are rare examples of orally transmitted practices (International Research Center for Traditional Polyphony, no date). By digitally preserving the content of these tapes and making them accessible, TSC's collections contribute to the Georgian polyphony canon through the broader dissemination of the material for research, educational, and artistic purposes.

Project Origin

In 2020, the Rector of the Tbilisi State Conservatoire contacted staff at the U.S. Embassy in Georgia requesting technical assistance with digitizing traditional Georgian polyphony vocal music from the TSC archives. Shortly after this discussion, the U.S. Embassy's cultural attaché approached the Smithsonian Institution about a potential partnership opportunity with the Conservatoire to help them meet these goals. The Smithsonian's Office of International Relations forwarded this inquiry to staff at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (CFCH), a leader in audiovisual preservation and the largest repository of audio and video recordings at the Smithsonian Institution (SI). Once connected, CFCH, TSC, and the U.S. Embassy team discussed the parameters of a potential grant project and submitted a proposal to the 2021 U.S. Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation. Included with the proposal were Memorandums of Support from the Georgian Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport and the CFCH. The project proposal was accepted and officially began in September 2021.

Urgency of Media Conservation

The subset of traditional Georgian field recordings held at TSC required immediate conservation intervention. Many of these tapes were produced in the mid-20th century and are composed of chemically unstable plastics. Tapes treated included those manu-

factured by the Pereslavsky and Shostka chemical plants, as well as by brands such as Svema (Свема), Tasma (Тасма), and Agfa. Over time, these tapes had become brittle, lost their lubrication, and signals were beginning to fade away.³ This challenge was further compounded by globally declining technical expertise on tape formats and a need for Georgian-language documentation on their care and handling. The equipment and technical expertise gained by the TSC through this project enabled its staff to create preservation-grade digital copies of its unique ethnomusicological collections and to make more informed preservation decisions in the future.

Proposed Objectives and Anticipated Outcomes

In the proposal, CFCH and TSC staff, referred to in this article as the ‘project team’, identified six key objectives to ensure that the success of the project will endure beyond the lifecycle of the grant:

1. Establish a space at TSC’s Georgian Folk Music Laboratory suited not only for digitization but for a range of audio media conservation activities.
2. Conduct assessments of TSC’s collections to determine needs and priorities.
3. Participate in preservation trainings and develop documentation that can continue to be used in media conservation processes.
4. Facilitate virtual exchanges to continue developing skills and topics beyond those covered in the core workshop.
5. Finalize the preservation of any undigitized tapes and develop an access plan for broadly publishing and distributing the preserved recordings to the public.
6. Promote the project in Georgian media and through Smithsonian social media channels.

Programmatic Achievements and Technical Evaluation

Objective 1: Establish Media Conservation Lab

Media conservation requires specialized equipment and supplies to perform the work effectively and efficiently. In this project, the project team’s goal was to not only outfit the Georgian Folk Music Laboratory with the equipment and supplies necessary to safeguard its recordings, but also to train TSC staff on the various techniques for dealing with complex and deteriorated media objects. Throughout the project, the project team worked closely together to quantify TSC’s needs and capacities and to identify local sources for needed materials when possible.

In initial conversations about existing resources and practices at TSC, staff indicated that for many years, they had used a tape machine and other equipment to make copies of audio tapes onto CDs. They recounted, however, that many of their field recordings – especially smaller format ones – played back too quickly and sometimes with multiple performances overlaid on each other. This issue was due to the limitations of the Soviet-era studio tape machine they were using, which could only operate at faster tape speeds and handle tapes with specific recording configurations.

Many of these field recordings were recorded decades ago on different, likely portable machines at slower speeds to maximize recording time per tape. When these tapes were played back on TSC’s existing machine, they sounded sped up twice to four times as

3 These details were conveyed by the Rector of the Tbilisi State Conservatoire and included in the initial grant proposal to the *U.S. Ambassador’s Fund for Cultural Preservation*, 2021.

fast as normal. Furthermore, many of these tapes featured multiple “tracks” (discrete recordings spanning the width of each tape) that could not be read independently on this machine, causing overlap between adjacent recordings on a single tape.

When outlining the required equipment and supplies for the lab, it was essential to identify and acquire a machine that could handle the various technical nuances of tapes in the TSC’s collection. However, without first manually inspecting each tape, predicting the exact technical characteristics of the recordings was impossible. Therefore, a multi-function machine was needed, suitable for preservation playback that could handle up to two dozen possible tape configurations. CFCH located a recently restored Studer A810 for sale, which was customized for archival playback and configured with selectable tape heads and variable speed control. This machine would be able to increase TSC’s capacity to digitize various recordings and was well-suited for fragile field recordings with different track configurations and inconsistent tape speeds. SI staff thus swiftly procured this machine ahead of the in-person workshops and later procured large-format reel platters to allow digitization of larger format tapes stored as “pancakes” (i.e., without reels) in the TSC collection.

In addition to providing an archival tape machine, it was a priority to include professional and reliable audio digitization and monitoring hardware to permit digitization at the highest quality. This equipment replaced the existing consumer-grade hardware, which TSC staff had noted introduced audible, additional noise into the signal during digitization. An uninterruptible power supply was integrated to protect the new equipment and prevent damage caused by power disruption. This piece of equipment proved especially important, since TSC facilities staff manually shut off all power to the room each evening, which could damage sensitive audio equipment. With funds from an additional grant, TSC purchased a high-performance computer for this project. TSC also acquired an additional file storage device, a 5.5 TB Raid Network Attached Storage device with four separate hard drives configured for extra redundancy.

Beyond equipment, specific consumable supplies were acquired for use in the conservation process and to help protect the audio tapes over time. Based upon the estimates provided by TSC in early 2022, SI staff procured and shipped new archival tape reels, boxes to house individual reels, and larger containers to improve storage conditions for the 63 audio tapes identified. 221 additional tapes were later discovered in need of similar supplies, which were eventually procured and shipped to TSC.

To further improve the condition of the collection and increase physical access, the team sought alternative storage solutions to keep materials off the floor and desks. In April 2023, the team identified a local source for archival cabinets to store the collection securely, minimize the risk of damage and debris to the recordings, provide physical security, and facilitate improved access for TSC staff involved in the digitization process.

Due to the sensitivity of the electronics, equipment, and supplies acquired for this project, SI staff decided to contract with a reputable art courier experienced with international shipments. On 27 September 2022, the courier picked up the first shipment—two large wooden crates containing the tape machine, essential digitization hardware, and supplies—and delivered them to the U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi two days later. Highly sensitive pieces such as the magnetic tape heads and calibration tapes were hand-carried by SI staff during travel to prevent accidental damage during shipment. A second shipment of equipment supplies was sent in April 2023. As initially anticipated in the early project planning stages, most of the equipment and supplies essential for enhancing

TSC's existing lab for professional audio media conservation had to be imported from outside Georgia.

The newly purchased equipment and supplies were envisioned as a way for TSC to encourage preservation activities and to collaborate with other institutions in the region. After press appearances in October 2022, the Conservatoire received regional inquiries for assistance in digitizing materials in personal collections. Furthermore, the project team chose an archival tape machine found in other preservation facilities across Europe and Asia, increasing the chance of finding replacement parts and technicians experienced with this particular mode in the future, thereby keeping it available as a resource for future projects.



Figure 2. TSC staff rehousing tapes and preparing for filing in new storage, September 2023. Photo by David M. Walker.

Objective 2: Collections Assessment

A foundational part of this project was the collections assessment that was collaboratively conducted during the two weeks of workshops held at the Conservatoire from 17–28 October 2022. SI staff members David Walker and Crystal Sanchez demonstrated the process of performing physical inspections and proposed methods for tracking this information to support preservation decisions and actions. Before the workshops, TSC staff had identified only 63 audio tapes needing preservation. However, this number increased as inspection and tracking commenced.

The project team documented the following about the state of the collection:

- The collection of open reel audio tapes featured a mix of sizes and material types from various years and in varying conditions.
- 227 previously digitized reels were housed in their original boxes and stored vertically in closed cabinets in another room.
- An additional 200+ tapes were stored stacked on their sides on tables in the lab in their original boxes and on original reels, sometimes inside plastic bags.
- Some tapes were not on reels or hubs and required manual winding onto appropriate reels.
- Leader tape was intermittent, and the ends were not secured, leading to unraveling when opening boxes.
- Descriptive information was robust but existed solely on the boxes or on paper sheets inside the boxes with the reels.
- These materials did not originally contain identifiers or catalog records.

In the workshop, Walker and Sanchez introduced concepts of high-level inventory and condition assessments of materials before digitization and cataloging. The assessment framework was informed by standard archival practices and adapted in real-time to address the specific materials and challenges presented in the session. Key metadata fields, including tape width, reel dimensions, hub type, composition, and physical condition, were prioritized to ensure thorough documentation and to guide future digitization and cataloging efforts. To illustrate these concepts, the team prepared a Google spreadsheet to gather basic technical and condition information about each item. Sticker labels were generated following the naming convention “TSC #####” and applied to tapes and their boxes after being tracked in the spreadsheet. Over 200 unique tapes were identified in this process, and the team developed preservation priorities based on the information gathered about uniqueness and condition. The team also put tapes into archival containers to keep them in a vertical orientation, and priority items were re-housed and given new reels (Figure 2). By the end of the workshop, the team had completed this collections assessment which now serves as the primary digitization prioritization and tracking tool for the TSC.

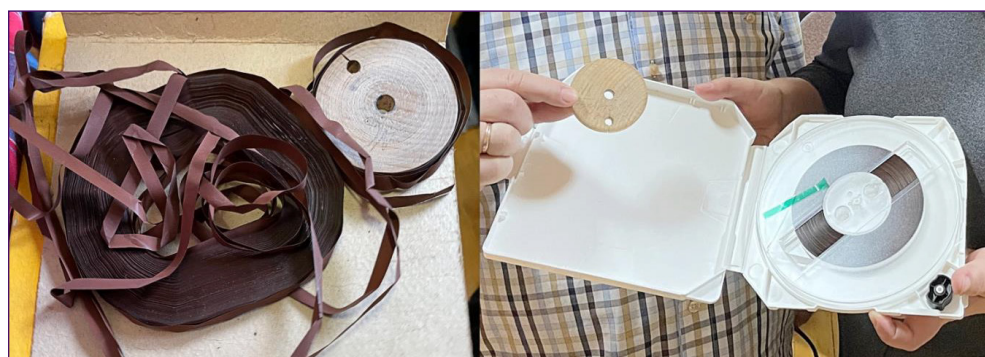


Figure 3. Tape previously stored on hand-made wooden core now made playable. Photo by David M. Walker.

During the collections assessment, the project team noted some interesting technical features about tapes in the collection. A small subset of tapes was stored on what appeared to be hand-made wooden cores (Figure 3). They also noticed many tapes on small 5” reels that had non-standard center holes, which were incompatible with both the old and new tape machines. Fortunately, TSC staff had a small portable tape machine that could be used to “shuttle” the tapes onto new, standard reels before digitization. The project team also found several tapes recorded at very slow speeds, each containing up to four discrete audio tracks and estimated to contain upwards of six hours of unique performances.

Objective 3: Preservation Training and Documentation

In the workshops held at the Tbilisi State Conservatoire from 17–28 October 2022, David Walker and Crystal Sanchez trained TSC staff and students in a series of preservation workshops covering many aspects of magnetic media preservation.

Walker and Sanchez used real examples from the collection to demonstrate key concepts and inform final recommendations, drawing from and referencing common best practice documents. Documents referenced in workshop curriculum include *IASA TC-*

04: *Guidelines on the Production and Preservation of Digital Audio Objects*,⁴ IASA TC-05: *Handling and Storage of Audio and Video Carriers*,⁵ and Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) *Technical Bulletin 30: The Digitization of Audiotapes*.⁶ Six TSC staff members, five music technology students, and occasional guests participated in the sessions. In the first week, prioritized concepts included identifying media materials, performing condition assessment and stabilization on tapes prior to digitization, assessing track formation and speed of tapes to prepare for transfer, calibrating and cleaning machines for optimal transfer, digitization workflows, file format technical specifications, metadata and cataloging standards, end-to-end workflows, digital preservation fundamentals, and basic restoration.

In the second week, staff and students continued work on preservation workflows and made further progress on the essential inventory work started in week one. The latter activity helped the team to better understand the collection, target materials in urgent need of prioritization, identify additional resource needs, and plan future work. Slideshows of each training module were saved and uploaded to shared spaces on Google Drive.



Figure 4. Workshop participants learning about tape characteristics. Photo by Crystal Sanchez.

While most of the TSC staff had some hands-on technical experience digitizing recordings in their collections, the workshops provided a broad foundation in preservation-level digitization based on international best practices and standards. The guided preservation sessions in the second week allowed participants to become familiar with the new equipment and methods for capturing the tape content with the highest accuracy, such as isolating specific channels and adjusting tape head azimuth (Figure 4). The sessions also served as an opportunity to tackle particularly problematic tapes, such as those suffering from vinegar syndrome or ones that had become unspooled from their hubs.

During the trainings, the participants learned about recommended file formats for audio preservation and workflows for creating preservation-grade Broadcast Wave Files

4 <https://iasa-web.org/tc04/audio-preservation> (Accessed 17 May 2025).

5 <https://iasa-web.org/handling-storage-tc05> (Accessed 17 May 2025).

6 <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/conservation-preservation-publications/technical-bulletins/digitization-audio-tapes.html> (Accessed 17 May 2025).

at 96kHz/24-bit. Embedded metadata practices were demonstrated using FADGI's *Guidelines for Embedding Metadata in Broadcast WAVE Files*⁷ and MediaArea's open-source tool BWF MetaEdit.⁸ The project team devised a list of recommended metadata fields and collaboratively established a robust file naming convention to be used going forward. The team also defined data storage strategies, which include storing files on a separate drive on the audio computer, copies on the newly acquired 5.5 TB Raid purchased by the Conservatoire, and redundant backups held at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Throughout the workshop, the project team created textual documentation and supplementary photos, audio and video recordings to serve as reference material on the procedures discussed. These materials were later used to create detailed procedure guides for TSC staff, illustrative materials for presentations, and content for project promotion. Team members were given Certificates of Completion at the end of the two-week workshop period (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Participants with Certificates of Completion. Photo courtesy of the Tbilisi State Conservatoire.

Objective 4: Virtual Exchanges

After the Smithsonian staff members had returned to the United States, the project team took part in several online meetings to resolve technical questions and share significant project updates. The project team had originally planned between eight and ten formal virtual training sessions to expand on the content covered in the in-person workshops. After the discovery that there were significantly more audio tapes to be preserved, the team realized this component was a bit ambitious and instead decided to focus on supporting additional technical work that needed to be done with the collection. The nine-hour time difference between Washington, D.C. and Tbilisi, Georgia was also not particularly conducive to scheduling extended sessions in real time.

Objective 5: Finalization of Preservation and Dissemination Plan

After the core workshops in October 2022, SI staff made two subsequent trips to Georgia in 2023 to continue collaborative preservation work and monitor the project's progress. From 5–20 April 2023, staff focused on preserving the most difficult-to-play tapes. TSC

7 <https://www.digitizationguidelines.gov/guidelines/digitize-embedding.html> (Accessed 17 May 2025).

8 <https://mediarea.net/BWFMetaEdit> (Accessed 17 May 2025).

identified additional tapes in their collection that required extensive intervention using newly acquired supplies, including large-format reel platters, to digitize safely. During this process, the team thoroughly reviewed the tape inventory, updated existing labels as needed, and integrated revised information into the collection spreadsheet.

As part of the collaboration, staff received training in advanced equipment maintenance and calibration. They carefully measured, calibrated, and integrated the old tape machine into the new preservation system to provide additional space for hands-on tape repair and a backup playback device for specific tapes. To enhance versatility, they fabricated an extra set of cables to allow auxiliary devices such as audio cassette players and turntables to be connected temporarily for digitization purposes.

By the end of April, the team had successfully preserved 51 audio tapes from TSC's collection, with an estimated 170 tapes in the queue. Additionally, the 227 tapes that were digitized before the project also became candidates for re-digitization using new tools. The preserved recordings encompassed a wide range of unique musical performances and narrative interviews from across numerous villages in the regions including Abkhazia, Adjara, Guria, Imereti, Kakheti, Kvemo Kartli, Racha-Lechkhumi, and Samegrelo.

SI staff returned to the Conservatoire for a final trip from 18–22 September 2023 (Figure 6). In these last preservation sessions, the team undertook work on additional tapes requiring extensive intervention and developed workflows for scanning paper field notes and other handwritten information associated with the recordings. As of 2024, the team successfully preserved over 80 hours of unique Georgian musical and cultural heritage on 92 open reel tapes. During this trip, SI staff also made digital backups of the preserved recordings for redundancy, to be stored in Washington, D.C., ensuring their long-term safety.



Figure 6. Crystal Sanchez, Nini Kutelia, and Ketevan Davitashvili preserving recordings. Photo by David M. Walker.

In late September 2023, TSC received a separate U.S. Embassy Small Grant to support the production of an audio CD from preserved recordings titled *United Georgia*. This album was designed to further the Tbilisi State Conservatoire's principles and goals as a unique research center of Georgian traditional music, as well as to preserve endangered traditional music recordings, promote Georgian cultural heritage, and to generate interest in Georgian music for younger generations. The album's intended audiences included ethnomusicologists, folk music performers and choirs, professional musicians, students, and music enthusiasts.

Objective 6: Project Promotion

The project team participated in several significant promotional activities to showcase the partnership and support from the U.S. Embassy in this project. On 27 and 28 October 2022, SI and TSC staff participated in Georgian national media events led by the cultural attaché. In televised interviews on Georgia Public Broadcasting and the private Georgian TV channel Mtavari Shuadze, team members discussed the importance of preserving recorded Georgian cultural heritage and highlighted the vital work TSC is now able to do to protect and promote these rich documents. The project team also demonstrated work on-site at the lab, where videographers captured additional footage and conducted interviews for a documentary film sponsored by the Community Heritage Exchange Initiative. Upon returning to the US, the office of the Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie Bunch III published two posts on Twitter to raise awareness of the project and acknowledge the support from both the U.S. Embassy and TSC.

Continuing their commitment to promoting the project, SI staff conducted two significant presentations at audiovisual preservation conferences. On 19 May 2023, David Walker delivered a 45-minute technical presentation and led a discussion at the Association for Recorded Sound Collections conference in Pittsburgh, PA. Walker also participated in a panel discussion alongside two esteemed leaders in the field of audiovisual preservation at the Library of Congress's National Audiovisual Conservation Center on 3 June, 2023.

From 11–15 September 2023, the project team continued their public outreach initiatives by participating in the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) conference held at Istanbul University. With the support of travel grants funded IASA, staff from the Conservatoire and Smithsonian participated in outreach and networking events with professionals from neighboring regions, including Türkiye and Ukraine. On September 13, the project team delivered a joint presentation titled "Building Audio Preservation Capacities for Georgian Ethnographic Recordings at the Tbilisi State Conservatoire."⁹

Conclusion

The collaborative efforts between the Smithsonian Institution and the Tbilisi State Conservatoire have resulted in significant achievements in the preservation of Georgia's rich musical and cultural heritage. This project was initiated to address a critical need to preserve the endangered audio recordings of traditional Georgian music housed at the Vano Sarajishvili Tbilisi State Conservatoire. Audio tapes in the Conservatoire's collection were prone to embrittlement, loss of lubrication, and demagnetization; and required specialized expertise and resources for preservation. The Conservatoire's ethno-

9 Sanchez, C., Matiashvili, K., Davitashvili, K., and Walker, D., 2023. *Building Audio Preservation Capacities for Georgian Ethnographic Recordings at the Tbilisi State Conservatoire*. Presented at the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) Conference, 13 September 2023, Istanbul, Türkiye.

musicological recordings capture a diverse array of traditional music spanning numerous regions, offering unique instances of Georgia's cultural heritage. Overall, the project's success represented not only the digitization of audio recordings but also its broader cultural heritage impact. By preserving and promoting Georgia's traditional music, the project contributed to the global appreciation and understanding of this rich cultural heritage for generations to come.

The preserved recordings hold lasting relevance for the Georgian polyphonic singing tradition, featuring performances by rarely recorded practitioners in remote environments across the country. These recordings will continue to serve as primary sources for ethnomusicologists, scholars, and musicians; contributing to the study, appreciation, promotion, and revitalization of this endangered yet culturally significant tradition. Beyond preservation efforts, the project team actively engaged in promotional activities to raise awareness of the project's significance. Media appearances, appearances in documentary films, social media outreach, and presentations at prestigious conferences showcased the partnership's impact and highlighted the importance of preserving Georgia's cultural legacy. By participating in international conferences and networking events, the project team expanded their professional networks and shared best practices in audio-visual preservation. This bolstered TSC's internal capacity and fostered collaboration with institutions facing similar challenges in neighboring regions.

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