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Research Article

Music from the perspective of the New Ethics: Ethical responsibility and social impact

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between music and ethics within the framework of the "New Ethics" approach. Moving beyond traditional rule-based ethical perspectives, the study focuses on relational responsibility, social impact, and cultural sensitivity in music. The research was conducted using document analysis within a qualitative methodological framework; the existing, although still limited, literature in the field of music and ethics, together with contemporary particular examples from Georgian musical culture, were analyzed. The results of the study show that music is not only a form of aesthetic expression, but also a dynamic field of ethical interaction shaped within specific cultural and social contexts. Important ethical issues related to cultural authenticity and representation arise primarily from the commercialization of traditional music, its transformation through modernization processes, and its presentation on stage. These results are consistent with the existing scientific literature, which emphasizes the relational and culturally contextual ethical nature of music. Ultimately, it can be argued that the new ethical approach allows music to be considered not only from a local artistic perspective and according to its content, but also in relation to its impact on society and social relations, thereby providing a comprehensive theoretical framework.

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Introduction

Music can be considered not only a form of aesthetic expression, but also a multi-layered sphere of interaction which, together with other branches of art, shapes the aesthetic views and tastes of society. Above all, music influences relationships between individuals and societies and generates ethical meanings (Cobussen & Nielsen, 2012; Warren, 2014). It is widely recognized that ancient civilizations regarded music as one of the most powerful mechanisms for influencing human emotions. At the same time, music has always reflected the national consciousness, traditions, spiritual orientations, and aesthetic aspirations of nations and peoples. In addition, music plays an important role in social communication and fulfills a significant public function. In this context, music contributes greatly to the formation of cultural identity and to the transmission of social values from generation to generation. Given this significant role of music, it is not surprising that it strongly influences the emotional and behavioral orientations of individuals (Sánchez González, 2022).

As approaches to musical art have become increasingly diverse in recent years, it is natural that the "new ethics" approach no longer considers ethical evaluation solely on the basis of rules and norms, but instead focuses on

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relationships, responsibility, and social impact (Palazzolo, 2024). Thus, music as a phenomenon has moved beyond the boundaries of art and is no longer regarded solely as a creative field. Rather, it has become a highly dynamic space in which ethical responsibilities are shaped through relationships between individuals and within broader social contexts.

Evaluating Music as a Field of Ethical Interaction

Music is not merely a personal or even collective aesthetic experience, but a practice that acquires meaning within the framework of social relations. It creates emotional, cultural, and social connections between individuals and shapes a space for ethical interaction (Cobussen & Nielsen, 2012; Warren, 2014). The well-known triad of creator or composer (or, in the case of folklore, the collective creator — the people), performer, and listener is essential for music to reach its audience, and the relationships among these three components generate ethical responsibility. Accordingly, it is appropriate to consider music not only as a form of "production," but also as a process of "establishing relationships."

The New Ethics Approach and Relational Responsibility

The New Ethics Approach evaluates ethical issues not through rigid rules and norms, but through relationships, context, and responsibility. This perspective places particular emphasis on the influence individuals have on one another and on the consequences arising from that influence (Palazzolo, 2024). In the context of music, this means that the evaluation of a musical work depends not only on its ideas and content, but also on its impact on listeners and its potential social consequences. All this further demonstrates that music is not a passive form of human activity, but rather an active and socially significant force.

The influence of music on social values

It is well known that music has always influenced society's visions, worldviews, and the formation and dissemination of social norms. For example, song lyrics, narratives, harmonies, and rhythms influence the thinking and behavior of individuals (Sánchez González, 2022). Therefore, in authorial music, the composer, and in the case of folk music, the people, necessarily take into account the demands of the audience and the social order of society, since everyone knows that music is an instrument with a strong social impact. From the perspective of the new ethics, this impact is related to social, moral, and ethical responsibility and emphasizes the obligation of the authors of music (composer or people) to take into account the social consequences of their work or collective musical product.

Cultural Context and Ethical Sensitivity

It is indisputable that music, as a bearer of cultural identity, acquires different meanings in different societies. Accordingly, its ethical assessment is not limited by universal rules and requires, first of all, consideration of the cultural context (Shelemay, 2013). In particular, traditional music represents an important part of the collective memory of any nation and defines identity, which further increases the importance of ethical sensitivity. The new ethical approach takes this diversity into account and offers a more inclusive model of assessment.

Research Objectives

Based on the discussions above, it is evident that music (both composed and folk) is not only a field of aesthetic production, but also a dynamic structure that creates ethical relationships between individuals and societies. Accordingly, the research aims to:

- Examine the relationship between music and ethics within the framework of the "new ethics" approach;
- Determine how music can be evaluated in terms of its social impact, specific cultural context, and ethical responsibility.

This approach seeks to demonstrate that music is not merely an art form, but also a space for ethical interaction.

Method

Research Model

This study is based on a qualitative research approach. It employs a descriptive research model and aims to analyze the relationship between music and ethics through the examination of relevant academic literature.

Data Sources

The research data consists of academic articles on the relationship between music and ethics, scholarly books, and cultural heritage documents. In addition, examples of traditional Georgian polyphony and UNESCO documents were used as important research materials.

Data Collection

The data were collected through a systematic analysis of relevant scientific sources. Particular attention was paid to identifying specific examples, key concepts, and ideas directly related to the objectives of the research.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the descriptive analysis method. The information obtained during the analysis process was grouped into four main themes: ethical responsibility, social impact, cultural sensitivity, and Georgian musical culture.

Study Limitations

The study does not include empirical data or field research. Therefore, the results obtained are limited to the scope and content of the sources used in the research.

Findings

Tension between the protection of cultural heritage and commercialization

Despite the fact that Georgian traditional polyphonic music is recognized by UNESCO as a cultural heritage, it is currently undergoing certain changes for tourist and commercial purposes during stage performances and studio recordings. The transfer of traditional performances to the stage, for completely understandable reasons, leads to changes in the authentic structure of the music and, in some cases, may even diminish the cultural significance of these songs.

This circumstance once again suggests that music is not only a work of art, but first and foremost a bearer of cultural identity, and that it may lose the sacredness and characteristics that make the authentic version a cultural value during stage performance. As Cobussen and Nielsen (2012) point out, music creates ethical meanings, while Shelemay (2013) emphasizes the importance of cultural context in ethical evaluation. In this sense, the commercialization of traditional music is a controversial issue from the perspective of the "new ethics," because it is related to the problem of respect for and responsibility toward national culture.

Transformation of Traditional Music in the Process of Modernization

The following trend is observed in Georgia: the younger generation is becoming increasingly interested in contemporary Western vernacular musical art, while the sphere of traditional music, under the influence of the digital environment, is gradually narrowing. This process leads to the transformation of musical culture and the weakening of certain traditional elements.

However, it is worth noting that the "new ethics" approach does not consider this process as a "loss," but rather as a "transformation." Fernando Palazzolo (2024) notes that ethical responsibility is a relational process that changes along with changes in the social context. In this regard, changes in music represent not so much an ethical problem as an issue of cultural management and adaptation.

Music and the Relationship with Social Identity

In Georgia, music has been a collective practice since ancient times and has played an important role in the formation of social unity. Even today, almost no event in Georgia is held without music. At various events, memorial evenings, holidays, and weddings, music plays a major role in strengthening identity and preserving social unity and collective memory.

This conclusion coincides with studies that emphasize the influence of music on social values. Sánchez González (2022) notes that music influences people's behavior and thinking. Warren (2014) also argues that musical experience is always

formed through interaction with others. Accordingly, from the perspective of the "new ethics," music is considered a sphere of social responsibility.

The Transfer of Traditional Music to the Stage and the Problem of Authenticity

Significant changes can be observed in the process of performing Georgian traditional music (folklore) on stage. Among these changes, it is sufficient to mention the reduction of improvisation, the elimination of social or ritual context, and, most importantly, the standardization of musical structure. These circumstances lead to a reduction in the authenticity of the music and create a distinction between the "real" and the "performed" versions of traditional music.

The problem lies in the following: Georgian traditional music genres were historically associated with labor processes, battle, healing practices, wedding ceremonies, funeral rituals, and other social activities. Accordingly, Georgian folk songs possess their own social "scenario" and cultural function. During concert performance, archiving, and digitization, it is quite natural that the everyday, social, and ritual contexts of the music are lost or significantly reduced.

Moreover, at this stage, a homogenization of national music may occur, and a Georgian folk song of a particular genre may even begin to resemble a song of the same genre from another country in certain features. This happens because concert performance and digitization can lead to the loss of authenticity and several defining parameters of national uniqueness (Ghvinjilia, 2025, p. 371).

Obviously, performing a song on a concert stage and posting it on the Internet are important ways of popularizing Georgian music. However, at the same time, traditional music becomes desacralized and marginalized, and, most importantly, its social and ritual function is lost.

To substantiate this argument, it is useful to consider one of the popular genres of Georgian traditional music that is included in the repertoire of many folklore ensembles, preserved in online archives, and circulated on the Internet, especially on YouTube. This genre is the Georgian folk lullaby. When songs of this genre are performed before an audience in a concert hall, they are naturally separated from the original ecosystem of the genre. The audience listens to the combination of text and melody, but the ritual and social context of the song is no longer visible on stage.

In a concert setting, the Georgian folk lullaby sounds like an ethno-musical lyrical miniature that, during performance, is deprived of its original social purpose. It becomes primarily an object of aesthetic enjoyment, and the quality of performance deserves the listener's approval and applause. However, the original purpose of performing a lullaby is to calm a child and put the child to sleep. Accordingly, when a Georgian folk lullaby is heard on the concert stage, it is evaluated by the listener mainly from the perspective of performance skill.

What is the real social and ritual context of this genre — folk lullaby — in Georgia? Let's review a few variants of these domestic, social or ritual contexts:

Georgian Folk Lullaby- as a Lullaby for a Child to Sleep

The lullaby was traditionally performed by the mother near the child's bed. Singing a lullaby did not simply mean singing a song; rather, it was a bodily and emotional act. The mother sang while rocking the baby lying in the cradle, and the rhythm of the song resonated with the rhythm of the cradle's movement. The essence of this intimate practice was that the mother had to sing the lullaby in a voice so soft that it could not be heard beyond the walls of the room.

This ritual also had an ethical and social framework. The lullaby was usually sung only by the child's mother, and only rarely by the father, rather than by other relatives. Thus, the Georgian folk lullaby represented not only a musical genre, but also a deeply personal and ritualized form of communication between parent and child. Another very important aspect is creating a sense of comfort and safety for the child. As Gül et al. (2025) note, "Beyond their primary functions—such as soothing, comforting, inducing sleep, and awakening—they also transmit national and spiritual values, as well as social norms such as sensitivity toward people and nature."



Image 1. A cradle (rocking baby bed) by Polish-Georgian painter Henryk Hryniewski (Web 1)

Obviously, many nuances of the lullaby are lost on the concert stage or during the digitization of the song, including emotional feeling, bodily involvement (such as the reactions of the child and the movements of the mother's body), affective intensity (crying, pauses, and changes in emotional expression), and improvisation, since every child falls asleep after a different period of time. Instead of witnessing the intimate relationship between the child and the mother, the audience on stage hears only the song performed by a singer or group of singers, and the lullaby becomes primarily an object of aesthetic pleasure.

Georgian Folk Lullaby-as a Musical Ritual Supporting the Child's Physical Endurance

When taking the first steps, the child was required to walk around the oak tree planted in the family yard. During this ritual, family members sang a lullaby. The purpose of the ritual was symbolic: the child's knees and physical strength were expected to become as strong and enduring as the oak tree itself. The duration of the lullaby depended both on the circumference of the oak tree and on the child's physical abilities and endurance.



Image 2. Ethnomusicologists' Creative Group Nanina's new project "Restored Song", Meskhetian Batonebi (Web. 2)

Georgian Folk Lullaby- as a Musical Background for a Health and Gratitude Ritual

Georgians often visited village shrines or churches to ask the supreme mystical forces for health and protection, as well as to express gratitude. On the way to the shrine, they frequently sang songs belonging to this genre. In this context, the Georgian folk lullaby functioned not only as a musical form, but also as part of a ritual practice connected with faith, hope, and collective spiritual experience.

Georgian Folk Lullaby — as the Main Element of a Ritual for the Treatment of Infectious Diseases

The lullaby was also an important element of rituals connected with the treatment of infectious diseases, associated with the so-called "Batonebi" — folklore demonic or spiritual entities. The lullaby was sung in the bedroom of a sick child, which was traditionally filled with the scent of violets and roses. On a low table (tabla), sweets, colored fabrics, and sweet water were placed. A small fire was lit in a clay bowl, into which walnuts were thrown. The flame of fire had to remain very weak, symbolizing the stingy and sensitive nature of the "Batonebi."

The lullaby was performed around a tree placed in the center of the room and decorated with gifts. According to the ritual belief, the child was held tightly against the tree, so that the tree could absorb the illness of the child (Samsonadze, 2025, p. 32).



Image 3. "Batonebi". The second traditional music festival "Nanina-2024", State Folklore Center (Web 3)

Obviously, we must note that there are similarities among lullabies with different social and ritual functions in terms of musical intonations, verbal expression, and their psycho-physiological impact on individuals and society (Tsurtsumia, 2020, p. 48).

Thus, Georgian traditional music, during its authentic performance, possessed a specific social and ritual context that is largely lost during its digitization and concert performance. However, it must also be emphasized that, even when performed in a concert hall, Georgian traditional music still functions as folklore and as a symbol of national identity and tradition. In this context, it continues to fulfill the role of national cultural representation. Nevertheless, what takes place on stage clearly distances the music from its authentic form. This is precisely the situation implied when referring to the distinction between the "real" and the "represented."

In this context, ethical considerations focus on the way music is presented. As Cobussen and Nielsen (2012) point out, the meaning of music depends on its context, while Shelemay (2013) emphasizes the importance of ethical sensitivity in cultural representation. From the perspective of the "new ethics," such transformations should be considered not merely as an aesthetic issue, but also as an ethical one.

Conclusion

The findings of this interdisciplinary research demonstrate that music is not only an artistic phenomenon and a field of aesthetic production, but also a sphere filled with social influences and ethical responsibilities. It is a space of interaction shaped by cultural contexts. In particular, the example of Georgian traditional music, especially the lullaby genre, revealed that the commercialization of Georgian national music, its transformation in the process of modernization, and its presentation on stage create ethical problems that affect the authenticity and cultural significance of music. One of the main reasons for this is the disappearance of the mystical, social, and ritual context, which is largely lost during the concert performance of Georgian traditional polyphony.

All findings largely coincide with existing literature. Marcel Cobussen and Nanette Nielsen (2012), as well as Jeff Warren (2014), point out in their studies that music is a relational structure that primarily creates ethical meanings. Similarly, this study found that music is an art form that shapes ethical space through the active interaction of these three "links." In the same way, the "relational responsibility" approach proposed by Fernando Palazzolo (2024) further strengthens the idea that the role of music should be assessed on the basis of its social impact, which is consistent with the results of this study. It is also noteworthy that the importance of cultural context in ethical evaluation, emphasized by Kay Kaufman Shelemay (2013), directly corresponds with the conclusions drawn in this study based on the Georgian example.

The results of the study indicate the following:

- The "new ethics" approach should consider music not only at the level of content and musical parameters such as harmony, rhythm, polyphony, and melody, but also on the basis of its influence on audiences and society, as well as its relationships and cultural context;
- Music should be assessed as a dynamic structure that creates meanings, values, and responsibilities between individuals, communities, and society in general.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the relational and comprehensive approach of the "new ethics" provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the ethical dimension of music as a major form of social communication.

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