

# **Musical Geographies of Central Asia**

## **Conference and Concert**

**16-18 May 2012, London**

**Report by Dr Megan Rancier (Bowling Green State University)**

The "Musical Geographies of Central Asia" Conference was held May 16-18, 2012 at the Institute of Musical Research (IMR) of the School of Advanced Study at the University of London and was co-organised by IMR and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in collaboration with the Aga Khan Music Initiative, a programme of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. The conference was an unprecedented event that brought together thirty delegates, who travelled to London from Azerbaijan, China, England, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, New Zealand, Russia, Scotland, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and the United States. The conference was attended additionally by University of London faculty and students. Given Central Asia's famous association with the Silk Road and its monumental contributions to intercultural dialogue throughout history, the international nature of the "Musical Geographies" conference was absolutely fitting. The three-day conference offered a wealth of perspectives on themes and issues that pertain to the musical practices of Central Asia, ranging geographically from the post-Soviet republic of Azerbaijan to the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Western China (Xinjiang). Many of these territories and their respective societies share musical elements such as instruments, terminology, theoretical principles, melodic modes, repertoires, and performance contexts; however, the ways in which these musical elements are utilized and interpreted are often as diverse as the people who inhabit this vast region. Similarly, the cultural and political realities in which musicians pursue their arts are highly variable throughout the region; what is celebrated and promoted by one nation-state may be suppressed or tightly controlled in another. Through their wide-ranging and compelling presentations, conference participants explored the fascinating spectrum of cultural practices, contestations, histories, similarities and differences, politics, and identities found in the music of Central Asia.

The subject matter for the thirty papers presented at the conference spanned dozens of genres encompassing traditional, religious, folk, and popular music. The topics discussed in the presentations included visual art and language, music theory, musical lineages, music education, music history, epic storytelling, music and spirituality, music and healing, musical expressions of

emotion, cultural heritage, music and nationalism, and transnational music networks. Presenters ranged from senior scholars, to recent Ph.D. graduates, to graduate students still engaged in conducting fieldwork for their master's or doctoral degrees.

One of the most notable features of the conference was the high number of scholars from Central Asia, in addition to the usual proportion of scholars from the United States and Europe. The unique advantage of having these "insider" scholars as delegates was that many of them have extensive first-hand experience with the musical traditions of their respective homelands, as musicians or scholars (or both), and have worked within the very systems of music education and practice that "outsider" scholars seek to understand through their research. The conference was an invaluable opportunity for European and American scholars to interact, network, and share perspectives with their Central Asian counterparts, and vice versa. In this way, the conference helped to perpetuate the legacy of the Silk Road by enabling the flow of ideas to transcend the boundaries between diverse peoples and nation states.

A highlight of the conference was the keynote address given by Dartmouth University's Arthur R. Virgin Professor of Music, Senior Project Consultant to the Aga Khan Music Initiative, and chair of the Arts and Culture sub-board of the Open Society (Soros) Foundations, Dr Theodore Levin. In his address, Dr Levin explored the conference's central concept of "musical geographies," offering a survey of several possible geographies and proposing ways in which each of them can be used as an intellectual lens with which to pursue the study of Central Asian music. Although he identified the "geography of ethno-nationalism" as "the biggest motivator in cultural development" in the region today, Levin also discussed the geographies of cosmopolitanism, hybridity, revitalized inter-regionalism, globalization, indigenous spirituality, and diaspora as vital considerations for scholars of Central Asian music and culture, and points from which future music research could grow further.

The conference concluded with a concert celebrating the musical wealth and diversity of Central Asia. Four individual artists and two performing ensembles presented music from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Tajikistan/Uzbekistan, Xinjiang, and Azerbaijan. Some of the performers were conference participants who demonstrated their practical – as well as intellectual – mastery of Central Asian musical practices. First, Professor Bakhtiyar Amanzhol (Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory) demonstrated examples of the traditional Kazakh narrative instrumental

genre called *küi*, on both the two-stringed lute *dombra* and the reed flute *sybyzgy*. Second, Professor Jamilya Gurbanova (Turkmen National Conservatory) sang two pieces from the Turkmen *muqam* repertoire while accompanying herself on the two-stringed lute *dutar*. Next, Dr William Sumits (University of Central Asia, Dushanbe) performed selections from the famous classical repertory of musical suites called *shashmaqam*, which is widely recognized as the shared, centuries-old cultural heritage of both Tajiks and Uzbeks. Sumits presented several *shashmaqam* melodies on the two-stringed *dutar*, which shares the same name as the Turkmen instrument but differs in both size and structure. The fourth performer was Dr Giovanni De Zorzi (University 'Ca' Foscari' of Venice), who performed several Sufi-inspired improvisations, or *taksîm*, on the Turkish reed flute *ney*. Following the solo performances, the London Uyghur Ensemble, led by Dr Rachel Harris (SOAS), played selections from the Uyghur classical music repertoire called *on ikki muqam*, which included a number of Uyghur musical instruments as well as a vocalist. Lastly, the audience was very fortunate to be able to enjoy a performance of classical Azeri *mugham* by a professional ensemble from Azerbaijan, featuring the excellent vocalist Gochag Askarov. Over the course of the concert, the musical connections between the peoples and cultures of Central could be seen and heard through the forms and sounds of the instruments, the repertoires, and the musical aesthetics of each performance. In addition to conference participants, a large number of students and members of the general public attended the concert as well, creating a warm feeling of community for this culminating event.

In sum, the "Musical Geographies of Central Asia" Conference was a significant success on both intellectual and aesthetic levels, demonstrating the continued growth of interest in Central Asian music among international music scholars and creating a renewed sense of collegiality and cooperation between scholars from inside and outside the region. In addition to the generous support provided by AKMI, the Institute of Musical Research, and the University of London, this remarkable event could not have taken place without the tireless efforts of conference organizers Dr Saida Daukeyeva (IMR) and Dr Rachel Harris (SOAS), to whom all of the participants are most grateful.

## **МУЗЫКАЛЬНЫЕ ГЕОГРАФИИ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ**

### **Конференция и концерт**

**16-18 Мая 2012 г., Лондон**

#### **Отчёт Д-ра Жамили Гурбановой (Туркменская Национальная Консерватория)**

Конференция «Музыкальные Географии Центральной Азии» была крупномасштабным и ценным научным симпозиумом, представившим исследования специалистов разных стран по общей, интересующей нас теме. Конференция позволила получить представление о целостной панораме исследований по музыке центральноазиатского региона, познакомиться с методами и теоретическими системами, доступ к которым в самом регионе ограничен, и раскрыть новые ракурсы в исследовании собственного материала. Новые исследования по музыке близлежащих и отдаленных регионов, близких по языку и традициям, дали возможность осознать место и роль локальных традиций в ряду многочисленных музыкальных культур Центральной Азии.

Темы выступлений участников конференции были интересными и познавательными, а их последовательность и деление на тематические секции хорошо продуманы. Положительным моментом организации явилось то, что была предоставлена возможность обсудить доклады после выступления, а не на заключительном круглом столе. Дискуссия выявила разные подходы в рассмотрении одних и тех же музыкальных традиций. Например, исторический подход к исследованию музыкальной культуры Туркменистана для некоторых ученых был новым.

Концерт, в котором приняли участие как музыканты из Центральной Азии, так и музыковеды, продемонстрировал жанровое разнообразие музыки региона и то, как исследователи могут на практике раскрыть свои мысли относительно особенностей той или иной музыкальной традиции.

Хотелось бы поблагодарить организаторов за их великолепную работу. Если в дальнейшем появится возможность опубликовать озвученный на конференции материал, это было бы большой радостью. В самом регионе такое издание пользовалось бы большим спросом.