Tuva, Among the Spirits
Sound, Music, and Nature in Sakha and Tuva
Among the Spirits is a sonic journey to the steppes of southern Siberia, the wellspring of Tuvan and Sakhan music, where the spiritual power of nature is manifested through its sounds. In these unprecedented on-site recordings, master musicians imitate and interact with the natural acoustic environment. Recorded in 1995-1998 on horseback, in creek beds, caves, canyons, and grasslands. 49 minutes, extensive notes, photographs, and discography.
TUVA, AMONG THE SPIRITS:
Sound, Music, and Nature in Sakha and Tuva
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Front cover: petroglyphs from cliffs on the bank of the Yenisei River, Tuva.
superimposed on photo of the Sayan Mountains north of Kyzyl, Tuva

AMONG THE SPIRITS Sound, Music, and Nature in Sakha and Tuva
by Ted Levin

An Animist View of the World
Among the Spirits is a sonic journey through a landscape and soundscape whose inhabitants preserve what is arguably one of the world’s oldest forms of music-making. I call this way of making music “sound mimesis.” The Greek word mimesis means “imitation,” and among the herder-hunters of the Siberian regions of Tuva and Sakha, sound mimesis both reproduces and interacts with the ambient sounds of the natural world: the calls of wild and domestic animals, the reverberant echo of cliffs and jazz-like syncopated rhythms of stream water burbling over stones, the multiphonic howling of wind blowing across open steppe. These are the sounds which provide constant companionship to the pastoralists who herd sheep, cows, horses, reindeer, yak, and camels (depending on the climate and terrain) and who typically supplement their diet and income by hunting and trapping. In both Tuva and Sakha, pastoralism is the key element of a living economic, cultural, and spiritual tradition that, while open to innovation, preserves vestiges of archaic practices and beliefs.

For the Siberian herder-hunters, nature is the locus of spiritual power. That is, they typically ascribe spiritual power to natural phenomena and pray to the spirits, literally “owners” or “hosts” of mountains, rivers, and caves, as well as to the spirits of wild animals such as bear, elk, and certain birds. The spirits of animals are themselves believed to animate and sanctify topographic features such as mountains, as is evident, for example, in the Tuvan word xaiyrakan, whose primary meaning is “bear,” but which also connotes “a sacred mountain.”

The spiritual nature of mountains and rivers is believed to be manifested not only through their physical appearance (which in the case of mountains is
typically anthropomorphized through analogies between topographic features and parts of a human body), but through the sounds they produce — or can be made to produce through human agency. Thus, the echo that results from singing in proximity to a cliff, and the interaction of a human voice with the gurgling water of a brook or the swishing air currents of a strong wind may be imbued with spiritual power.

Living creatures, no less than inanimate places or landscapes, manifest spiritual power through sound, and for humans, the key to animating and assimilating this power is the imitation of sound. The Tuvan verb “to imitate,” ottüner, seems to be derived from the noun öt, “bile,” suggesting that the Tuvan concept of imitation is rooted not simply in the notion of physical mimicry, but involves actually emplacing oneself “in the bile” of another being, that is, assuming the essence of another living creature. In traditional Tuvan culture it is the liver (which produces bile) rather than the heart that is regarded as the seat of feeling and emotion. For example, to convey the sense of being touched by hurtful emotion, Tuvans commonly speak of “liver ache,” rather than, as in English and other European languages, “heartache.”

That imitation, with its overtones of animist worship, is based on the medium of sound rather than, for example, sight—which would tend to lead to a mimesis of movement or physical expression, such as dance (as among some other Siberian peoples, e.g., Koriaks)—underscores the importance of sound as a physical stimulus and of listening as a sensory medium in the traditional herding-hunting culture of the Altai Turkic peoples.

Tuva: The Sequel

In 1987, I became the first American to do ethnographic fieldwork in what was then the Soviet Autonomous Republic of Tuva, a sparsely settled region of grasslands, boreal forests, and mountain ridges that lies some 2,500 miles east of Moscow. Sponsored by the National Geographic Society and the USSR Union of Composers, my small American-Russian-Tuvan expedition surveyed the traditional expressive culture of Tuva’s sheep and reindeer herders, focusing on the musical technique called xoömei, or “throat-singing,” in which a single vocalist simultaneously produces two distinct pitches: a fundamental note and, high above it, a series of articulated harmonics that are sequenced into melodies and manipulated with extreme virtuosity in several canonical styles. Our field recordings became a compact disc released by Smithsonian Folkways called Tuva: Voices from the Center of Asia.

In producing the CD, we had no intention of commercializing Tuvan music, but our release seems to have been at least partly responsible for turning Tuvan music into a major phenomenon on the international “world music” scene. Tuvan music groups have performed concerts throughout Europe and North America, recorded with rock stars, collaborated with a string quartet, and contributed to the soundtrack of a Hollywood movie (Geranimo). Yet the very success of Tuvan music in the Western cultural marketplace as well as the legacy of Soviet culture policy in Tuva itself, where traditional music was recast in forms compatible with the secular nationalism of the Soviet state, threaten to obscure the role it has traditionally played among the South Siberian herders. With the aim of illuminating this role, I returned to Tuva in 1995, 1996, and 1998 to delve more deeply into the remarkable tradition of spiritual and expressive culture in which the Tuvan pastoralists’ keen perception of natural landscapes and soundscapes is artistically linked to their legacy of animistic practices and beliefs. Traveling with my Tuvan friends Sayan Bapa, Kaigal-ool Khvaly, and Anatoli Kuular of the ensemble Huun-Huur-Tu, and on our 1998 expedition, with Boston-based recording engineer Joel Gordon, I sought out landscapes and soundscapes that inspired sonic response and interaction, either from my Tuvan fellow travelers or from other Tuvans we visited along the way. In 1998, our group traveled not only in Tuva, but visited Yakutsk, capital of the Sakha Republic.
(known as Yakutia during the Soviet era), 1,500 miles northeast of Tuva. There, Joel Gordon and I recorded some extraordinary musicians whose mastery of sound mimesis so astonished us that it seemed unthinkable not to include them on this recording. Indeed, the Yakuts, who, according to widely accepted anthropological evidence, migrated northward to their present territory from the region of Lake Baikal in South Siberia, share with the South Siberian Altai Turks many patterns of culture, not the least of which is a common sense of musical ideals and aesthetics.

Sound or Music?

Music has sometimes been broadly defined as "aestheticized sound." Whether highly structured or randomly produced, and whether considered by listeners to represent sublime harmony or an inharmonious affront to the ears, music strives to convey an aesthetic statement through sound. In the sound world of Tuva and Sakha, however, the boundary between sound and music becomes vague. In the Tuvan language, for example, no word covers the same semantic field as "music" (xözhüm, a loan word from Mongolian, means broadly "music" but implies the use of musical instruments as opposed to voice alone). Rather, the social functions, techniques of acoustical production, and formal styles of sound and music are described by a range of specialized terms. These functions, techniques, and styles might best be understood as points along a continuum that ranges from "sound" to "song," that is, from iconic imitation of natural sounds through aestheticized imitations of natural sounds to autonomous musical constructs. Such a continuum would look as follows:

(references in brackets are to examples from either the present recording or from Tuva: Voices from the Center of Asia [see discography], here abbreviated Tuva.) [N.B. In transcriptions of Tuvan words, "x" sounds like "ch" in "loch." ]
The table aims to clarify distinctions of function and form that are represented in the traditional Tuvan sound world and that still play a role in the sound world of contemporary Tuva. These distinctions, however, are not absolute. For example, _xöömêi_ or "throat-singing," which is at root a form of aestheticized imitation, is often employed as a vocal technique in songs, particularly in _kozhanyk_. Likewise, instruments including those such as the _amirga_ (a hunting horn) and _ediski_ (a single reed made from bark), whose original function was iconic imitation, are nowadays included in arrangements of composed songs.

**A Sonic Journey**

In piecing together the sonic journey represented on *Among the Spirits* from many hours of digital field recordings, we have tried to illustrate some of the ways in which herder-hunters acoustically interact with the natural soundscapes and landscapes in which they live. These various types of interaction were not inventoried in advance and systematically sought out on our travels; rather, they emerged from the very process of traveling on the land. For example, the spectacular recording of Anatoli Kuular fusing the harmonics of his throat-singing with the sound of flowing stream water (track 7) grew out of a chance event on our 1995 expedition. One evening just before dusk while walking on level grassland, we came upon a small stream. I asked Anatoli, who is in his early 30s and polished his virtuoso throat-singing abilities as a Soviet-style concert performer of Tuvan "folk music," whether he had ever heard, or heard of, older herders singing with flowing water. Anatoli nodded. "_Borbangnadyr,_'" he said, naming a style of throat-singing that imitates the sound of something rolling or flowing (from the verb _borbangnaar:_ to roll, to flow). When Anatoli jumped into the rocky streambed and tried singing _borbangnadyr_ with the water, we noticed that, when he produced a harmonic melody of just the right rhythm, pitch, and timbre, his vocal har-
monics melded with the dancing harmonics produced by the rushing stream. Eureka! Many attempts later, Anatoli had become something of an expert in the art of listening carefully to the pitch, rhythm, and timbre of flowing water and matching his vocal harmonics to the harmonics produced by the water. For the recording on track 7, we chose a location which best represented the sound ideal of flowing water as my Tuvan companions characterized it: omnidirectional “surround-sound” which covers a wide frequency range, yet at the same time creates discrete rhythmic, timbral, and melodic patterns. Tuvans like to hear streams that “speak,” “sing,” or “converse” (English expresses a similar analogy between water and speech in the cliché “babbling brook”). Too great a rate of flow is unappealing because it produces white noise without identifiable patterns, while streams with too little flow lack the constantly shifting sonic drama which holds a singer’s interest.

Not all of our recordings were as carefully set up as that of borbangnadyr with water. For example, track 12, “Harmonics in the Wind,” was the result of spontaneous inspiration during an afternoon hike on a windy hilltop near the Mongolian border in August 1996. Encountering ferocious gusts as we tramped toward a cave where we planned to make some recordings, I unpacked my microphone to capture the sound of wind. At that moment, Kaigal-ool remembered hearing the sound of wind exciting the strings of a Tuvan zither called chatagan that had been placed on the roof of a yurt so that the gut strings could dry in the sun. The excitation of the strings had produced a soft wash of harmonics, and these harmonic sounds inspire humans to produce harmonics themselves — or so it is said among the herdsmen. Kaigal-ool and Sayan quickly unpacked igil (two-stringed fiddle) and doshpuluur (banjo-like lute), held them up to the wind, and turned them until the wind passed over the strings at just the right angle to produce maximum harmonic output.

The organizing principle of the sonic journey represented on Among the
Spirits is neither chronological or geographical, nor does it group together particular musical categories or modes of sound production. Rather, it is a journey through soundworlds related by their acoustical qualities and by the mood that these qualities evoke. For example, the resonant sound of the igil in track 4 is followed by a recording of birds and bird imitations (try to distinguish them!) in a lush, highland field whose acoustical qualities match well those of the small, stream-side clearing where we recorded the igil just after a light rain had freshened the air. We show not only the similarities among various acoustical environments, but the contrasts: the dry, open acoustic of the grasslands where we recorded the "sound painting" illustrated on track 13 and the wind on track 12 couldn't be more different than the super-reverberant acoustic of the cave where we recorded track 15, and the riverine cliff where we recorded the "long song" in track 16 ("long" because of the long reverberation which singers sought in outdoor performance environments rich in echo).

In the end, what became clear from watching my Tuva companions listen to and interact with their soundworld is that Tuva listening is timbral listening. If music in other cultures centers around the discrimination and manipulation of melody and rhythm, then in Tuva and Sakha (as well as elsewhere in Siberia) it centers on timbre. Indeed, for animists, a sensitivity to the subtleties of timbre provides arguably the most essential and intimate tool for imitating and interacting with the natural soundworld.

The Recordings

The sounds on this CD were all recorded on location in Tuva and Sakha using assorted two-microphone techniques, with the exception of tracks 7 and 8, recorded with 4 mics. All tracks were recorded outdoors except tracks 2 and 14, which were recorded rather unexpectedly in a small living room in Yakutsk. The recordings are presented essentially as recorded, with a minimum of processing (mostly to remove distracting wind noises). With the goal of presenting as vividly as possible the wonderfully permeable border between sounds of the nonhuman world, human imitation of that world, and musical constructions involving those imitations, we have used some very long, transitional crossfades—up to 30 or 40 seconds—which juxtapose two or even three elements at once (e.g., between tracks 2 and 3, 11 and 12, 12 and 13). Beyond these transitions all is as it was collected by our two mics for your two ears.

—Joel Gordon
1 A Reverberant Valley 1:59
Birds, stream water, and imitations of a distant owl are interrupted by the sound of a horse cantering past, which segues into...

2 Sakha Animal Imitations 1:55
Aided only by a jew’s harp, German Khatilaev and Klavdia Khatilaeva, two young Yakut musicians, use a range of extended vocal techniques to make all of these imitative sounds.

3 Tuvan Round-Up 1:48
To make this recording of a herd of wild horses, Joel Gordon stood in the path of a stampede, hand-holding his microphone boom and hoping that the horses would go around, rather than over, him.

4 Fantasy on the igil 5:33
The sound of field birds early in the morning by the shore of Chagatai Lake, where, legend has it, Chingis Khan buried gold treasure, leads into Kaigal-ool Khovalyg’s free-form improvisation on the igil, a two-stringed fiddle, which he accompanies with throat-singing. The igil is well suited to imitate the sounds of horses, while through throat-singing Kaigal-ool creates a stylized imitation of birds, and also demonstrates the style known as ezengileer—an imitation of the sound of boots clicking in stirrups.

5 Birds and Bird Imitations 2:21
Kaigal-ool Khovalyg, Anatoli Kuular, and Alexei Sarygir imitate the sound of the owl, black kite (Milvus migrans), common cuckoo bird (Cuculus canorus), and carrion crow (Corvus corone). An amirga (hunting horn) sounds in the distance.

6 Xöömei on Horseback 2:32
Anatoli Kulaar and Kaigal-ool Khovalyg demonstrate how herders break into spontaneous xöömei (throat-singing) while riding horseback, the rhythm of the singing synchronizing with the gait of their horse. To make this recording, Joel Gordon attached a microphone to a length of plastic pipe held by one of the riders, with cables running to a DAT recorder which he carried in a backpack.

7 Borbangnadyr with Stream Water 2:43
Anatoli Kulaar finds the rhythmic, melodic, and timbral groove of a stream. (See further description in preceding essay.)

8 Xomuz (jew’s harp) Imitating Water 1:38
The xomuz is used to imitate a great variety of environmental and human-made sounds. Here Anatoli Kuular plays his xomuz by the bank of a stream and represents the sounds of flowing and dripping water.

9 Home on the (Mountain) Range 1:28
In which we join a Tuvan herding family at its homestead in a field set below tall cliffs that create a sound environment rich in echo, as heard in this recording of children playing among domestic animals.

10 Ang-meng mal-magan öttineri
(Imitation of wild and domestic animals) 1:49
Albert Saspyp-oool, a 21-year-old herder who is a gifted mimic, illustrates the sound genre which Tuvans call “imitation of wild and domestic animals.” His imitations, each recorded separately, were edited together into a pastiche and mixed with a few samples of natural bird sounds in the background.
11 Ang-meng mal-magan ăttüneri (reprise) 2:12
Alexander Chambal-oolgii Tüülish, a hunter and herder who told us that he had trapped 97 wolves (and sold their skulls to shamans, who use them for ritual purposes), imitates the cry of a camel, snake, duck, bull, wild boar, and foal.

12 Harmonics in the Wind 2:59
Recorded on a grassy hilltop near the border of Mongolia. The clicking sounds in the background are grasshoppers. (See further description in preceding essay.)

13 Sonic Landscape 1:49
Grigori Mongush spontaneously transforms visual imagery into sonic imagery as he whistles an imagistic picture of a dramatic vista of grasslands landscape.

14 The Legacy of Ancestors 7:32
In this composed piece, Tos-Khol, a group of young Yakut musicians, mimes the varied natural soundworld of Sakha in springtime.

In addition to voices, they use the following instruments: xomuz (jew's harp), kryymma (fiddle), köpsiür (single-headed barrel drum), dünggür (frame drum used by shamans), and djağa (maracas).

15 Cave Spirits 0:56
For Tuva, caves are sites of spiritual power, for they are orifices through which humankind can contact spirits residing inside the earth. There are many legends about the special power of singing and musical instruments performed inside caves. To experience this power for ourselves, we journeyed to a cave near the Mongolian border situated high on a stony escarpment. This recording features not only Sayan Bapa performing the style of throat-singing called kargyraa but also the sound of water dripping from the roof of the cave onto the microphone.

16 Kyzyl Taiga (Red Forest) 2:19
Kaigal-ool performs this “long song,” so called because of its long reverberation time, in the traditional fashion, with the reverb provided by a cliff. Kaigal-ool recalled that herders often used to sing to one another across the banks of a river because song carried better than speech. “It wasn’t easy to cross rivers then,” he said. The cliff in this recording forms the north bank of the Kaa-Xem, a river which joins the great Yenisei at Kyzyl. Kaigal-ool stood on the south bank and sang across the river, his voice reflected by both the cliff and the water. The recording took place by flashlight at 2:00 AM, after the wind and noise from revelers at a nearby campsite had finally died down.

17 Talking Xomuz 1:53
The xomuz is used to imitate not only natural sounds but human speech. Many stories and legends tell of confidential messages encoded in the playing of the xomuz and subsequently decoded by listeners sensitive to the instrument’s phonetics. In this recording, Anatoli Kuular first sings a quatrain and then repeats on the xomuz what he has sung.

Xo-y-le chonnung arazynanan On my soft-voiced xomuz
Körbeecchängep orba urug I play for the multitudes
Xoyög ünnig xomuztalgan Among them sits a girl
Xo-y-le chonga oynap bereen—oi Who pretends not to notice me.

18 Chiraa-Xor 4:28
Kaigal-ool Khovalyg, Anatoli Kuular, and Sayan Bapa, three of the four members of the popular Tuvan ensemble Huun-Huur-Tu, perform one of their favorite songs for an impromptu audience of herders. The song sings the
praises of a favorite horse whose name translates as "yellow trotter," and how it escaped a jealous landowner's plot to drive it over a cliff.

19 Epilogue 0:59
The birds have the last word—literally. These seagulls, recorded early in the morning at Chagatai Lake, in south central Tuva, turn human sound mimicry on its head with their anthropophonic sighs and chatter.

This recording is dedicated to the memory of Gennadi Chash (1959-1998), the first Tuvan to visit the United States, throat-singer extraordinaire, conservationist, generous friend.

Performers
Kaigal-ool Khovalyg (b. 1960), Anatoli Kuular (b. 1965), Sayan Bapa (b. 1962), and Alexei Saryglar (b. 1966) [tracks 4-8, 15-18] comprise the ensemble Huun-Huur-Tu, whose concert tours and recordings have made them well known to aficionados of world music in the United States and Europe. Each is a talented soloist in his own right, and on this recording they perform primarily as individuals. Their enthusiasm for the idea of investigating Tuvan music in its traditional acoustical environments made these recordings possible.

Grigori Mongush (b. 1958) [track 13] grew up in the settlement of Xorum-Dag and herded animals from a young age. Grigori told us that he learned to whistle while herding. "I would look around and whistle, and sheep and cows would raise their heads and listen. I can do throat-singing, but I like to whistle. I do it when I’m really at peace. I whistle in a special way. I can whistle melodies, but the way I whistle for myself is much more complicated."

Alexander Chambal-oglu Tülüsh (b. 1940) [track 11] is renowned for his skills as a hunter and trapper, and for his detailed knowledge of animal behavior and animal sounds.

Albert Saspyk-oool (b. 1975) [track 10] lives on a collective farm near the settlement of Chadan. He is a talented mimic, well known in the local area for his ability to imitate animal sounds.

Mar-oool Sat (b. 1941), amirga [track 5], grew up in a herding family and presently earns his living as a schoolteacher in Teelli, a settlement in the west of Tuva. He is an avid hunter and an expert at using the amirga to imitate the call of an elk.

Tos-Khol is a group of young Yakut musicians who live in Yakutsk, the capital of the Sakha Republic, and share an interest in traditional Yakut music and culture. In addition to the ubiquitous xomuz and kyyrympa, an archaic fiddle held in an upright position, they play a variety of home-made percussion instruments drawn from Yakut traditions.

German Khatilaev (director), düngür
Klavdia Khatilaeva, xomuz, küsür
Lyuba Stolyarova, xongsuo, tangaali, turun
Üemelshne Fedorova, xomuz
Xüüxeegiin Baldorgy, küpsür
Mariania Sforonova, dijag

German Khatilaev and Klavdia Khatilaeva perform as a duo in addition to their work with Tos-Khol.
Bibliography and Discography


Kyrgyz, Zoya. Tyva chonnung ertinei xorqomi ["Throat-singing, the Jewel of Tuva"], Kyzyl, 1992


Discography/Videography


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Huun-Huur-Tu: The Orphan's Lament, Shanachie (1994)

Huun-Huur-Tu: If I'd Been Born an Eagle, Shanachie, (1997)

Tuva: Voices from the Center of Asia, Smithsonian Folkways SFW 40017.

Tuvinian Musicians: Choomey—Throat Singing from the Center of Asia, World Network 21, 1993.


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