TUVA

VOICES FROM
THE CENTER
OF ASIA

Miraculous
Singing from Siberia
Preserves an
Ancient Sound
World
TUVA: Voices from the Center of Asia

Recordings and notes by Eduard Alekseev, Zoya Kirgid, and Ted Levin

On a brilliantly clear Siberian morning late in the summer of 1987, the Soviet-American Musical-Ethnographic Expedition to Tuva — or so our group of four called itself — arrived in Kyzyl, Tuva's capital, a peaceful town of wide avenues and parks on the south bank of the Yenisei River (see map). We were in Tuva to survey its diverse styles and genres of traditional music, with and without camera and digital tape recorder, to document the musical sounds, and more broadly, what one might call the sound world, of the Tuvans. Closely bound to a dramatic natural environment of mountains, forest, and steppe, and to the horses, reindeer, yaks, sheep, and other animals that provide their livelihood, the Tuvan herders maintain a subtle and complex sonic relationship with the natural — and supernatural — beings and forces that share their world. For the Tuvans, music forms a discourse with nature that reinforces their sense of place, purpose, and self.

Sponsored by the National Geographic Society and the USSR Union of Composers, our team made two visits to Tuva in 1987 and 1988. We recorded music in yurts, the circular felt and canvas tents that are home to the nomadic herders, and in the rural "houses of culture" that serve as official cultural centers for the small settlements that have sprouted on the Tuvan steppe since the onset of collectivization in the late 1920s.

We sought musicians whose repertoire stems from the oral tradition of a family or community. In rural parts of the Soviet Union, amateur folk music and dance groups coached and chore-
A stone and iron monument in a small park on the bank of the Yenisei River has a carved inscription that reads "Centre of Asia" in English, Russian, and Tuvan, a Turkic tongue distantly related to the language of modern Turkey. The story goes that a Victorian Englishman, having already visited the geographic centers of Africa, Australia, and Europe, decided to add Asia to his conquests. His compass led him to the Yenisei, to a spot a bit downstream from the present monument, where he erected a marker. Not long ago, the "Centre of Asia" was moved to its current, still more scenic, site.

most directly illuminate the style and role of music among the Tuvan herders. One exception (track 17) is an excerpt from the singing of a young trio that demonstrates their attempt to carry forward traditional music in the context of contemporary performance conditions, including the concert stage, recording studio, and television.

In releasing this recording, our aim is twofold; to share with a wider audience a fascinating and little-known musical world, and to support the efforts of those in Tuva who are working to preserve it. Traditional Tuvan music embodies the highest aspirations of a unique and remarkable culture. We dedicate this recording to the musicians who generously shared their music and their knowledge with us.

The Tuvans are a South Siberian Turkic people numbering some 150,000 whose traditional territory lies north and west of the present-day border between the Soviet Union and Outer Mongolia, stretching from the Altai Mountains to the headwaters of the Yenisei in the Sayan Basin. Vassals first of the Mongols and then of the Manchus, the Tuvans formed a revolutionary republic in 1921 with support from the Soviet Union, called Tanna Tuva. In 1944, Tuva became part of the USSR and now has the status of an Autonomous Republic within the RSFSR (Russian Federation). It is almost entirely a rural land, and the traditional occupation of herding still plays a central role in its economy.

To an outsider, the most striking music in Tuva is that which the Tuvans call khoomei, from a Mongolian word that means "throat." Khoomei (sometimes transliterated as xoomi, xomei, or hoomi) is generally translated as "throat-singing," but Western musicians and researchers have also referred to the same phenomenon as overtone singing, biphonic and diphonic singing, and harmonic singing. The principle in all cases is the same: a single vocalist produces two, and occasionally three, distinct notes simultaneously. By precise movements of the lips, tongue, jaw, velum, and larynx, singers can selectively intensify vocally produced harmonics.

In music, harmonics are sounds whose frequencies are integral multiples (that is, twice, three times, four times, etc.) of the frequency of a common fundamental tone. For example, if middle C is the fundamental, then the first several harmonics would yield C an octave higher, followed by G, C two octaves above middle C, E, and so on. Harmonics form a sonic ladder - with rungs set closer and closer together - extending upward from any fundamental frequency. Various combinations of harmonics are present in virtually all the sounds we hear, producing a distinct timbre or tone quality. Normally however, the numerous harmonics that add "body" to a tone are less loud than
the fundamental frequency that tells a listener what musical pitch is being played or sung. We hear harmonics only as coloring, not as distinct notes. In throat-singing, the opposite is true. Harmonics can be made louder than the drone note from which they arise. In Tuva, high harmonic pitches are sequenced into melodies and manipulated with extreme virtuosity in a number of canonized styles.

The melody of the song "Artii Sayir" (track 18), sung in harmonics, is transcribed below. The number above each note identifies the harmonic which produces that pitch. By convention, the first harmonic ("1") is the fundamental pitch; thus the second harmonic ("2") is that which sounds an octave higher, and successive harmonic multiples of 2 all successively higher octaves above the fundamental.

Throat-singing in Tuva is almost exclusively the province of men, though women are physiologically able to produce the same sounds, albeit at higher pitch levels. A taboo against women throat-singers based on the belief that such singing may cause infertility is gradually being abandoned, and some girls are now learning khoomei.

Tuvan throat-singers sing in a number of distinct musical styles that represent different types of vocal production. Five styles are widely recognized: kargiraa, sigit, borbamdir, ezengileer, and khoomei, which is the name of a particular style as well as the general term for throat-singing. In earlier times, singers specialized in a single style or two related styles, whereas contemporary singers, particularly younger ones, commonly perform in several styles, frequently arranging short melodic segments into polystylistic medleys. Each of the five main styles is presented on this recording.

Kargiraa (from an onomatopoetic word that means in Tuva "to wheeze," "to speak in a hoarse or husky voice") is characterized by an extremely low fundamental pitch sung with much chest resonance, long, even breaths, and open vowel sounds such as "aah," "ooh," "eh," and "oo" (as in "boozie"). When sung from a low fundamental pitch, these vowels produce harmonics 6-12 times the frequency of the fundamental (i.e., two-and-a-half to three-and-half octaves above the drone). Kargiraa is usually applied to texted songs, as opposed to textless melodies. A variant of kargiraa, called "steppe kargiraa" (side 1, no. 1) calls to mind the Tantric "overtone chanting" of Tibetan Buddhist monks, most notably from the Gyüütö and Gyümé monasteries. A steady harmonic tone — the 10th harmonic — sounds three octaves and a major third above a fundamental in a subbass register. The fact that Tibetan Buddhist monks and monasteries were present in Tuva until the late 1920s, having reached Tuva by way of Mongolia, tempts speculation on a possible connection between Tuvan and Tibetan overtone practices.

Sigit (from Tuvan: "whistle") may be
readily distinguished from kargiraa. In sigit style, the fundamental drone is pitched notably higher than that of kargi-
raa — in a baritone register — and vocal production is highly tensed, yielding clear, piercing harmonics that range between 8 and 12 times the frequency of the fundamental. Texted lines usually alternate with untetailed vocalizations formed from tense vowels such as “eene” (like “cheese”) or “urr” (“urn”).

Khoomei is sung in the same register as sigit, but with less laryngeal tension and more nasal resonance. Khoomei and sigit are often joined together, as in the performance of Tumat Kara-ool (track 8).

Ezengileer (from Tuvan “stirrup”) and borbannadir (used metaphorically to signify “rolling”) both feature a pulsating, asymmetrical rhythm that represents the canter of a horse. In ezengileer, soft, shimmering harmonic melodies produced by rapid vibrations of the lips are sung over a low fundamental drone. Borbann-
adir is sung from a fundamental in either the bass or baritone range and has a fuller, tenser sound than ezengileer.

Like khoomei, borbannadir is character-
ized by nasal resonance. (In some cases, khoomei and borbannadir seem to designate a single, identical style). The borbannadir segment presented on track 11 contains an ultra-high, whistle-like harmonic that is peculiar to the performance of that singer.

Neither borbannadir nor ezengileer is normally sung with text and neither is presented in rounded, song-like forms, as is sigit. Rather, these two styles might well represent vestiges of a proto-musical sound world in which man sought through mimesis to link himself to the beings and forces that most concerned him: in the case of the Tuvans, domestic animals, the physical environment of mountains and grasslands, and the elemental energies of wind, water, and light.

In the traditional sound world of present-day Tuva, throat-singing is still intimately connected to nature. For example, “steppe kargiraa,” mentioned above, is so called because of its traditional manner of performance. A singer stands on the windblown steppe and turns his head at just the right angle to the wind while carefully shaping his lips. The effect is similar to that of blowing across an open bottle top, with the wind subtly amplifying vocally produced harmonics. Throat-
singing seems to have served traditionally as a means of responding to states of heightened feeling brought on by exalta-
tion at the beauty of nature. Walking alone on the grasslands, herdsmen sang not for one another, but for themselves, for the mountains, and for the steppe. At the same time, they identified themselves through song with the ethos of their people.

Throat-singing is also closely tied to the sounds of other musical forms and genres. If is nqaccident that the charac-
teristic timbre of khoomei is so similar to that of the Khomuz jewl’s harp, the most widespread instrument in Tuva (track 10; track 28). In the hands of a master, the jewl’s harp is transformed into a human voice, while in throat-singing, the voice sounds like a jewl’s harp. The timbre of khoomei also permeates the lullaby sung by Bilchit-Maa Davaa (track 29). In the brief excerpt presented on this recording, her voice divides clearly into fundamental and pulsating harmonics.

Imitations of animal sounds by hunters (track 20, a-e), chants for the domestication of newborn animals (the bonding of young ones to their mother or to a different nursing female, tracks 21-
24), the blessing of the bear hunt (track 20), and the “conversation” between a reindeer herder and one of her animals (track 20g) all reveal glimpses of a twil-
light area at the periphery of music. Drawing on an inventory of sounds and on rhythmized and intoned speech, these items might be considered the sonic ancestors of contemporary “performance art.” But like khoomei, these “perform-
ances” were originally created not to entertain other humans, but as a response to a finely honed understanding of the place of human sound in the natural world. And while naturalistic, they reveal a sensitivity to poetic and musical form.

At present, the Tuvan herdsmen seem to be precipitously poised between old cultural values and new. In many arenas of material and spiritual culture, the once strong voice of tradition is now only a faint echo. For example, shamans, the tradi-
tional healers, are all but non-existent,
and shamanism has been officially consigned to the non-threatening status of an historical artifact amenable to theatrical recreation. The shamanic ceremony excerpted on this recording (track 23) was indeed performed by an actor in the Kyzyl dramatic theater who has long and convincingly acted the role of a shaman in plays. Yet the boundary between artifice and authenticity is not clear, for the actor, Alexander Davakai, comes from a hereditary line of shamans, observed many shamanic ceremonies in his youth, and is intrigued by the question of whether shamanic power really exists.

"Hymn to the Mountains" (track 33) is another vestige of a musical practice from a previous time. This fragile and poignant chant sprang from the reminiscences of an old man who studied in a Buddhist monastery as a youth. He has remained a repository of texts and songs that illustrate the syncretic nature of Tuvan religious beliefs, which combine elements of Buddhism, animism, and shamanism. Without local efforts at revival, it seems certain that within a few years, the music of lama, animist and shaman will slip away entirely.

By contrast, our Tuvan expeditions led us to be more sanguine about the future of khoomei. After periods of uncertainty and flagging interest, throat-singing has entered a new era of popularity. Many young people have learned to sing, and some of the very best throat-singers are in their 20s and 30s. Within the Soviet Union, and increasingly, abroad, Tuvan throat-singers have appeared at festivals, on television, and on recordings. Younger musicians intent on exploring new forms of music-making have created ensembles to broaden the traditional solo performance of khoomei. Unlike "official" folk-troupes in the USSR, these ensembles are not fettered to an "artistic director," but determine their own musical repertory and direction. Such a group is Amirak (track 17), three of whose musicians perform on our record, combining several throat-singing styles with accompaniment on khomuz and doshpular (a small lute) into a single, if not yet wholly unified, "composition." Likewise, the unusual personal styles of singers like Sundukai Mongush (e.g. tespeng khoomei, track 7) reveal an active, creative musical thought that is the hallmark of a living tradition.

Tuvans are not the only people from the center of Asia who practice throat-singing. Across the border in western Outer Mongolia, khoomei is also alive and evolving. To a lesser extent, it survives among the Bashkirs, a Turkic people of the Volga region, who call their throat-singing uszilau. Yet, nowhere does the tradition flower with such diversity and ingenuity as in Tuva. Why here, in these remote and starkly beautiful Asian uplands? Might throat-singing have existed at some time in other cultures from which it subsequently disappeared? Did the original throat-singers understand that through the practice of khoomei, the physical harmony of the overtone series could become related through the body to a living "harmony" in oneself, and with the natural world?

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TRANSLATION OF TEXTS

(Absence of translation indicates that musical item is textless)

1. Steppe Kargiraa
   Fedor Tau, b. 1929, Samagaltai, Tes-Khem Region

2. Sigit
   Mergen Mongush, b. 1961, Chadan, Dzun-Khemchik Region

3. Sigit “Alash”
   Mergen Mongush, as above
   Oh, my Alash,
   Running down from the high mountains
   With 30-40 tributaries,
   Running swiftly, my Alash.

4. Sigit with Igil (bowed instrument)
   Anatolii Kuular, b. 1967, Chadan, Dzun-Khemchik Region

5. Khoomei
   Fedor Tau, as above

6. Khoomei
   Sundukai Mongush, b. 1926, Chadan, Dzun-Khemchik Region

7. Tespeng Khoomei
   Sundukai Mongush, above
   When I remember the Ulug-Khem,
   It comes to me like the stem of a rose willow.
   When I remember my sweetheart
   She comes to me lying, as if
   Awakening from sleep.
   When I remember the Kaa-Khem
   Its span is enormous.
   When I remember my dark-haired sweetheart
   Smiling shyly, she comes to me, sitting down.

8. Kozhamik (medley) with khoomei, sigit, and kargiraa
   Tumat Kara-ool, b. 1935, Arig-Bazhi, Ulug-Khem Region
   Whether it sounds good or whether it doesn’t,
   I’m going to sing you borbannadir, ooy.
   Whether on a one-year old foal or a two-year old,
   You want to put on a harness, ooy.
   To you, my dark-skinned sweetheart
   I’ll sing a khoomei song, ooy
   To you, my only one,
   I’ll sing kargiraa.

   Tumat Kara-ool and Andrei Chulдум-ool, b. 1927, Arig-Bazhi, Ulug-Khem Region
10. Khomuz melodies performed by trio of Khomuz players
Anchimaan Sonat, b. 1940
Anchimaan Khert, b. 1940
Achimaua Targin
Chandannaa Torten-oool, b. 1942
Chiraa-Bazhi, Dzun-Khemchik Region

11. Borbannadir
Mikhail Dopchin, b. 1922, Narin, Tes-Khem Region

12. Borbannadir
Tumat Kara-oool, as above

13. Borbannadir with finger strokes across lips
Tumat Kara-oool, as above
From the many mountain peaks of Bayan-Kola
I am your older brother - a combine driver.

14. Borbannadir
Anatolii Kuular, as above

15. Ezengileer
Marzhimal Ondar, b. 1932, Bora-Taiga, Sut-Khol Region
Ezengileer with imitation of boots clicking in stirrups (finger snapping against tea bowl)

16. Sigit with khomuz
Oleg Kuular, as above

17. Medley of various throat-singing styles
Ensemble "Amirak," Arig-Bazhi, Ulug-Khem Region
Gennadi Chash, b. 1959
Evgenii Oyun, b. 1958
Mergen Mongush, b. 1961

There, where they sow various kinds of bread
Is the wide and spacious Bayan-Kol.
There, where my dear sweetheart is conversing merrily.
There, where they sow various kinds of bread
Is the wide and spacious Bayan-Kol.
Where, winking, the daughter of my aunt, my loved one, is conversing.
Uvai, uvai, uvai, uvai, uvai...
When I remember the Ulug-Khem It comes to me like the stem of a willow rose.
When I remember my sweetheart,

18. Kargiraa "Artii-Sayir"
Vasily Chazir, b. 1958, Ak-Erik, Tes-Khem Region

19. Melody on the amirge (hunting horn): luring of the stag
Vasili Khuurak, b. 1916, Ak-Tal, Ulug-Khem Region

20. a. Imitation of the roe deer
b. Imitation of the musk deer
c. Imitation of reindeer
d. Imitation of owl
e. Imitation of wolf's howl
Vasili Khuurak, as above

f. Appeal to the patron of hunters before the hunt
Shoirbul Salchak, b. 1921, Toora-Khem, Todzhe Region

Mysterious, unknown, grant me, master, That prey which is too heavy to lift.
Send me, master, the unknown and unknowable,
Send me, master, an animal with a wide chest.

20. Reindeer herder’s calls to the reindeer
Polina Oro-o, b. 1930, Toora-Khem, Todzhe Region

Hey, girl, over there, no. 34, I think. Come here, khai, khai, khai, how can she run away, that reindeer, no. 34. Come over here, girl, and bring your little one as well. You can’t catch her, come here, itti, itti, itti, aa! My fawn came and now I’ve got her. And now the young male will hang on to the mother and cry, “ava, ava, ava” – that’s the way he cries.

21. Domestication of sheep to lamb
Doloma Lopsanchap, b. 1932, Terr-Khol, Erzin Region

22. Domestication of goat to kid
Doloma Lopsanchap, as above

23. Domestication of cow to calf
Khuren Oorzhal, b. 1932, Arg-Uzun, Ulug-Khem Region

24. Domestication of camel to calf
Shimet Soyan, b. 1916, Ak-Erik, Tes-Khem Region

25. Excerpt from shamanic healing ritual
Alexander Davakhai, b. 1923, Kyzyl

26. Funeral lament
Tatyana Sat, b. 1943, Chadan, Dzun-Khemchik Region

27. Lullaby
Tatyana Sat, as above

Hushabye, hushabye, ooi, hushabye, my little one.ooi.
Look, above, ooi, at how the moon shines, ooi.
Better than it is the light of the sun, ooi.
To you, son, ooi, let the light be a gift, ooi.
Hushabye, hushabye, hushabye, hushabye.

28. Wooden jew’s harp
Balgan Kuzhuet, b. 1918, Kara-Khol, Bal-Taiga Region

29. Lullaby with Khoomei
Bilchit-Maa Davaa, b. 1923, Narin, Erzin Region

30. Long Song: “Don’t Frighten the Crane”
Sundukhai Mongush, as above

Don’t Frighten the Crane, Jewel of the Steppe.
A semi-nomadic
(three-season)
Tuvan yurt
encampment.
Ulug-Khem
Region. Photo by
Karen Sherlock.

sheep are beautiful
When I climb a hill, my hill is high.
"Why are you wandering among the
settlements?"
Ask mother and father in alarm.
"Your horse escaped its tether."
"I went and searched for it," I say.

32. Kozhamiktar (antiphonal quatrains)
Men: (all from Chadan, Dzun-Khemchik
Region)
Kok-ool Khovalig, b. 1918
Sundukai Mongush, b. 1918
Soskool Mongush, b. 1951
Dosumaa Mongush, b. 1911

Women: (all from Chadan)
Valentina Kuular, b. 1951
Raisa Mongush
Lemmaa Kuular, b. 1938
Soskool Mongush, b. 1931

Women: Whether or not the dawn comes,
The cloudy morning stands.
Whether to take me or not take me to
wed
My friend can't make up his mind.

Men: Strength decides the fate of
One-year old and two-year old foals.
Let intentions decide the
Decorations on the bride's attire.

Women: Whether the sun rises or not,
Somewhere, it is getting hot.
Whether or not my friend appears,
The (bride) price will be bid up, won't it?

33. Ceremonial song: "Hymn to the
Mountains"
Kazakh Sandak, b. 1918, Ak-Dovurak, Erzin
Region

Eei, my world, my universe, my
servants...
Eei, my goose, my jackdaw...
Eei, my world, my universe....
Eei, let all purify itself, protect all of my
herd...

Oi, my heart is warming
Don't rouse my dear one.
Don't scare the bird-swan,
Jewel of the forest glades.
Penetrating my burning heart,
My dear one, don't rouse him.

31. Long Song: "When I Graze My
Beautiful Sheep"
Khuren Oorzhak, as above

When I am herding, my sheep are
beautiful
When I look about, my hill is high.
When I drive my sheep to pasture, my
Eei, let all purify itself and let everyone be happy...
Eei, look after everyone...
Eei, my world, my universe, my relatives...
Eei, my nomad camp, place of my birth....

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Other recordings from the Soviet Union on Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings:

Musics of the Soviet Union SF 40002, on CD and cassette.

The following Folkways titles are available on audio cassette directly through mail order (telephone 301/443-2134):

Music of the Ukraine (issued in 1950) album number 4443
Folk Music of the USSR - Europe (1960) 4533 A/B
Folk Music of the USSR - Asia (1960) 4533 C/D
History of the Soviet Union in Ballad and Song (1964) 5420
Ukrainian Christmas Songs (1956) 6828
Folk Music of the USSR - Middle East (1956) 6916
Russian Choral Music (1951) 8754
Contemporary and Traditional Russian Songs (1973) 8780
The Russian Alphabet (2 cassette set, 1962) 8160
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