THE MUSIC OF CENTRAL ASIA

EDITED BY

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Chapter 15 Kyrgyz Jaw Harps

Nurlanbek Nyshanov

Kyrgyz metal jaw harp (*temir ooz komuz*).

The jaw harp (also called Jew's harp), one of the world's most archaic musical instruments, has long been a part of the musical cultures of Eurasia, with indigenous jaw harp traditions spanning the continent from China to Western Europe, and from northern Siberia to southern India. Jaw harp traditions have developed with particular virtuosity and variety in Inner Asia, and since ancient times, jaw harps have been favorite musical instruments of the Kyrgyz. Kyrgyz jaw harps consist of two varieties: wooden jaw harps (*jygach ooz komuz*) and metal jaw harps (*temir ooz komuz*). Wooden jaw harps are mainly played by Kyrgyz who live in certain specific regions, while metal jaw harps are played in all regions of Kyrgyz settlement.

Different theories have been advanced to explain the origin of the jaw harp, but the only incontrovertible fact about its origin is that no one knows when and where the first jaw harp player lived. Certain kinds of simply constructed jaw harps still in use today, however, may provide clues about the earliest instruments. In Tuva, a small republic in the Altai region of south Siberia, simple wooden jaw harps (Tuvan: *iyash khomus*) are made from a Y-shaped stick without the need for any tool. The playing technique is analogous to that for other jaw harps: the player grips the single end of the stick in the mouth while firmly holding one branch of the "Y" and vibrating the other branch of the "Y" with the fingers of the free hand. Kyrgyz wooden jaw harps most likely evolved from the simple stick jaw harp into two closely related forms:

Tuvan wooden jaw harp (*iyash khomus*).

Kyrgyz wooden jaw harp (*jygach ooz komuz*).

1. The tongue is vibrated by plucking it with a finger. This form is also widespread in Southeast Asia.
2. The tongue is vibrated by pulling a thread attached to it. This is the form currently used in Kyrgyz traditional musical culture.

Among the Kyrgyz and among some Siberian peoples, such as the Nivkh and Ket, "thread-vibrated" wooden jaw harps were traditionally made from the branches of a hardwood bush or from animal bones. Nowadays bone jaw harps are no longer made or played. Kyrgyz musicians play *küü*s (narrative instrumental pieces) on the wooden jaw harp as well as on other instruments. Different pitches are produced by widening or narrowing the oral cavity and closing or opening the throat. Since the range of the wooden jaw harp is not large, *küü*s played on the instrument tend to be short and simple. Such *küü*s mostly represent birds and animals, e.g., "Kükük" (Cuckoo) and "Jorgo" (Pacer horse), or describe patterns of nomadic lifestyle, e.g., "Boz üydo" (In a yurt) and "Jailoodo" (In a pasture).

Example 15.1. "Kükük" (Cuckoo), traditional *küü,* performed by Nurlanbek Nyshanov (wooden jaw harp).

Study Questions

1. **How is the image of a cuckoo bird expressed in the *küü*?**
2. **How successful is the *küü* in representing the cuckoo bird?**
3. **What cultural and social forces might either promote or impede the use of the wooden jaw harp in the future?**

Metal jaw harps are also ancient and are a testament to the sophisticated metallurgy of the Iron Age. In the most common kind of metal jaw harp, a flexible tongue and frame are made separately, and the tongue is fixed at one end to the frame.

To produce a sound, the player grips the round portion of the frame between the front teeth and plucks the tongue with a finger. The resultant sound is rich in harmonics, or overtones, which can be selectively amplified by precise movements of the player's mouth. In the past, both wooden and metal jaw harps were popular among Kyrgyz women and children, and women played a key role in the development of jaw harp music. Burulcha Osmonbek kyzy, a great female musician of the nineteenth century, said, "A child who grows up listening to a metal jaw harp will develop good verbal skills." Her linking of music and verbal skills shows that people in the past had a deep understanding of music's value in childhood education and development.[1]

In the twentieth century, men also began to play metal jaw harps, and jaw harp ensembles became popular. Many jaw harp melodies were recorded and notated.

Kutmanaaly Sultanbekov playing a wooden jaw harp.

Yakut metal jaw harp.

Different types of compositions were written for the instrument, and metal jaw harp melodies were played with the accompaniment of an orchestra. In the second half of the twentieth century, due to the spread of European musical instruments in Kyrgyz cultural life, people's interest in jaw harps as well as in other traditional instruments decreased. This situation lasted until the end of the 1980s. Then, influenced by perestroika and independence, interest in jaw harps as well as in other traditional instruments was revived.

The metal jaw harp has a wider range than the wooden jaw harp, and, as a result, its repertory is richer and more diverse. The metal jaw harp repertory can be divided into three groups:

1. Variations on songs—mostly themes of old traditional songs
2. *Küü*s that represent nature and animals, e.g., "Karacha torgoi" (Black lark), "Turumtai" (Hawk), "Erkin too" (Free mountain), "Ker özön" (Wide valley)
3. *Küü*s that narrate personal stories, e.g., "Kojojash mergen" (Kojojash the hunter), "Eselbai"

Some contemporary metal jaw harp players perform old *küü*s in a new style, creating their own versions in ways that do not contradict Kyrgyz musical tradition. Variation and improvisation are characteristic of Kyrgyz music. In the following audio example, the performer plays a traditional *küü,* gradually accelerating the tempo, then adding a second traditional theme and improvising on it.

WATCH

Example 15.2. "Ala too jazy" (Spring in the Ala Too mountains) and "Erkin too" (Free mountain), performed by Nurlanbek Nyshanov (metal jaw harp).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How do the two *küü*s that compose this medley convey an image of their subject matter?
2. How would you characterize the differences between the technical capacity of the metal jaw harp and that of the wooden jaw harp?
3. How successful is the juxtaposition of the two *küü*s? Do they go together well, or does the transition to the second *küü* seem incongruous?

Hand gestures are sometimes incorporated into a performance to create a beautiful visual effect. The performer, generally a woman, gently plucks the tongue of the jaw harp with the fingers of both hands while making smooth, sweeping gestures of the hands and arms, as illustrated in the following example by Gülbara Baigashkaeva.

WATCH

Example 15.3. "Tagyldyr too" (Mountain where an orphan baby deer lives), composed by Adamkaliy Baybatyrov, performed by Gulbara Baygashkaeva (metal jaw harp).

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Does the *küü* succeed in portraying an image of mountains? If so, through what means?
2. In your view, are the hand gestures abstract, or do they represent something in particular? In either case, could they be considered a form of dance?

Today, interest in jaw harps is growing, and young performer-composers in Kyrgyzstan are creating new music for the instrument. Kyrgyz musicians have performed this new repertory not only in Kyrgyzstan but internationally (see example 32.4). The majority of new *küü*s for metal jaw harp are being composed for ensemble performance, and are notated in Western staff notation. One such composition is presented in the following audio example. The piece, called "Jangylyk" (Novelty), features a wooden jaw harp and two metal jaw harps tuned a fourth apart

The Tengir-Too junior ensemble playing jaw harps.

(the difference between the scale degrees *mi* and *la)*. In "Jangylyk," the players try to extract all possible overtones from their instruments—overtones that aren't typically used in jaw harp music. "Jangylyk"—which is one of my own compositions—reflects my conservatory training in counterpoint: there are canons and melodic motifs in contrary motion. The performers learned the piece from musical notation and play it from a score, even though it has the feeling of an improvised jam session.

WATCH

Example 15.4. "Jangylyk" (Novelty), composed by Nurlanbek Nyshanov, performed by Kambar Kalendarov (metal jaw harp in A), Kutmanaaly Sultanbekov (wooden jaw harp in A), and Gülbara Baygashkaeva (metal jaw harp in E).

Study Questions

1. What clues reveal that "Jangylyk" is a recently composed *küü*?
2. How are the three jaw harps integrated in the piece? Does each one have a specific role (e.g., melody, accompaniment, rhythm), or do they switch roles and each play different roles?
3. How does the musical content of "Jangylyk" represent or refer to its title?
4. Do you see a musical future for the metal jaw harp? If so, how do you see it developing? What kind of music might be written for jaw harp(s) by future composers?

NOTE

1. The link between early musical training and verbal skills has been underscored by recent research in neuroscience. See, for example, Nina Kraus et al., "Music Enrichment Programs Improve the Neural Encoding of Speech in At-Risk Children," *The Journal of Neuroscience,* (September 3, 2014): 11913–11918.

Chapter 16

The Kazakh *Qobyz*

BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Saida Daukeyeva

The *qobyz,* a two-stringed bowed lute, has a special status and significance among the Kazakhs as a sacred (*kieli*) instrument deeply rooted in their traditional culture and spirituality that is believed to aid mediation with ancestor-spirits. Distinguished by a versatile imitative and expressive sound, the *qobyz* was originally used as an accompaniment to shamanic ritual and epic narration, and was later adopted in the performance of narrative instrumental pieces (*küi*s) as a form of art music. Its subsequent history, from the cultural transformations of the Soviet era to the years following Kazakhstan's independence, has seen a marked change in the identity of the instrument, the role and musicianship of the *qobyz* master (*qobyzshy*), and the context and style of *qobyz* performance. This chapter chronicles the history of the *qobyz* and examines its multifaceted performance tradition against the backdrop of political and social change, and in relation to evolving ideologies and concepts of identity among the Kazakhs.

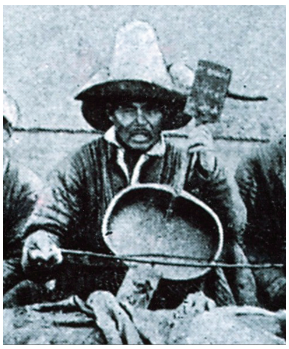
Small mirrors and metal pendants in the soundbox of this highly ornamented *qobyz* were believed to attract protecting spirits.
Courtesy of Museum of Kazakh Folk Musical Instruments.

Origins

The Kazakh *qobyz* is a lute hollowed out from a whole piece of wood in a ladle-like shape, with an open resonator whose lower part is covered with a camel-skin sound table.[1] It has two horsehair strings tuned a fourth or a fifth apart and played with an arched horsehair bow (in the compound name of the instrument, *qyl-qobyz, qyl* means "horsehair"). The *qobyz* belongs to a family of Central Asian fiddles with horsehair strings and bow that includes the Karakalpak *qobyz,* Kyrgyz *kiyak,* and Mongolian *khuur,* from which bowing is thought to originate.[2]

In oral tradition the invention of the *qobyz* is associated with Qorqyt, or Qorqyt ata, a legendary hero among Turkic peoples who is the protagonist of the Oghuz

The instrument's bridge is set on a sound table made of camel skin.



Kazakh shaman with the *qobyz*. In the rituals of shamans (*baqsy*), playing and singing to the accompaniment of the *qobyz* was a means of mediating with spirits, healing patients, and soothsaying.

Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

epic *Dede Korkut Kitabi* (The book of grandfather Korkut), and whom Kazakhs regard as their first shaman, epic bard, and musician. According to a popular legend in the corpus of *küi*s attributed to Qorqyt, the hero devised the instrument on the shores of the Syr Darya River to escape death. In search of immortality, he visited all four parts of the world. But wherever he appeared, death would meet him in a different guise. Then he returned to his homeland, the shore of the Syr Darya River, and made the *qobyz,* covering it with the skin of his sacrificed she-camel, Jelmaya ("Fast-as-the-Wind"). Thinking that death would not reach him on the waters of the Syr Darya, he spread out a carpet on the river's waves and came to play the *qobyz* day and night. His playing attracted all earthly creatures who gathered by the river drawn by the music, and as long as Qorqyt played, death could not approach him to take his soul. But one day, when Qorqyt put down his *qobyz* to take a drink of water, he was bitten by a poisonous snake, and died. Thus Qorqyt became the patron (*pir*) of *qobyz* players.

Belief in the magic powers of the *qobyz* as a medium between the human and spiritual worlds, and between life and death, in which capacity it offered protection from evil and misfortune and helped maintain equilibrium in the universe, permeated the original context of its performance. In the rituals of shamans (*baqsy*s), playing and singing to the accompaniment of the *qobyz* was a means of mediating with spirits, healing patients, and soothsaying. In narrations of epic poems and tales by bards (*jyrau*s), who acted as spiritual leaders and advisers to the khans, *qobyz* playing served to protect and guide the community, and to foretell the outcome of important events, such as battles and military campaigns.

While little is currently known about musical dimensions of early epic performance, ethnographic accounts of shamanic rituals from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries recapture the original context of the rituals and tell us about the role of music in them. According to these accounts, shamans played the *qobyz* several times during the course of a ritual, typically to accompany singing. At the beginning of the ritual, the *qobyz* served as a means of calling the shaman's spirit-protectors and entering a state of trance. One account of a shamanic ritual from the end of the nineteenth century offered the following description: "During the séance the *baqsy* does not stop playing his *qobyz,* and his calling [to the spirits] is interrupted only with the coming of complete exhaustion."[3] After the ecstatic actions or "play" (*oiyn*) believed to be conducted under the spell of spirits, the shaman would resume playing the *qobyz* in order to receive their answers and advice: "[The *baqsy*] began to play the *qobyz* again, but more calmly. . . . This time he was not singing and, listening to his own playing, he rocked from side to side. With the assurance of Oken [*baqsy*] himself, at this point the spirits gave answers to his questions, advice and cures for illness."[4] Finally, playing the *qobyz* would bring to an end the ritual of "letting go the spirits": "Concluding his séance with the words

'it is all over,' the *baqsy* takes up the *qobyz* again and begins to play and sing for the jinns [ancestor-spirits] a 'letting go' song."[5]

The perception of the *qobyz* as a medium for contacting the spiritual world arose from its peculiar shape and sound properties. Kazakhs associated the *qobyz* with images of totemic animals—the camel, horse, and swan. This association supported the idea of the instrument as a vehicle for transporting the shaman during healing séances to the mythical upper, middle, and lower worlds in search of a patient's soul seized by evil spirits. In oral accounts, the *qobyz* was depicted as a living creature able to walk, ride, fly, and produce sounds of its own accord. The usual attributes of the shamanic *qobyz*—a mirror set within the soundbox and metal pendants and bells hanging from its head—were believed to attract protecting spirits.

The instrument's sound suited its ritual purpose. The *qobyz* is distinguished by a peculiar raspy sound amplified by harmonics—the series of high-frequency, acoustically related tones generated by a fundamental tone sounded on a string, or in a reverberant space such as a hollow tube. Strings made of horsehair are particularly rich in harmonics when excited by the friction of a horsehair bow drawn across the strings, and when fingered lightly instead of being pressed down hard against the neck of the instrument (a technique known as *flageoletto* in Western musical practice). In shamanic rituals the harmonics and melodic ornaments combined with sound effects produced by ringing metal pendants and tinkling bells created a complex resonating soundscape. This soundscape was described in ethnographic accounts as "mystical, mysterious, and unearthly, evoking a state of mesmerization . . . well matched with the shamans' incantations and conjurations."[6] Listen to the use of harmonics in the *küi* "Qongyr" (Deep-brown), whose composition is attributed to Qorqyt, and particularly to the harmonic amplification of the second motif in the upper register (1:19–1:35).

An old *qobyz*. The carved out section in the middle of the sound box originally held a mirror.

LISTEN

Example 16.1. "Qongyr" (Deep-brown), attributed to Qorqyt, performed by Jappas Qalambaev. Courtesy of Kündiz Qalambaeva.

Study Questions

1. **In your own words, how would you describe the sounds of the harmonics at 1:19–1:35? Do you agree with the characterization of the ethnographic account quoted above?**
2. **What about the rest of the melody? How would you describe its character and rhythmic flow?**
3. **Listen for the use of double-stops, in which the performer plays on both strings at once. Where in the piece do you hear double-stops? If you are a musician, can you identify the intervals made by the two strings? What do you think is the purpose of double-stops in the music?**

Along with the use of harmonics, another powerful device in ritualized *qobyz* performance is the imitation of sounds made by animals and birds that are associated with the shamans' helping spirits. The well-known folk legend *küi* "Aqqu" (White swan) offers a vivid imitation of the voice and movements of the swan, a totemic bird and the embodiment of an ancestor-spirit among the Kazakhs.

WATCH

Example 16.2. "Aqqu" (White swan), folk *küi*, performed by Raushan Orazbaeva. Filmed by Saodat Ismailova, 2014.

Study Questions

1. How does Raushan Orazbaeva represent the swan on her *qobyz*? What sounds associated with the swan does she evoke in her performance, and by what playing techniques?
2. What else, beyond imitation, does this music express? Could one say that, apart from representation, it has an abstract expressive quality?

Raushan Orazbaeva.
Courtesy of Saodat Ismailova.

The imitation of totemic animals served to express the "language of spirits" or "alien voices" that marked the stage of the ritual when the shaman had already been possessed. In the hands of the shaman, the *qobyz* would be transformed into the instrument of the spirits, transmitting the music of the other world. This instrumental onomatopoeia corresponded in its purpose and meaning to vocal imitations performed by the shaman. According to an ethnographic account, "The *baqsy* accompanies his conjurations by sudden remote soft whistling . . . guttural and hissing sounds in which one can pick up imitation of the cries of birds, beasts, and domestic animals."[7] Thus the production of both harmonics and onomatopoeia served a mediatory and transformative role, inducing a trance-like state in the shaman and exerting a powerful effect on participants in the ritual.

Some accounts, corroborated by musicological studies, point further to shamans' use of recurrent personal tunes (*saryn*s) either inspired by spirits or passed down through a *baqsy*'s hereditary lineage. Consisting of repetitive motifs and/or a refrain, these tunes were believed to have magic, conjuring, and healing properties and, like the *qobyz* itself, were not played outside a ritual setting.

The experience of listeners during a shamanic ritual at the end of the nineteenth century is evoked in the ethnographic account of Nevolnik: "Suddenly Oken with masterly skill and power passed the bow over the *qobyz* strings and began to play. Lamentably heart-breaking sounds began to flow among the crowd holding their breath. . . . For a moment one could hear in the *baqsy*'s playing a rending stream of subconscious grief and yearning of a people migrating across the monotonous dreary steppe; the Kazakhs, lulled to sleep, as it were, held their breath and plunged into thought. . . . Everyone was transfixed in an almost blissful ecstasy."[8]

Decline of the Epic Tradition

Whereas the shamanic practice of the *baqsy* continued into the early twentieth century, the epic performance tradition of the *jyrau* had already begun to fade away in the late eighteenth century. The decline of epic performance came as a response to transformations in nomadic society under the increasing political and economic influence of the czarist empire in Central Eurasia. This influence led to the subjugation of the Kazakh tribal confederations, or Hordes (*jüz*); the disruption of traditional social organization; and the elimination of the power of the ruling khans. The epic bard Bukhar jyrau Qalqamanuly (1688–1787), adviser to Ablai, the khan of the Middle Horde (*Orta jüz*), is said to have been the last great *jyrau.* The epic tradition continued in the form of smaller epic genres performed by bards (*jyrshy*) who accompanied themselves on the *dombyra,* the two-stringed plucked lute that from the nineteenth century onward would gain widespread currency among Kazakhs.

The decline of epic performance, as some historical sources suggest, was also a consequence of the changing ideology brought about by the proselytizing of Islam as part of czarist colonial policy. The Kazakh ethnographer Shoqan Valikhanov, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, observed that under the influence of this policy, "Our national character increasingly takes on a general Muslim type . . . , and our bards, instead of folk epics, sing Muslim apocryphal stories set to folk verses."[9] In another work, Valikhanov specifically points to the decline of the epic tradition and *qobyz* performance among *jyrau*s as parallel to the rise of the poet-improviser (*aqyn*) and singer (*ölengshi*): "Although at the present time . . . *aqyn* (or *ölengshi*)[10] in the steppe are many, they are mostly improvisers, while ancient *jyr*s, being yet more incomprehensible to the new generation, are falling out of use year by year, and very few of their experts remain."[11] He further indicates that "the form of *jyr*, like the *qobyz* itself, remained now solely the property of *baqsy*s.[12] Only they still preserve this form of verse, using it during the conjuration of jinns."[13]

The continuity of shamanic ritual practice in the face of the new ideological influences noted by Valikhanov could be explained by the fact that it was embedded in everyday life, and in indigenous syncretic beliefs that combined elements

of shamanism and Islam. This allowed for the integration of *qobyz* performance into Muslim devotional practice, particularly Sufi rituals of "remembrance" (*zikr*). Historical accounts support the inference that such an integration came about through the ecstatic nature of both shamanic and Sufi practices and their mutual aim of achieving spiritual transformation and trance. While the practice of "shamanic *zikr*" (*baqsynyng zikiri*) must have existed prior to the twentieth century, firm evidence comes from the mid-twentieth century. The writer Tanash Däurenbekov cites an account of such a ritual, as related by an observer, which was held secretly in Syr Darya district of Qyzylorda region in the south of Kazakhstan in 1943: "He [the *baqsy*] took the *qobyz* and began to play on it . . . His sad melody pierced me through; I felt tingles all over my body. . . . One of the old men . . . began to make movements corresponding to the rhythm of the melody. The *qobyz* resounded with a new power. 'Stand up!' said Bekbergen [the *baqsy*]. The sharp voice sounded imperatively. Everybody stood up from their places. . . . 'Do *zikr!*' All the old men began together: '*La ilaha illa lla! La ilaha illa lla!*' ['There is no god but God! There is no god but God!']"[14]

Yqylas Dükenuly's *qobyz*.
Courtesy of Aqnar Shäripbaeva.

Küi Performance

In the nineteenth century, the *qobyz* began to be played outside the ritual context, in the form of narrative instrumental pieces accompanied by storytelling (*küi*s). These pieces were an example of "program music"—that is, music that tells a story, represents images and events, or conveys emotions and states of mind. The shift in *qobyz* performance from ritual to art music is associated with the name of Yqylas Dükenuly (1843–1916), a *qobyz* player and *küi* master (*küishi*) who came from the present-day Shymkent region of southern Kazakhstan. Relatively few accounts of his life and the circumstances in which he composed his *küi*s have been passed down to us, and these were subject to adjustment under ideological censorship during the Soviet era. Yet it is known that Yqylas descended from several generations of *qobyzshy* and *baqsy;* that his instrument, inherited from his shaman father, Düken, was believed to possess magic healing and mediatory powers;[15] and that his performance had a powerful effect on listeners, akin to that experienced by participants in shamanic rituals.

The small body of *küi*s attributed to Yqylas that have come down to the present day—about ten out of approximately fifty he is thought to have composed—are elaborate instrumental pieces. Compared to the shamanic *saryn*s and *küi*s attributed to Qorqyt, they encompass a wider pitch range, employ more advanced playing techniques, and are characterized by developed musical forms not found in the folk *qobyz* repertory. In their imagery, genres, and musical language, *küi*s by Yqylas nevertheless reveal continuity with older forms of music making on the *qobyz*.

Onomatopoeia and the use of recurrent motifs (*saryn*s) typical of epic and ritual *qobyz* performance are distinctive features of Yqylas's *küi*s. In these *küi*s, the

sound of the *qobyz* represents episodes and images in the narrative, or "speaks" in a human voice. Thus, in the *küi* "Shyngyrau" (Abyss), which Yqylas composed after witnessing a snake about to swallow defenseless nesting birds, each character in the story is introduced by a distinctive motif. The *küi* "Erden," improvised on the occasion of the death of the son of Erden, a district governor, is based on a lament-like tune similar to a shamanic *saryn.* The *küi* expresses sentiments of grief and sorrow and, according to one version of its narrative, musically articulates the words "*Beu! Ainalaiyn qaraghym-ai*" (Oh! My dear, beloved), which deeply moved Erden and his grieving family.[16] Listen to the performance of "Erden" in example 16.3. As you listen, focus in particular on the lament theme, amplified through the use of harmonics at its second appearance (from 0:21), and on the evocative imitation of the spoken phrase (1:21–1:40).

Example 16.3. "Erden," composed by Yqylas Dükenuly, performed by Smatai Umbetbaev. From Xavier and Saoulé Hallez, *Kazakhstan: The Kobyz, The Ancient Viol of the Shamans* (France: INEDIT Maison des Cultures du Monde, 2004), track 1.

Study Questions

1. What happens in the music at 1:21–1:40 to evoke the imitation of the spoken phrase described above?
2. What qualities in the performance contribute to the musical affect of the *küi*?

The effect of Yqylas's music on contemporary listeners is tellingly captured in the reminiscences of the Kazakh poet, writer, and statesman Säken Seifullin (1894–1938), who described Yqylas's performance of an unknown *küi* during a ceremony to commemorate the death of Säken's son: "Yqylas, tuning, pulled tight the *qobyz* strings and began to run his bow. From under his fingertips there began to flow a groaning, sorrowful *küi* that tugged at one's heartstrings. My heart began to palpitate. . . . It was as if the crying *küi* was flowing from somewhere above, from the sky. People in the yurt stood motionless. The *qobyz* was yearning, lamenting, sobbing. Having come to myself from a deep numbness, I raised my eyes to Yqylas and saw the head of his *qobyz* as if rooted to Yqylas's temples. While making the *qobyz* sob with both his hands, Yqylas himself was crying together with the *küi.* Tears were flowing over his cheeks and small beard. . . . I did not dare to stir. Yqylas abruptly broke off the tearful sobbing of the *qobyz.* . . . People sat long in a deep silence."[17]

Suppression and Transformation

With the rise of the Soviet era in Kazakhstan, the *qobyz* and its performance practice underwent a profound change and decline.[18] In the 1920s, the instrument, closely associated with shamanic practice, was declared "a vestige of the dark feudal past" and was widely banned and suppressed. Aleksandr Zatayevich (1869–1936), a Russian musicologist, music critic, and composer who collected Kazakh musical folklore in the 1920s and 1930s, wrote about the imminent disappearance of shamanic practices as follows: "*Baqsy*s are, undoubtedly, a remnant of the dark past and nowadays are bound for extinction. So even more one is made to regret that their interesting magical music remains unrecorded."[19] While some shamans and musicians continued to play the *qobyz* secretly, others stopped practicing for fear of persecution.[20]

Jappas Qalambaev with the first modified *prima-qobyz*.

Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

At the same time, however, modified versions of the *qobyz* were assimilated into official cultural life. In 1934, the first orchestra of folk instruments (later named after Qurmanghazy) was established in Almaty—a major enterprise that came to epitomize the music of Soviet Kazakhstan. The creation of such an orchestra entailed both reconstructing traditional Kazakh instruments for orchestral playing and adapting the traditional performance culture of Kazakh music to the new social venue of concert halls. Master luthiers attached to the Music and Drama College (later Conservatory) in Almaty were instructed to modify the *qobyz,* and set to work under the supervision of the orchestra's artistic director, music scholar, and composer Akhmet Jubanov (1906–1968).

The first "improved" version of the traditional instrument, called *prima-qobyz,* was produced in 1936, and underwent further adjustments in subsequent years. The *prima-qobyz* was modeled on the violin and, like the violin, served as the lead melodic instrument in the orchestra. Though still fashioned in a ladle-like shape, it was covered with a wooden sound table over its open resonator, strung with two gut strings and one metal string tuned a fifth apart, and played with a violin bow. *Qobyz* players, seated in chairs on a concert stage, held their instruments in an upright position between the knees, with the instrument's neck resting against the performer's chest. This position represented a departure from the way traditional performers played their instrument: kneeling or sitting on the ground, with the *qobyz* held away from the body, resting against the knee or ankle.

Though it was different from the traditional *qyl-qobyz,* the *prima-qobyz* retained aspects of its physical form and playing techniques. For example, the strings of the *prima-qobyz* were placed high above the instrument's neck, allowing players to press their fingernails against the strings sideways, as on the *qyl-qobyz.* The gut and metal strings of the *prima-qobyz* deadened the harmonics that were a distinctive feature of the *qyl-qobyz,* but the gut strings and skin table lent it a warm, velvety

timbre that resembled a human voice. On balance, however, the limited range and subdued sound of the *prima-qobyz* were inconsistent with the brightness and clarity needed to perform the new solo, ensemble, and orchestral repertory, and to make the instrument audible amid the ever-expanding orchestral forces, which later included both Kazakh and European wind and percussion instruments.

These shortcomings led to further modification of the *prima-qobyz.* The second modified version, introduced in 1954, represented a closer imitation of the violin, with four metal strings, tuned to fifths, and a shortened fingerboard fabricated according to violin measurements. After a series of experiments with the shape of the instrument and material of the sound table, the *prima-qobyz* acquired a violin-like, figured body and an entirely wooden table. Following the introduction of the modified *prima-qobyz,* the other instruments in the *qobyz* consort were also superseded by their four-stringed, short-necked counterparts. The consort was now a quintet analogous to the string section of a symphony orchestra: *prima-qobyz* 1 and 2 (1st and 2nd violin), *alto-qobyz* (viola), *bass-qobyz* (cello), and *double bass-qobyz* (contrabass).

The new type of violin-like *qobyz,* strung with metal strings and played with a taut bow, could not produce the rich field of harmonics and other sound effects that were such a vital part of older performance techniques. Its repertory now centered on folk orchestra arrangements of Kazakh songs and solo *küi*s, on European classics, and on new works by modern composers from Kazakhstan. An example of the latter is "Aria" by Akhmet Jubanov.

The *qobyz* group of the Qurmanghazy Orchestra in the 1950s. Seated in the front row from left to right are performers on the *prima-qobyz* 1, *qyl-qobyz* (playing the *alto* part), *bass-qobyz,* another *qyl-qobyz,* and *prima-qobyz* 2. The *double bass-qobyz* player is outside the picture, standing at the back of the orchestra.

Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

LISTEN

Example 16.4. "Aria" for *prima-qobyz* and piano accompaniment, composed by Akhmet Jubanov, performed by Ghaliya Moldakarimova. Courtesy of Ghaliya Moldakarimova.

Study Questions

1. How would you describe the style of "Aria"? What is Kazakh about it? What is European?
2. What kind of European music would you guess serves as the model for the style of the piece?
3. What is the difference between the sound of the *prima-qobyz* and the sound of the violin?

Present-day *qobyz* group of the Qurmanghazy Orchestra: *prima-qobyz* and *double-bass-qobyz* players.

The new aesthetics of *qobyz* playing reflected a reimagined sound ideal influenced by Western classical music and a broader cultural trend toward modernization, urbanization, and the adoption of European standards in Kazakhstan. This trend emerged not so much from state policy as from changes in cultural values, aspirations, and notions of identity, and musicians welcomed it with interest and enthusiasm. In Kazakhstan's mainstream music scene, the Europeanized *qobyz* displaced the traditional *qobyz,* propelled by a perception that it was a more advanced instrument that symbolized dynamic change and progress in society. Over time the general public began to view it as a bona fide substitute for the *qyl-qobyz.*

Meanwhile, the older form of *qyl-qobyz* was marginalized throughout much of the Soviet period. Only two traditionally trained *qobyz* players—both followers of the school of Yqylas Dükenuly—continued to work within the institutional framework of the Kazakh State Philharmonic Society and the Orchestra of Folk Instruments: Däulet Myqtybaev (1905–1976) and Jappas Qalambaev (1909–1969), who performs the *küi* "Qongyr" in example 16.1. Their *qyl-qobyz* playing in the orchestra, though, was merely a timbral addition to the sound of the reconstructed instruments, serving as humble evidence that such an instrument still existed among the Kazakhs.

Revival

This situation changed in the 1960s, the time of the political "thaw" in the Soviet Union, when, against the backdrop of a changing ideological climate and broad

resurgence of interest in the origins of Kazakh ethnicity and culture, musicians, music scholars, and cultural activists began to study and restore traditional instruments, including the *qobyz.* In 1968, the original *qobyz* was reintroduced into the curriculum of the Kazakh National Conservatory in Almaty. However, the way in which *qobyz* training and performance were carried out reflected the influence of contemporary music practice and education, which by that time had already been profoundly Europeanized. One master-performer, Däulet Myqtybaev, taught students in the traditional master-apprentice method in which students memorized *küi*s aurally from the playing of their teacher. Another teacher, Bolat Sarybaev, offered instruction in basic playing techniques on one of the orchestral versions of the *qobyz*—the *bass-qobyz,* a diminished replica of the cello. Däulet Myqtybaev's teaching facilitated the transmission of a number of traditional *qobyz küi*s, including both anonymous folk compositions and compositions attributed to Qorqyt and Yqylas. These compositions were subsequently transcribed and published, and have become part of the repertory of present-day performers. But the type of *qobyz* player shaped through the dual approaches of traditional and Europeanized training differed from that exemplified by the former *qobyzshy.*

This becomes apparent when comparing video recordings of performances by Däulet Myqtybaev and one of his pupils made in the 1970s (examples 16.5 and 16.6). These recordings reveal differences in the posture of the two performers, the way they hold the instrument, bowing and fingering techniques, and the quality of the *qobyz* sound. Whereas Myqtybaev holds the *qobyz* away from the body, his student rests it on his chest in a cello-like position. Even though both performers use a violin bow, the master holds it from underneath, in a traditional way, while the pupil holds it from above, like a cello player. Consequently, the trajectory of bowing and the distribution of the hand's weight on the strings are different in the two cases. The master's left-hand fingers are positioned tight against each other, and sound is mainly produced by the index and third fingers, which frequently slide down the string to reach out to different pitches, generating a fluctuating intonation. The student, by contrast, uses a cello fingering with a wide finger-stretch to distribute tone production, and the resulting intonation is clearer and more stable. In contrast to his student, the master uses ornaments and harmonics liberally, which produces a different quality of sound. The perception of time is also distinct in the two cases: the master plays in a flexible manner, whereas the pupil keeps to a more rigid metric structure. These observations attest to the student's assimilation of European technical and aesthetic norms of performance in his interpretation of a *qobyz küi* learned through training with a traditional master.

Däulet Myqtybaev performing on the *qyl-qobyz*.

Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

WATCH

Examples 16.5 and 16.6. "Qongyr" (Deep-brown), attributed to Qorqyt, performed by Däulet Myqtybaev. "Qorqyt," attributed to Qorqyt, performed by Bazarkhan Qosbasarov. Fragments from films, 1970s. Courtesy of the archive of the Kazakhstan Republic Television and Radio Corporation.

Study Questions

1. Compare the performances of master and pupil. What, in your opinion, distinguishes their interpretations of the traditional *küis*?
2. How would you characterize the aesthetics and sound ideal of *qobyz* playing as reflected in the two performances?
3. How, in your view, did the aesthetic and semantic shift in *qobyz* performance exemplified by these interpretations of *küis* relate to changes in Kazakh society that took place during the 1960s–1970s?

Neo-Tradition

The most recent phase in the evolution of the *qobyz* began in the years prior to and following Kazakhstan's emergence as an independent state in 1991. In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, the traditional *qyl-qobyz* has been revitalized and reintroduced in mainstream performance as well as in the curricula of music schools and the national conservatory. *Qobyz* students and researchers have sought out performers who acquired their skills by studying with traditional masters or through a hereditary lineage. One such traditional master is Smatai Umbetbaev (b. 1949), whose performance of Yqylas's "Erden" is presented in example 16.3.

The *qyl-qobyz* has also been taken up by healers in the context of neo-shamanic practices, and by neo-epic singers attempting to re-create the older style of epic singing to the accompaniment of the *qobyz* inferred to have been practiced by Kazakh bards of the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries. The *qyl-qobyz* is featured frequently at concerts, festivals, and folk music competitions. Its sound is heard in the media and on recent sound recordings such as the CD anthologies of Kazakh *küi*—"Eternal Melody" (*Mänggilik saryn*) and "1000 Traditional Kazakh *Küis*" (*Qazaqtyng dästürli 1000 küii*)—produced within the state-supported program "Cultural Heritage" (*Mädeni mura*). State promotion of the *qyl-qobyz* as an attribute of traditional Kazakh culture and spirituality contributes to its visibility in the public domain.

The survival of a small traditional *küi* repertory in a European-influenced world of contemporary music in Kazakhstan has led to a lively discourse on the nature of "tradition" and "authenticity" in *qobyz* performance. While some present-day musicians define traditionalism as the restoration of old repertory and playing techniques derived from early recordings and performances by the few living masters, other musicians understand the essence of the *qobyz* tradition as a performer's ability to mediate with supernatural powers and transform listeners emotionally and spiritually. Central to this discourse is the special quality of the *qobyz* sound, which for some musicians lies in the style of playing and for others in its transformative effect.

Contemporary *qobyz* music ranges from arrangements of European classical music for the *prima-qobyz* to popular adaptations of traditional tunes, to innovative creativity that explores aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of older *qobyz* performance styles by reproducing their idiomatic musical language on the cello or the *prima-qobyz.* An example of one such piece is "Oyanu" (Awakening) by the *prima-qobyz* player and composer Güljan Amanjol. In the words of the composer, "Oyanu" evokes "the awakening of the soul to a new spiritual realm, its liberation from matter and opening up to new spaces of light." The piece can be understood to reproduce the progress of a shamanic ritual, with a dynamic buildup toward an ecstatic climax, followed by a lyrical melody (c. 1:53) taken up in the performer's singing (2:45), which finally dissolves into *prima-qobyz* playing, rich in harmonics and sound effects. "Oyanu," with its imaginative mixture of innovation and older influences, serves as an apt metaphor for Kazakhstan's contemporary music scene—a meeting point of the local and the global, tradition and modernity.

Güljan Amanjol.

LISTEN

Example 16.7. "Oyanu" (Awakening), composed and performed by Güljan Amanjol. Recorded by Bakhtiyar Amanjol.

Study Questions

1. What elements of traditional *qobyz* playing do you hear in "Oyanu"?
2. What about the piece makes it contemporary?
3. As a piece of contemporary music, how would you assess and critique "Oyanu"?

NOTES

1. The name *qobyz* is related to a cluster of words in Turkic and Mongolian languages that mean "hollowed-out object," "container," "gourd," and "drinking cup," including those objects hollowed out for the purposes of making the resonator of a stringed instrument. See Gerard Clauson, *An Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth-Century Turkish* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 582–583; Gerhard Doerfer, *Türkische und Mongolische Elemente im Neupersischen* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1967), 1419.

2. The term *qobyz,* in different phonetic variants and with different prefixes, figures in the names of other Central Asian instruments, in particular, varieties of jaw harp (*shang qobyz, jygach ooz komuz, temir ooz komuz*).

3. Abubekir A. Divaev, "Baqsa" [Baqsy], *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* [Ethnographic review] 4 (1907): 23.

4. Nevolnik, "Vo mrake nevezhestva" [In the darkness of ignorance], *Turgaiskaya gazeta* [Turghai newspaper] (Orenburg, 1896), 77; Quoted in Saida Elemanova, *Kazakhskoe traditsionnoe pesennoe iskusstvo: Genezis i semantika* [Kazakh traditional song art: Genesis and semantics] (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2000), 21.

5. Abubekir A. Divaev, "Iz oblasti kyrghyzskikh verovanii: Baqsy kak lekar' i koldun" [From the realm of Kyrghyz (Kazakh) beliefs: *Baqsy* as a healer and magician], *Izvestiya Obshchestva arkheologii, istorii i etnografii pri Imperatorskom Kazanskom universitete* [Proceedings of the society of archeology, history and ethnography at the Imperial Kazan University] 15, no. 3 (1899): 56.

6. Ibid., 58.

7. I. A. Chekaninski, "Baqsylyq: Sledy drevnikh verovanii kazakhov [*Baqsylyq:* Traces of the Kazakhs' ancient beliefs], *Zapiski Semipalatinskogo Otdela Obshchestva izucheniya Kazakhstana* [Proceedings of the Semipalatinsk branch of the society for the study of Kazakhstan] 1, no. 18 (1929): 81–82.

8. Nevolnik, quoted in Elemanova, *Kazakhskoe traditsionnoe pesennoe iskusstvo,* 22. The author uses the ethnonym "Kyrghyz" to describe Kazakhs, as was the custom of the time.

9. Shoqan Valikhanov, "O musul'manstve v stepi" [On muslimness in the steppe], in *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh* [Collected works in five volumes], ed. Alkei Marghulan et al., vol. 4 (Alma-Ata: Glavnaya redaktsiya Kazakhskoi Sovetskoi Entsiklopedii, 1985), 71. Valikhanov uses the Russian words *bayan* for "bard," and *bylina* for "epic."

10. Valikhanov uses the word *akhun* and the Arabic transliteration of *ölengshi,* "singer."

11. Shoqan Valikhanov, "O formakh kazakhskoi narodnoi poezii" [On the forms of Kazakh folk poetry], in *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh* [Collected works in five volumes], ed. Alkei Marghulan et al., vol. 1 (Alma-Ata: Glavnaya redaktsiya Kazakhskoi Sovetskoi Entsiklopedii, 1984), 286.

12. *Jyr* here refers to the seven- and eight-syllable poetic meter typical of epic recitation.

13. Valikhanov, "O formakh kazakhskoi narodnoi poezii," 281. In the opinion of the ethnographer Älkei Marghulan, "Shoqan's assumptions about the disappearance of the singers of epic poetry relate to the Kazakhs of the Middle Horde, but do not reflect the state of affairs in the other two hordes, where epic poetry was in its heyday." See Alkei Marghulan, "O nositelyakh drevnei poeticheskoi kul'tury kazakhskogo naroda" [On the bearers of the ancient poetic culture of the Kazakh people], in *Sbornik k 60-letiu M. O. Äuezova* [Collection of articles for the 60th anniversary of the birth of M. O. Äuezov] (Alma-Ata: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk KazSSR, 1959), 77.

14. Jaqau Däurenbekov and Edige Tursynov, eds., *Qazaq baqsy-balgerleri* [Kazakh shamans and healers] (Almaty: Ana tili, 1993), 205; quoted in Elemanova, *Kazakhskoe traditsionnoe pesennoe iskusstvo,* 34–35. This account and other relevant information point to a more widespread use of the *qobyz* and a greater continuity of its traditional performance into the 20th century in the south of Kazakhstan, the legendary birthplace of the instrument, compared with other regions.

15. According to Akhmet Jubanov, Düken's *qobyz* aided childbirth by expelling evil spirits, and was "invariably hung at the threshold of the yurt where childbirth was taking place." See Akhmet Jubanov, *Struny stoletii* [Strings of the centuries] (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2001), 231.

16. Bazarkhan Qosbasarov, *Qobyz öneri: Muzyka oqu oryndarynyng oqytushylary men studentterine arnalghan oqu quraly* [The art of the *qobyz*: Textbook for students and teachers at music institutions] (Almaty: Sanat, 2001), 21.

17. Boris G. Erzakovich, *U istokov kazakhskogo muzykoznaniya: Po materialam russkikh uchenykh XIX veka* [At the sources of Kazakh musicology: Based on materials of 19th-century Russian scholars] (Alma-Ata: Nauka, 1987), 23–24.

18. Kazakhstan became an autonomous republic of the USSR in 1920, and a constituent republic (Kazakh SSR) in 1936.

19. Aleksandr V. Zatayevich, *1000 pesen kirgizskogo naroda: Napevy i melodii* [1000 songs of the Kyrgyz (Kazakh) people: Tunes and melodies] (Orenburg: Gosudarstvennoe muzykal'noe izdatel'stvo, 1963), 469. Zatayevich himself never witnessed a live shamanic ritual; the few tunes of *baqsy*s published in his collection were performed outside the ritual context.

20. Since any association with the *qobyz* could lead to persecution as an "enemy of the people," the instrument was often hidden, or even buried according to Muslim custom.