



THE MUSIC OF CENTRAL ASIA

EDITED BY

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CHAPTER 14 Narrative Instrumental Music

INTRODUCTION: MUSIC AND NARRATIVE

At its simplest, narrative refers to the act of telling a story or providing an account of events and experiences. Narration with words, it is safe to say, is a universal attribute of humankind. Whatever their length, form, content, and thematic roots in the human psyche, stories, tales, and oral poetry, sometimes supplemented by gesture, are culturally ubiquitous. In many cultures, oral literature is recited or performed to the accompaniment of music. But the notion of telling stories, relating events, or conveying images exclusively through instrumental music itself without the aid of texts—what in the West would be called “program music”—is a more limited phenomenon.

Narrative instrumental music exists throughout the Inner Asian nomadic realm, but it has reached a particularly high level of professionalism among Kazakh and Kyrgyz musicians who compose and perform closely related repertoires called *küi* (Kazakh) and *küü* (Kyrgyz). This chapter is divided into two sections, which address *küi* and *küü*, respectively.

PART 1. Kazakh *Küi*

SAIDA DAUKEYEVA

Küi is a genre of narrative instrumental music that serves as a major vehicle of cultural expression among the Kazakhs. Developed as a sophisticated form of solo performance by folk musicians and master composer-performers (*küishis*) on a variety of Kazakh musical instruments, it is a versatile medium of narration through sound central to the Kazakhs' social and musical life. The repertory of *küis* is diverse, and includes pieces for the end-blown flute, *sybyzghy*, traditionally played by shepherds, and the two-stringed bowed lute, *qobyz*, in former times the instrument of shamans and epic bards (see chapter 16). The largest number of *küis*, however, belongs to the *dombyra*, the two-stringed long-necked lute that is the most widespread Kazakh instrument and came to epitomize Kazakh culture and national identity (see chapter 17). This chapter presents a brief account of the origins and development of *küi* and explores the relationship between music and narrative in *küi* performance, focusing on an examination of *dombyra* performance styles and repertories of *küis* in the two principal stylistic traditions centered in western and eastern regions of Kazakhstan.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF *KÜI* AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MUSIC AND NARRATIVE

The origins of the *küi* genre have been traced to instrument playing that formed part of shamanic rituals, singing, and the narration of epics among the Kazakhs' nomadic predecessors in medieval Central Asia. The oldest layer of Kazakh instrumental music deriving from shamanic ritual practice is represented by *qobyz küis* attributed to Qorqyt, or Qorqyt ata, hero of the Oghuz epic and legendary forefather of Kazakh shamans, epic bards, and musicians, who is thought to have lived around the eighth or ninth century.¹ The earliest *küis* for the *dombyra* are believed to be those ascribed to the quasi-historical, quasi-legendary *küishis*, Ketbugha (twelfth to thirteenth century) and Asan qaighy (fourteenth to fifteenth century).² The heyday of *küi*, however, came in the nineteenth century, when celebrated *küishis* from across present-day Kazakhstan created distinctive instrumental styles that became identified with local composition and performance on various instruments, first and foremost, the *dombyra*. These styles and the related repertories of *küis*—anonymous, or “folk” (*khalyq*), and those of known authorship—have been transmitted down to the present through lineages of



**Kazakh *küishis* and *änshis*,
1900–1910s.**

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

students and successors by way of oral tradition and, since the early twentieth century, through notated transcriptions and recordings.

The interrelation between the musical and verbal elements of *küi* evolved in the course of its history. In earlier performance practice, notably in folk *küis* based on legendary subjects (*khalyq angyz küiler*), music was integrated with the verbal narrative (*angyz-änggime*, legend-story). Performers would alternate their storytelling with brief instrumental interludes or self-standing *küis*, which served to illustrate, imitate, or elaborate in sound the content of individual narrative episodes. But over time, instrumental performance became structurally and artistically independent from storytelling, assuming the leading role in *küi*. The present-day *küi* is primarily a musical genre. Verbal discourse serves more as an introduction, explaining the origins of the instrumental piece, than as an artistically equal component of performance, and in concert practice *küis* are commonly performed without their verbal element.

Through its long-term association with the spoken word, however, purely instrumental playing acquired some of the communicative qualities of verbal expression. Both *küi* and the instruments of its performance are regarded in their indigenous milieu as a means of communication between performers and listeners. A common metaphor for *küi* is that of a “speechless” (*tilsiz*) or “wordless language” (*sözsiz tili*) that has the capacity to convey meanings beyond the verbal narrative itself. This concept corresponds to the belief in the narrative, speaking powers of the *dombyra*. Traditionally, *dombyra* players would announce the telling of a story by the instrument and conclude their performance with the words *dedi* or *depti*, meaning “[the *dombyra*] said” or “it seemed to say.” The highest acknowledgment of a *dombyra* player’s mastery is to say that his *dombyra* “speaks” (*aityp tur*).³



**Aqyn performs in an *auyl*,
accompanying himself on
the *dombyra*, 1930s.**

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

Küi narratives embrace an array of subjects relating to the Kazakhs’ social and cultural world: their ways of life, relationship with nature and worldviews, oral lore, traditions and customs, and historical experiences. Folk legend *küis* (*khalyq angyz küiler*), which are considered to have early origins, depict images of nature, animals, and birds, evoking ancient mythology and animist beliefs among the nomads. *Küis* attributed to specific composer-performers (*küishis*) from the eighteenth century onward tend to be biographical, historical, philosophical, or lyrical in content. Many of them reflect particular occurrences in the lives of their

creators or important historical events. The genre provenance of *küis* is accordingly varied. Some draw on particular song genres, for example, songs for opening a celebration (*toy bastar*), farewell (*qoshtasu*), announcement of a death to relatives (*estirtu*), mourning lament (*joqtau*), and contemplation (*tolghau*). Others relate to genres of specifically instrumental origin, such as *aqjeleng* (pieces of vivacious, playful character), *qosbasar* (lyrical or philosophical pieces), and *qongyr* (meditative, sorrowful *küis*). A group of *küis* arises from instrumental contests (*tartys*). Another distinct group consists of dedications (*arnau*) to particular images, characters, or personalities.⁴

The musical embodiment of these diverse subjects involves a range of expressive devices, from imitation of the sounds of nature and intonations of human speech to evocation of emotional and psychological experiences. Apart from relating a story, imitating images or recording history, though, each *küi* explores a certain universal state of mind that encapsulates the *küi*'s underlying meaning—for example, joy, elation, melancholy, sorrow, or nostalgia. The depiction of a storyline in *küi* does not involve development or elaboration of its main characters. Narrative images and episodes, even those featuring physical movement, such as a bird's flight or a horse's galloping, are captured in sound as complete and lasting states rather than as a dynamic process. This method of artistic representation is expressed in the name of the genre, *küi*, which literally means "state of mind," or "mood." The capacity of *küi* performance to communicate universal states of mind is rooted in the aesthetics of *küi*—its instrumental "language," compact form, and short duration (typically one to five minutes). Imparting universal states of mind is also central to the artistic purpose of its composition and performance, which lies not in the mere re-creation of a narrative but in revealing an essential meaning or idea at its heart.⁵

An example of the musical representation of narrative is the folk legend *küi* "Aqsaq qulan," which is believed to relate to an early layer of Kazakh instrumental music. This widely known *küi* draws on a legend demonstrating the power of music to tell a story without recourse to words that is found in various versions across Inner Asia. In the Kazakh version, the legend recounts how the only son of Jochi Khan, heir of Genghis Khan and governor of the Golden Horde (thirteenth century), regardless of his father's warnings, went to hunt wild horses (*qulan*), sacred animals whose killing is forbidden among the Kazakhs. During the hunt, he was killed by the leader of a herd, a lame wild horse.⁶ Having learned about the disappearance of his son, Jochi Khan announced that anyone who dared to break bad news to him would have molten lead poured down his throat. Nobody had the courage to tell him about his son's death. Eventually a *domyra* player came before him and performed "Aqsaq qulan," which so vividly narrated the story of the hunt

and the death of his son that the khan immediately realized the truth.⁷ In his fury, the khan was about to punish the musician, but, perceiving that it was the *dombyra* that had revealed his son's fate, he ordered molten lead to be poured on the instrument's body.⁸ Some versions of the legend say this is how the *dombyra* acquired a hole in its soundboard.⁹

"Aqsaq qulan" is known in several variants throughout Kazakhstan. The variant featured here comes from western Kazakhstan, and is performed by a renowned twentieth-century *dombyra* player, Rüstembek Omarov (1919–1988). In musical terms, the piece belongs to the group of folk legend *küis* presumed to be of early origin. Such *küis* are commonly intended for a *dombyra* whose two strings are tuned to the interval of a fifth (*teris burau*), and are based on reiterations of simple melodic motifs within a small pitch range. In some of them, the melody is supported by a bass drone produced on the unfretted, or open, lower-sounding string. A common narrative device employed in these *küis* is instrumental imitation of the sounds and physical traits of the legend's protagonists, in particular, the voices and movements of animals and birds.

"Aqsaq qulan" evolves from the initial motif with a stepwise melody in the lower voice against the main tone ostinato in the upper voice (0:00–0:15). The motif is then transposed and developed in higher registers, and recapitulated at the original pitch. Played throughout with a rapid strumming technique (*qara qaghys*) that produces an agitated rhythmic pulse, the *küi* has an imitative effect: it draws a sonic picture of the hunt and horses galloping in the steppe. Additionally, though, it conveys a sense of disquiet, foreboding the tragic resolution of events. This air of disquiet is created, in particular, by variant reiterations of the stepwise melody that resembles Kazakh mourning laments (*joqtau*). The use of this motif and the overall musical character of the legend *küi* have prompted scholars in Kazakhstan to compare it with the traditional song genre *estirtu* in which Kazakh musicians broke news of a death to relatives of the deceased in a figurative, allegorical form.¹⁰ The *küi*'s message or state of mind is thus encoded by the *dombyra* player in musical "language" and communicated to the listeners—and, in the legend, to the khan—through a confluence of imitative and symbolic means.

LISTEN

Example 14.1. "Aqsaq qulan" (Lame wild horse), folk legend *küi*, performed by Rüstembek Omarov. Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. As you listen to the *küi*, what do you hear as highlights of the piece, and what musical devices do you observe, on a first hearing and then after closer listening? How do background knowledge and musical analysis contribute to an appreciation of the *küi* and its performance?
2. Based on this example, to what extent would you agree that musical images in *dombyra* performance are not elaborated upon or developed? What seems to you to be the relationship between the depiction of images and the presentation of a state of mind in this *küi*? Compare the musical depiction of narrative in *küi* with other examples of program music from around the world, including European classical music.
3. Listening to “Aqsaq qulan,” would you accept the idea that a performance of a *küi* may have the same effect on different listeners? Test this by comparing your impression of the *küi* with the responses of other students in your class.

DOMBYRA PERFORMANCE STYLES

Dombyra performance, in both its folk and authored forms, encompasses two principal stylistic traditions: *tökpe* and *shertpe*. *Tökpe* is identified with western Kazakhstan, while the roots of *shertpe* are in eastern Kazakhstan. Historically, these stylistic traditions arose among the different Kazakh tribal confederations, or Hordes (*jüz*), that populated these regions. *Tökpe* originated among the Little Horde (*Kishi жүз*) in the western region (Batys), its local sub-traditions evolving



Map of Kazakhstan.

Dombyra from western Kazakhstan attributed to *küishi* Makhambet Ötemisuly (19th c.).

Courtesy of Museum of Kazakh Folk Musical Instruments.



in the northwestern area formerly known as Bökei Orda, in the area of the Aral Sea and Syr Darya River, and on the Manghystau Peninsula.¹¹ *Shertpe* developed among the people of the Middle (*Orta jüz*) and Great Hordes (*Uly jüz*) in the eastern Kazakh lands, with separate schools in the regions of Saryarqa, or Arqa, Jetisu, and Altai, as well as among some tribes of the Little Horde (*Kishi jüz*), such as the Tama and Tabyn, in the southeastern region of Qaratau.

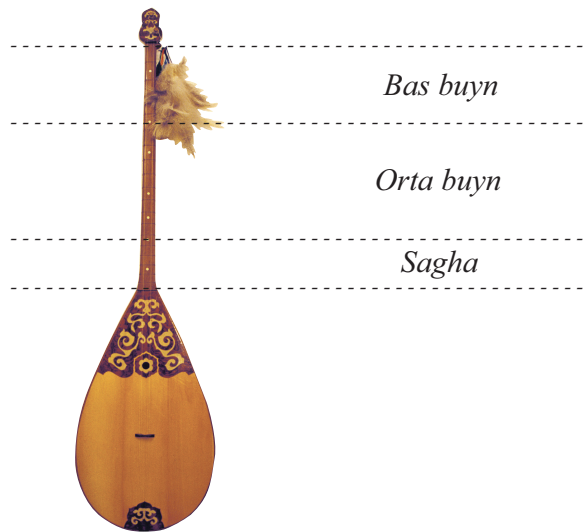
Across these different localities, two main types of *dombyra* evolved, distinguished by morphology and sound properties. Prevalent in the western region was a *dombyra* with a rounded, pear-shaped body and a long, slender neck with twelve to sixteen frets. In the eastern region, the prevailing instrument was a *dombyra* with a flat body of varying shape—rectangular, shovel-like, or triangular—and a shorter, broad neck with seven to eleven frets.¹² In some areas, notably Arqa, early *dombyras* were provided with intermediate movable frets called *qashaghan perne* (deviating, deflecting frets) that produced variant pitches of the main scale-degrees.¹³ Whereas the western *dombyra* type with the rounded body produced a bright and resonant sound, its eastern counterpart with a flat resonator had a more subdued and mellower voice.¹⁴

Intended for performance on the different *dombyra* types, *küis* in the *tökpe* and *shertpe* styles came to differ in playing techniques, structural principles, themes, and narrative devices. These differences, formalized in the classical repertoires of western and eastern Kazakhstan from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, were largely maintained in subsequent performance practice, despite the widespread adoption in Kazakhstan, as part of Soviet-initiated musical reforms in the 1930s, of a new, modernized type of *dombyra* with a pear-shaped body and an extended nineteen-fret neck, that differed morphologically and acoustically from the traditional instruments (see chapter 17). The distinction between *tökpe* and *shertpe* styles is not rigid, but takes into account *küis*' prevalent technical and structural properties.

Tökpe

In the *tökpe* style, the *dombyra* is strummed with a wrist movement of the right hand, using a variety of finger strokes (*qaghys*). Simultaneous strumming across both strings produces a sustained two-voiced heterophony in which the leading and accompanying voices are exchanged between the strings, while precise and strong rhythmic strokes lend *küis* a percussive effect. These features are reflected in the name of the style, *tökpe*, meaning literally “outpouring, spilling,” from *tögu*, “to pour out, spill, scatter, embroider.” The distinctive manner of sound production and rhythmic articulation in *tökpe küis* give them a dynamic quality, which is evident, in particular, in the depiction of epic, dramatic, and philosophical themes and images.

The *tökpe* style is identified with a distinctive structural principle designed to exploit the wide tonal range of the western Kazakhstan *dombyra*. Many *tökpe küis* are structured as a succession of thematically related sections in progressively higher pitch areas or registers (*buyn*) on the fingerboard of the *dombyra*: the initial section, serving as a refrain, produced in the low pitch area close to the peg-board of the *dombyra* (*bas buyn*); the middle section produced in the middle pitch area of the *dombyra* fingerboard (*orta buyn*); the culminating section of the *küi* marked by attainment of the high pitch area close to the body of the instrument (*sagha*). The area spanning the upper pitches of *bas buyn* and *orta buyn* usually contains salient melodic material that can be perceived as the main theme of the *küi* (*negizgi buyn*). In the course of the instrumental piece, this theme is variably presented in the different registers of the *dombyra* scale, with ascending leaps or passages to mark the onset of new, higher-pitched sections and periodic returns through descending melodic movement to the low-pitched refrain. The culminating section (*sagha*) may comprise two subsections of an increasingly wide range: *birinshi* (first) or *kishi* (small), and *ekinshi* (second) or *ülken* (great) *sagha*. The recurrence and variation of the thematic sections, involving a gradual expansion of tonal range and alteration of the intervallic distance between the two voices, creates a sense of development, while contributing to the structural integrity of the *küi*. The following figure shows the interrelation of the *buyns* in the structure of *tökpe küis*, which is known accordingly as *buyndyq* (sectional).¹⁵



Some Kazakh scholars have drawn attention to the extra-musical—anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and metaphysical—connotations of the indigenous terminology for the *dombyra* scale: *bas* (head, beginning), *orta* (middle, center) or *keude*



Dombyra from eastern Kazakhstan that belonged to *änshi* Birjan sal Qojaghululy (19th c.).

Courtesy of Museum of Kazakh Folk Musical Instruments.



(chest), and *sagha* (estuary), also known as *ayaq* (leg, end). These connotations and the progression of *tökpe küis* through low, middle, and high pitch areas prompted these scholars to suggest an analogy between the *küis*' tripartite form and the tripartite structure of the universe in traditional Kazakh cosmology. In this view, the structure of *küi* could represent a shaman's journey to the lower world in the course of a healing ritual.¹⁶

A leading role in the development of *tökpe* in the nineteenth century was taken by *küishis* from Bökei Orda, notably the *dombyra* composers and performers Qurmanghazy Saghyrbaiuly (1818–1889) and Däuletkeri Shyghaiuly (1820–1887)—both originally from the Ural region.¹⁷ Qurmanghazy, in particular, is regarded as the founder of a distinctive school of *dombyra* performance. While drawing on conventions of *tökpe* established by his predecessors, including his master, *dombyra* player Uzaq, he extended the scope of theme and genre in *küi* performance and enriched it with new technical and expressive devices. From a poor herder's family, Qurmanghazy clashed with the Kazakh authorities and sympathized with the uprising against the local and czarist administration that took place in western Kazakhstan in the 1830s. Originally from a Kazakh tribe that supported the rebels, he was persecuted and imprisoned, and spent much of his life in exile. Qurmanghazy's *küis*, accordingly, reflect on themes of struggle, courage, and social injustice, and evoke heroic and dramatic images. In order to convey these themes and images, he used a variety of virtuosic playing techniques, such as a powerful strumming with all fingers of the right hand (*qara qaghys*), tremolo, glissando, and the damping of the instrument's table with the right-hand elbow to create dynamic contrasts. He developed *bas buyn* into a distinct thematic section, and regularized the second *sagha* as a self-standing culmination zone, thereby expanding the tonal range and dimensions of *küis* and enhancing their dynamic character.

Many of Qurmanghazy's *küis*, such as “Kishkentai,” “Balbyrauyn,” “Adai,” and “Saryarqa,” form the core repertory of contemporary *dombyra* players. Among these widely known *küis* is “Alatau” (Many-colored mountain), in which the image of a mountain serves as a metaphor for expressing philosophical contemplation about life. In the following example, this *küi* is performed by Qali Jantileuov (1902–1993), a successor of Qurmanghazy's school, who passed a number of Qurmanghazy's *küis* down to the present day. As you watch the video example, try to discern the different sections (*buyns*), as they appear in the course of the piece. Then listen to the *küi* again, following the time code and description of the *küi*'s structure in table 14.1.



Qurmanghazy Saghyrbaiuly.
Rendering of a portrait by Aigerim Ilip.

WATCH **Example 14.2.** “Alatau” (Many-colored mountain), composed by Qurmanghazy Saghyrbaiuly, performed by Qali Jantileuov. Fragment from the film *Shabyt* (Inspiration), 1980s. Courtesy of the archive of the Kazakhstan Republic Television and Radio Corporation.



TABLE 14.1. FORMAL STRUCTURE OF “ALATAU”

TIME CODE	SECTION	NAME	CHARACTERISTICS
0:00–0:15	A	<i>Bas buyn</i>	Initial section, which recurs later as a refrain. The section comprises a distinct stepwise melody in the lower voice and can be perceived as a salient theme of the <i>küi</i> .
0:15–0:33	B	<i>Negizgi buyn</i>	Main thematic section, embracing the middle pitch area. The end of the section merges with the beginning of the refrain, contributing to a smooth transition between the sections.
0:33–0:47	A	<i>Bas buyn</i>	Refrain
0:47–1:15	C	<i>Sagha</i>	Culmination section, introduced with a melodic leap. The section combines two sub-sections, <i>birinshi</i> and <i>ekinshi sagha</i> , reaching toward the highest tone and the widest interval (two octaves) in the <i>küi</i> .
1:15–1:32	B ¹	<i>Negizgi buyn</i>	A sequential melodic descent from the culmination segues into a variant version of the main theme.
1:32–1:43	A	<i>Bas buyn</i>	Refrain
1:44–1:57	D	<i>Orta buyn</i>	A new section in the middle pitch area. ^A
1:58–2:14	B ¹	<i>Negizgi buyn</i>	The version of the theme that appeared previously now follows on from <i>orta buyn</i> .
2:14–2:26	A	<i>Bas buyn</i>	Refrain

NOTE:

A. In another variant of the *küi*, this section also appears at the beginning of the *küi*, before the *sagha* section, and is followed by *bas buyn*.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe the overall mental state or affect expressed in “Alatau”? How does the composer convey it in music?
2. What musical means are used in the *küi* to create a sense of development and contrast, and, at the same time, formal coherence?
3. Listening to the *küi*, do you find the analogy, described above, between the progression of *tökpe küis* and a shaman’s journey to the underworld persuasive? Can you offer your own interpretation or understanding of the progression of the *küi*’s thematic material through low, middle, and high pitch areas?



Rysbai Ghabdiev.

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

In addition to *küis* structured according to the standard sectional principle, Qurmanghazy's output includes a number of *küis* that depart from the model described above and exemplified in "Alatau." One of these is "Töremurat," a virtuosic piece whose performance requires a high level of mastery. Töremurat was the name of a Kazakh hero (*batyr*) who broke customary law (*adat*) by marrying a girl, Qyz-Danai, who had already been promised to another man for bridewealth. One day, Töremurat's settlement (*auyl*) was attacked by men from the *auyl* of Qyz-Danai's former fiancé. Qurmanghazy, who was staying as a guest in Töremurat's *auyl*, took an active part in fierce combat for Qyz-Danai and, after the attackers fled without being able to take the girl away, he composed this *küi* depicting Töremurat's fight for Qyz-Danai.¹⁸ The *küi* is unusual in its structure: it does not have a *bas buyn* section, but begins with rapid strumming in the *orta buyn* zone (0:00–0:14) and proceeds into a main thematic section, comprising several distinctive motifs, which move across the pitch area of *orta buyn*, *birinshi sagha*, and *bas buyn* (0:15–0:52). The culmination section (*ekinshi sagha*), which appears twice (0:53–1:04, 1:49–1:59), is clearly separated from the preceding sections, and rather than being followed by a steady melodic descent, briskly switches to the main theme in the *orta buyn* and *birinshi sagha* zone. Melodic leaps, rapid shifts in pitch and register, rhythmic acceleration and deceleration, and abrupt pauses all contribute to the *küi*'s dynamic and impetuous character and its almost theatrical effect. The example below features a performance of the *küi* by another famous interpreter of *tökpe küis*, Rysbai Ghabdiev (1936–2004). Watch the example, paying attention to the performer's techniques and the movement of his left hand along the *dombyra* neck in the course of the *küi*.

WATCH

Example 14.3. "Töremurat," composed by Qurmanghazy Saghyrbaiuly, performed by Rysbai Ghabdiev. Fragment from a film, 1983. Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In your opinion, is the *küi* imitative (i.e., does it create a sonic image of the heroes' fight, horses stamping, and so on), or does it (perhaps additionally) convey a certain composite state of mind or affect?
2. Compare the structure of "Töremurat" with that of "Alatau." In what ways are the two *küis* different or similar?
3. What qualities of performance, in your view, make Rysbai Ghabdiev a master performer?

A distinctive stylistic branch of *tökpe* developed in the nineteenth century to the southeast of Bökei Orda, in the region of the Aral Sea and Syr Darya River. *Dombyra* performance in this region, which was then part of the Khanate of Khiva, came to be influenced by the local tradition of epic narration (*jyraulyq*) among the Kazakhs and the music of neighboring peoples in the Khorezm oasis—Karakalpaks, Uzbeks, and Turkmen. The most acclaimed representative of this stylistic tradition is Qazanghap Tilepbergenuly (1854–1921), a *küishi* born on the western shores of the Aral Sea, in the present-day Aqtöbe region. Qazanghap's *küis*, in their character, melodic themes (*äuen*), and structural development, are distinct from *küis* by Qurmanghazy. Their thematic material, often resembling the tunes of epics (*jyr*), typically unfolds through varied reiteration and elaboration in different registers, which reveal various dimensions of its musical character. The transition between sections is more fluid and flexible than in Qurmanghazy's *küis*, where sectional divisions tend to be clear-cut. Melodic development is centered on the *orta buyn* area and rarely reaches the upper *sagha* zone (*ekinshi sagha*), a prominent structural feature of Qurmanghazy's instrumental style.¹⁹ The composer frequently uses strumming with the index finger (*ilme qaghys*), in contrast to the wrist strumming with all fingers (*qara qaghys*) often used by Qurmanghazy, and embellishes the melodic line with melismas and grace notes that resemble ornamentation in Karakalpak, Uzbek, and Turkmen music.

Among the best known of Qazanghap's *küis* is a series of pieces under the title "Aqjeleng," which refers to a genre of cyclic *küis* (*tarmaqty küiler*) in the *tökpe* style distinguished by a joyful, playful character, and often associated with female images. According to oral tradition, a cycle of sixty-two "Aqjeleng" *küis* ("Alpys eki Aqjeleng") was originally composed and performed by a girl named Aqjeleng, who sought to affect her listeners by opening the pathway of each of their veins (*tamyr*)—traditionally numbered by Kazakhs as sixty-two, causing them to experience a surge of energy and exaltation.²⁰ A number of western Kazakhstan *küishis*, including Uzaq, Qurmanghazy, and Däuletkerei, composed "Aqjeleng" *küis*. Qazanghap is said to have perfected the genre by creating an entire cycle of sixty-two *küis* comprising distinct groups of pieces of varied character and recognizable musical traits.²¹ Performance of this cycle won him victory at a *tartys* among acclaimed *dombyra* players that took place in Kongyrat, in present-day Karakalpakstan, in the late nineteenth century.²² Only a handful of these *küis* in various performers' interpretations have come down to us, such as "Küi basy Aqjeleng" (Head Aqjeleng Küi), "Buranbel Aqjeleng" (Slender Aqjeleng), "Domalatbai Aqjeleng" (Spinning Aqjeleng), and others.

In the following example, a successor and promoter of Qazanghap's musical legacy, *dombyra* player Säduaqaq Balmaghambetov (1941–1999), performs one of these remaining *küis*, "Kerbez Aqjeleng" (Graceful Aqjeleng), which the *küishi* composed in dedication to a girl, Jämi, after being dazzled by her beauty

Performer Profile: Dina Nurpeisova, *Küishi* and *Dombyra* Tradition Bearer

SAIDA DAUKEYEVA

An outstanding representative of the western Kazakhstan tradition of *dombyra* performance is Dina Nurpeisova (1861–1955), a disciple of Qurmanghazy and the most celebrated female *dombyrashy* and *küishi* ever in the history of Kazakh music.²³ Dina's life and legacy span a transitional period between what is regarded as the “classical” age of Kazakh music in the nineteenth century and the time of transformation and change that occurred during the Soviet era. Born in the Ural region into the family of a herder who was fond of *dombyra* playing and encouraged her early learning of this instrument, she became widely known as a “girl *dombyra* player” (*dombyrashy qyz*) by the age of nine, and when Qurmanghazy visited her father's home to listen to her, she so impressed him that he asked her father's permission to take her with him as his apprentice. Thus began her formative stage as a *dombyra* player: for nine years she frequently met with Qurmanghazy and accompanied him in his travels across the region, absorbing new repertory and playing techniques from him and other performers, and observing and participating in instrumental contests. Although she suspended travel and public performance following her marriage, she had a chance to learn *küis* by renowned *küishis* in western Kazakhstan, among them Uzaq, Eshchan, Baijuma, Balamaisan,

Däuletkerei, and Turkish. On the advice of her master, she also started composing herself—at first versions of *küis* by well-known composers and then her own instrumental pieces. In the 1920s—years marked by turmoil and famine in Kazakhstan—Dina, then a widow, moved closer to the Caspian Sea in search of a better livelihood and resumed public performances, traveling around *auyls* and playing *küis*.

A major turning point in Dina's life and musical career came in the 1930s when she was invited to Alma-Ata and became involved in state-supported cultural events that were to gain her recognition across and beyond Kazakhstan. In 1937, she had resounding success at the second All-Kazakhstan Rally of Folk Art Workers convened by the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment of the Kazakh SSR. Two years later, she won the Grand Prix at the first All-Union Competition of Performers on Folk Instruments in Moscow, where she led the delegation of musicians from Kazakhstan. Another major appearance for Dina was at the Ten Days of Music of the Republics of Central Asia and Kazakhstan held in Tashkent in 1944. Back in Kazakhstan, she was awarded several prestigious state awards, notably People's Artist of the Republic. She performed and toured actively as an artist of the Philharmonic Society, and trained *dombyra* players from the Folk Orchestra named after Qurmanghazy, in this way handing the legacy of



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

traditional *dombyra küis* down to a younger generation of performers.

Living through a period of major upheaval and change in Kazakh society, Dina responded to it in her compositions. Among her well-known *küis* are “On altynshy jyl” (1916), or “Nabor” (Conscription), which chronicles the 1916 uprising in the steppe against mobilization of the male population into labor brigades imposed by the czarist government; “Ana buiryghy” (A mother's command), “Jengis” (Victory), and “Engbek eri” (Worker heroes), which refer to World War II and the postwar reconstruction of people's lives; and “Segizinshi mart” (The 8th of March) and “Toy bastar” (Opening of the celebration), which relate to important occasions in the modern history of the Kazakhs, such as International Women's Day and

Performer Profile: Dina Nurpeisova, *Küishi* and *Dombyra* Tradition Bearer (CONTINUED)

the twentieth anniversary of Soviet Kazakhstan in 1940.

In depicting these contemporary topics, Dina drew on the traditions of western Kazakhstan *dombyra* performance while displaying her unique compositional and performance style. Her renditions of her own *küis* and interpretations of pieces by other composers became known for their virtuoso, vibrant manner, marked by technical sophistication and rhythmic variation. This was attributed to the extraordinary physical qualities of her hands: a flexible and agile right hand capable of producing a range of articulation techniques, and the long stretch of her left hand that facilitated unusual fingerings on the neck of the *dombyra*. Qurmanghazy reportedly praised Dina's left hand, saying: "If your left hand and my right hand were given to one person, there would not have been a better *dombyra* player in the world."²⁴

Many classical *tökpe küis*, including those by Qurmanghazy and Däuletkeirei, have come down to present-day performers in Dina's interpretations. One such *küi* is "Nauysqy," a virtuoso jocular piece that is played with gestural movement of the right hand. The *küi* is variously attributed to Qurmanghazy and to Dina herself. According to one version, Qurmanghazy composed it as an impression of a trade fair, using the right-hand gestures as a caricature



on gesticulation by people who exchanged goods without knowing each other's languages. It is said that he based the *küi* on the Russian joke song "Chijik-Pyjik" ("Finch-Fawn"), which he heard at the trade fair. The name "Nauysqy" in this version derived from the name of the place where the trade fair supposedly took place. According to another version, the *küi* was composed by Dina herself in response to a performance by Kyrgyz *komuz* players, as a way of demonstrating that their peculiar gestural techniques could also be applied in *dombyra* performance. The word "Nauysqy" thus meant a "parody" or "mimicry."²⁵ Dina's performance of "Nauysqy" is featured in a short documentary film made in 1947, the earliest ever

Dina performs *küis* to a group of young people, Alma-Ata, 1950.

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

to feature a renowned *dombyra* player. In the film, she plays a shorter version of the *küi*, without the *sagha* section, and with only a brief allusion to the song "Chijik-Pyjik" at 1:03–1:05. As you watch the film, note the peculiar gestural movement of Dina's right hand and the techniques of her left hand (for example, at 0:17–0:23 or 0:42–0:46). Note also that the lower-sounding string is often played unfretted, or open. This is a feature of *küis* for the *dombyra* tuned to the interval of a fifth, which are comparatively fewer in the *tökpe* performance tradition than *küis* for the *dombyra* tuned to a fourth.

WATCH

Example 14.4. “Nauysqy,” composed by Qurmanghazy Saghyrbaiuly or Dina Nurpeisova, performed by Dina Nurpeisova. Documentary film, 1947. Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How is “Nauysqy” distinct from the previous examples in the chapter? Is it stylistically or structurally close to the *küis* by Qurmanghazy you have heard?
2. What, in your view, is the purpose of the performer’s right-hand gestural movement? What does it tell you about the *küi*’s character and the image it creates?
3. Based on this historical video, what can you tell about Dina Nurpeisova’s musicianship?

and grace.²⁶ Typical of the *aqjeleng* genre, “Kerbez Aqjeleng” evolves from a short, dancelike initial motif (*bas buyn*), which is taken up by a tuneful main theme (*negizgi buyn*) and developed through elaborate melodic interlocking (including a modulation into a new tonality), creating smooth transitions between *buyns*.

LISTEN

Example 14.5. “Kerbez Aqjeleng” (Graceful Aqjeleng), attributed to Qazanghap Tilepbergenuly, performed by Säduaças Balmaghambetov. Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe the difference in compositional and performance style between Qazanghap’s “Kerbez Aqjeleng” and the *küis* in the previous examples composed by Qurmanghazy?
2. Does the *küi* in any of its musical properties (for example, the nature of thematic material, rhythmic articulation, melodic ornamentation, modal development) seem to you to bear an affinity to epic singing among the Kazakhs, or to Karakalpak, Uzbek, or Turkmen music, in particular, *dutar* performance?
3. Could a *küi* like “Kerbez Aqjeleng” have an emotional and psychological effect on listeners similar to the one attributed to “Alpys eki Aqjeleng” in the story of its origin? If so, what are the musical qualities that contribute to such an effect?

TABLE 14.2. FORMAL STRUCTURE OF “KERBEZ AQJELENG”

TIME CODE	SECTION	NAME	CHARACTERISTICS
0:00–0:05	A	<i>Bas buyn</i>	Initial section serving as a refrain.
0:06–0:20	B	<i>Negizgi buyn</i>	Main theme, taking up the <i>bas buyn</i> . The end of the section merges with the beginning of the refrain.
0:20–0:26	A	<i>Bas buyn</i>	Refrain
0:27–0:37	C	<i>Orta buyn</i>	A section in the middle pitch area: melodic development in the lower voice against the upper voice drone is followed by a variant form of the main theme in the <i>orta buyn</i> area.
0:37–0:42			
0:43–0:49	B ¹	<i>Negizgi buyn</i>	C segues into a shorter repetition of the main theme at the original pitch, which serves as a descent and return to the refrain.
0:49–0:55	A	<i>Bas buyn</i>	Refrain
0:56–1:03	D	<i>Sagha</i>	A section in the higher pitch area: melodic development in the lower voice against ostinato tones in the upper voice is followed by a modulation of the main theme into a tonality a fifth higher than the main tone. The theme then modulates back to the main tonality through a sequential intervallic descent.
1:04–1:19			
1:20–1:21			
1:22–1:29	B ¹	<i>Negizgi buyn</i>	D segues into a shorter repetition of the main theme, which serves as a descent and return to the refrain.
1:29–1:34	A	<i>Bas buyn</i>	Refrain
1:35–1:52	B ²	<i>Negizgi buyn</i>	Reiteration of the main theme with an ending from B ¹ .
1:52–2:00	A	<i>Bas buyn</i>	Refrain ^A

NOTE:

A. In a longer variant, the *küi* additionally proceeds into the *orta buyn* section, and concludes with a reiteration of the main theme and refrain.

A further recognizable tradition of *tökpe* originated from the Manghystau Peninsula, a region in the far southwest of present-day Kazakhstan, bordering the Caspian Sea. *Dombyra* performance there, as in the Aral and Syr Darya region, acquired its particular stylistic features through interaction with local epic and singing traditions, and with the instrumental and vocal music of the Turkmen and Karakalpaks.²⁷ A number of celebrated *küishis* from Manghystau, notably Öskenbai



Qalmambetuly (1860–1925), became equally well known as epic bards and singers, leading to the circulation in the local *dombyra* repertory of *küi* variants of epics and songs, known, respectively, as *jyr küi* and *än küi*. Many musicians, including Öskenbai and the eminent *küishi*s Abyl Taraquly (1820–1892) and Esir Aishuaquly (1840–1904), were in contact with Turkmen *bagshys* through performances and competitions at festive events (*toy, as*) that took place in Manghystau as well as in adjacent areas of Khorezm that are now within the borders of the neighboring countries of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Kazakh *dombyra* players and Turkmen *dutar* players often demonstrated their art and challenged each other in displays of musical ingenuity at competitions (*tartys*). Instrumental pieces performed or extemporized during such competitions have been preserved in oral tradition among the Kazakhs as *tartys* or *aitys küis*. There is, for example, a series of *küis* arising from a famous *tartys* between Öskenbai and the Turkmen *bagshy* Qulbai, in which the

Kazakh musician gained the upper hand. Such musical interaction contributed to the popularity of so-called “Turkmen *küis*” and folk instrumental melodies, called “Nauai,” which were widely performed in the southwest of Central Asia. The repertory of Manghystau *dombyra* players currently includes a group of “Nauai” tunes that show similarities to Turkmen and Karakalpak *dutar* music.

In example 14.6, one such tune, “Qaqpaly Nauai” (Nauai with finger strokes), is performed by Murat Öskenbaev (1904–1982), a son of *küishi* Öskenbai and himself a distinguished *dombyra* player, who was also well known in Turkmenistan and Karakalpakstan, and whose repertory included *dombyra* versions of *dutar* pieces. As you watch



Murat Öskenbaev.

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

the example, observe the right-hand finger strokes used by the performer that are referred to in the *küi*'s name (*qaqpaly*). This type of articulation, which creates a peculiar sharp rhythmic pattern, is also found in Turkmen and Karakalpak *dutar* music. Pay attention to the performer's right-hand gestures, or “hand play” (*qol oinatu*). Employed in some *küis* throughout Kazakhstan (see example 14.4), gesticulation is a prominent feature of local *dombyra* performance in Manghystau, intended to make a performance visually attractive to listeners and, in some cases, to illustrate the images of the *küi*'s narrative or express its general character.

WATCH

Example 14.6. “Qaqpaly Nauai” (Nauai with finger strokes), folk *küi*, performed by Murat Öskenbaev. Fragment from a film, 1978. Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.



STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Which musical features of “Qaqpaly Nauai” situate it within the broader *tökpe* tradition of western Kazakhstan, and which features reflect the influence of *dutar* music? Consider the *küi*’s structural organization, playing techniques, rhythmic pattern, melodic ornamentation, and modal shifts.
2. Does the *küi* follow the sectional structural principle found in many *tökpe küis*, i.e., does it progress through the three pitch areas (*bas buyn*, *orta buyn*, and *sagha*), or is it structured differently?
3. How do you interpret the role of the hand gestures in the *küi*? In your view, how do they correlate with the music, both structurally and semantically?

Shertpe

In the *shertpe* style of eastern Kazakhstan, performers pluck the *dombyra* strings with individual fingers of the right hand rather than strum across the strings with a wrist movement, as in the *tökpe* style of western Kazakhstan. The plucking technique, which gave rise to the style’s name, *shertpe*, or “plucking, flicking,” from *shertu*, “to pluck, flick, snap,” includes various methods of sound articulation, ranging from a gentle touch to a sharp touch to a forceful attack with the right-hand fingernails snapping against the instrument’s deck. By plucking strings with individual fingers, performers can produce melodies with two separate “voices”—an upper voice that presents the lead melody and a lower voice that accompanies it, lending such *küis* a songlike quality. The finger plucking technique gives players more subtle control over rhythmic and agogic execution than strumming from the wrist, and *küis* in the *shertpe* style are distinguished by intricate, varied rhythmic patterns, sometimes organized in a flexible or free meter. The sound of plucked strings in the *shertpe* style evokes a different kind of sonic imagery than the rhythmic strumming characteristic of *tökpe*. Many *shertpe küis* are devoted to lyrical and psychological subjects, and capture images of nature and the world of human emotional experience.

In structural terms, *shertpe küis* are not unified by any common principle comparable to the sectional (*buyndyq*) form that prevails in *tökpe*. Originally intended for a *dombyra* with a smaller neck than instruments used in the *tökpe* tradition, *küis* in the *shertpe* style, particularly the oldest chronological layer of the repertory, unfold within a more limited tonal range and do not normally involve the gradual tonal expansion and intervallic variation typical of *tökpe küis*. Although they may consist of distinct, repeatable sections, the order and function of these sections are not necessarily determined by the relative position in which they are played on the *dombyra* fingerboard, as is the case in the *tökpe* style. Some *shertpe küis* progress

according to an internal melodic logic, or present variations on a theme. Others unfold through a flexible combination of interrelated motifs in what has been described as a “mosaic” or “patchwork” (*quraqtyq*) form, a coinage derived from an indigenous analogy of such *küis* to a patchwork quilt (*quraq*).²⁸ The structural heterogeneity of *küis* in this style can be attributed to the fact that, spread over a large and culturally diverse geographic area extending from central Kazakhstan to the Altai region in the extreme east, the *shertpe* style embraced a variety of distinctive traditions which evolved from local features of *dombyra* performance and other kinds of music making in their respective regions.

The central and most representative tradition of *shertpe* arose in Saryarqa, or Arqa, a steppe region that spans eastern, northern, and central Kazakhstan, stretching from the Tarbaghatai Mountains in the east to Torghai in the west, and from the western Siberian plain in the north to Lake Balkhash in the south. The development of this tradition in the nineteenth century is mainly associated with the creative work of the celebrated *dombyra* player and composer Tättimbet Qazanghapuly (1817–1862). Tättimbet recreated the *shertpe* style that he inherited from his predecessors, notably the *küi* master Baijigit (seventeenth to eighteenth centuries), by assimilating into it elements of the local singing tradition that reached its zenith in the nineteenth century. The descendant of an aristocratic family from central Kazakhstan who were connoisseurs of music and frequently hosted musicians and singers, Tättimbet became known as a virtuoso *dombyra* player, charismatic singer-poet (*änshi*), and artistic personality (*seri*). His *dombyra* performance style thus absorbed some of the lyricism and melodious nature of the song repertoire, though elaborated in an instrumental idiom.

In example 14.7, one of Tättimbet’s well-known *küis*, “Sylqyldağ” (Tinkling), is performed by a twentieth-century follower of his style, Äpikė Äbenova (1915–1999). According to one version of its origin, the *küi* emerged when Tättimbet, in the late 1840s, migrated with his *auyl* to the lands of the Naiman tribe from the Middle Horde (*Orta jüz*). There he met and engaged in a competition with a remarkable girl nicknamed Erkekshora (“akin to a man”), who was a skillful *dombyra* player and horse rider, and who challenged men in *dombyra* contests and horse racing. It is said that Tättimbet and his female opponent competed for a long time and exchanged many beautiful *küis* without being able to defeat each other. But Erkekshora stopped after performing thirty-nine *küis*, whereas Tättimbet went on to play a fortieth *küi* and thus won the competition. This *küi*, which the *küishi* dedicated to his rival, came to be known as “Sylqyldağ” (from *sylqyldau*, “to tinkle,” or *sylqyldap külu*, “to laugh sonorously”) as a reflection of its joyful character.²⁹ As you listen to and watch the example, pay attention to the performer’s technique and the resultant sound, and note how the *küi*’s musical image unfolds in time.



Tättimbet Qazanghapuly.
Rendering of a photograph by
Aigerim Ilip.

WATCH

Example 14.7. “Sylqyldağ” (Tinkling), composed by Tättimbet Qazanghapuly, performed by Äpikė Äbenova. Fragment from a film, 1980. Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How would you characterize differences between the *tökpe* and *shertpe* playing techniques?
2. Based on the example of “Sylqyldağ,” how would you define differences between *küis* in the two styles with regard to the narrative flow of music and the aesthetic quality of the sound, or sound ideal?
3. Describe the structural progression of the *küi*. Does it have a recognizable theme? If so, how is it developed by the composer?

Tättimbet became known as the author of sixty-two *küis* called “Qosbasar” (“Alpys eki Qosbasar”), a genre of cyclic *küis* in the *shertpe* style analogous to “Alpys eki Aqjeleng” in the *tökpe* tradition. Oral accounts of the cycle’s origin, based on an archetypal legend, link the emergence of Tättimbet’s *küis* to his encounter with Kúshikbai, a wealthy man (*bai*) from his tribe, the Arghyn. Kúshikbai had lost his only son and heir and, overcome by grief, lay down and decided to starve himself to death. Seeing this, his alarmed relatives asked Tättimbet to make a visit and help save Kúshikbai’s life. The *küishi* arrived in Kúshikbai’s *auyl* and, seating himself on the threshold of his yurt, began to play sixty-two tunes on the *dombyra*, one by one.³⁰ As Tättimbet played, Kúshikbai felt relief and regained his will to live. The story goes that when Kúshikbai rose from his bed, he was surprised to see before him a young musician, to whom he said, “I thought my grief was the most terrible in the world, but listening to your *küis*, I realized that there is grief worse than mine, and that a man should continue to live in the face of all adversity. But I thought you were an old wise man, and you are little more than a child. Where does the grief in your *küis* come from?” To this Tättimbet responded, “Your grief is the grief of one person, while I bear in myself the grief of all people.”

Tättimbet’s cycle of sixty-two “Qosbasar” (two-stringed or twofold), a series of reflections on life and death, is said to have consisted of six groups of *küis* (five groups of ten *küis* and the sixth of twelve), each expressing a certain emotional state and marking a particular stage in the healing of Kúshikbai. The last group of twelve *küis* was called “Qyrmyzy Qosbasar,” *qyrmyzy* (scarlet) being the name



Äpikė Äbenova.

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

of a short-lived steppe flower similar to a dandelion. Explaining the meaning of this group of *küis*, Tättimbet reportedly said, “A man’s life is as ephemeral as a dandelion. Why seek to shorten it still more?”³¹ Example 14.8 features a version of “Qyrmyzy Qosbasar” passed down by a leading inheritor of Tättimbet’s musical legacy, Äbiken Khasenov (1897–1958). Like other surviving “Qosbasar” *küis*, it has a prominent melody and a songlike strophic form unified by recurring cadences that reaffirm the main tones. A formal scheme of the *küi* is provided in table 14.3.

LISTEN

Example 14.8. “Qyrmyzy Qosbasar” (Scarlet Qosbasar), composed by Tättimbet Qazanghapuly, performed by Äbiken Khasenov. Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

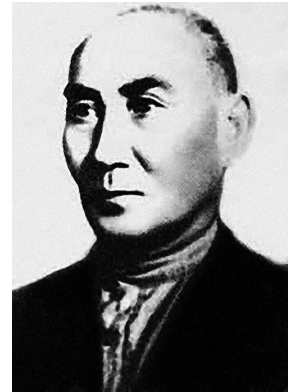
TABLE 14.3. FORMAL STRUCTURE OF “QYRMYZY QOSBASAR”

TIME CODE	SECTION	CHARACTERISTICS
0:00–0:19	A	The first melodic motif or phrase akin to the initial verse of a song, followed by a cadence-like repetition of the main melodic interval, a fifth.
0:20–0:28	B	The second melodic phrase akin to the final verse of a song, followed by a cadence. A and B appear to be in a question-answer relationship.
0:29–0:46	A ¹	Variant of the first phrase.
0:47–1:00	B ¹	Variant of the second phrase.
1:01–1:18	A ²	Another variant of the first phrase. An amplification of the melody with the bass drone at 1:09–1:11 marks the culmination of the <i>küi</i> .
1:19–1:33	B ²	Another variant of the second phrase, continuing on from the culmination.
1:34–1:41	B ³	Varied repetition of a passage from B ² , which serves as a coda.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In what ways is “Qyrmyzy Qosbasar” structurally distinct from *tökpe küis* composed according to the sectional principle? Does it show any similarity in its formal organization to “Sylqyldağ” in the previous example?
2. How would you describe the influence of singing traditions in “Qyrmyzy Qosbasar”? Does the *küi* sound songlike? If you hear songlike features, how are they reinterpreted on the *domyra*?
3. What state of mind is expressed by this *küi*? Does the story of its origin correlate with the image conveyed by the music?

A contrasting example of Tättimbet's compositional style is "Saryjailau" (Golden summer settlement), a large-scale, technically sophisticated, and structurally complex *küi* that is regarded as a masterpiece of Kazakh *dombyra* music. The *küi* paints the idyllic scene of an alpine summer settlement, which has been variously interpreted as a symbol of human life in a perpetual state of mobility, or the promised land (*Jeruiyq*) that was sought by a legendary Kazakh hero, Asan qai-ghy.³² This image is musically created through richly melodious thematic material based on two distinct initial themes (0:06–0:15 and 0:19–0:23) and a contrasting section (2:11–2:23). The contrasting section appears after the development of the main themes has reached its climax, and is followed by a new culmination and variant recapitulation of the two themes. The following example presents the version of the *küi* transmitted by Äbiken Khasenov.



Äbiken Khasenov.

Rendering of a photograph by Aigerim Ilip.

LISTEN

Example 14.9. "Saryjailau" (Golden summer settlement), composed by Tättimbet Qazanghapuly, performed by Äbiken Khasenov. Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How would you compare "Saryjailau" with the two previously presented *küis* by Tättimbet? Is it close to either of them in its technical execution and structural development? Does it display any songlike qualities, similar to or distinct from those examples?
2. What can you say about the rhythmic pattern employed by the composer? Is it regular or irregular? What is its role in creating the *küi*'s image, whether it is to be understood in literal or figurative terms?
3. How do you hear the narrative and emotional state communicated by the *küi*? Do you concur with the interpretations referred to above?

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a new idiosyncratic stylistic trend within the *shertpe* tradition of *dombyra* performance evolved in the southeast of Kazakhstan, in the area that forms the foothills of the Qaratau Mountains. The founder of the Qaratau *dombyra* tradition, Sügir Äliuly



(1882–1961), originally from the Sozaq region of present-day Kazakhstan, was a follower of the Arqa *shertpe* school and an accomplished performer of Tättimbet’s *küis*. He was also a disciple of the great *qobyz* player and composer from Qaratau, Yqylas Dükenuly (1843–1916), and came to master the performance of *qobyz küis* (see chapter 16). His composition style fused elements of the classical Arqa *shertpe* with the musical language of *qobyz* performance. Additionally, it embraced the technical and structural properties of the *tökpe* style current in the contiguous southwestern region of the Syr Darya River and the Aral Sea. Thus, some of his *dombyra küis* are distinguished by lyricism and a songlike quality typical of Arqa *küis*. Others show an affinity to *qobyz* music, having been either adapted from *qobyz* repertory or performed interchangeably on both instruments. Still others are played with the strumming technique (*qara qaghys*) or are structured in a manner similar to the sectional principle of *tökpe küis*, with specific musical and stylistic devices adapted to the narrative content and character of individual pieces. The intersection of *shertpe* with *tökpe* and *qobyz* performance, which is a hallmark of the Qaratau tradition, with its local musical interconnections and exchange, became possible thanks to its late development in Kazakh instrumental music as the creation of twentieth-century *küishis*. It thus represents the most recent and stylistically heterogeneous tradition of *shertpe*, and of *dombyra* performance in general.



Maghauiya Khamzin, *shertpe dombyra* player.

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

The following example of Sügir’s *küi*, “Toghyz tarau” (Nine branches), illustrates the fusion of *shertpe* style with *qobyz* performance tradition. The *küi* is thought to belong to the cycle of nine *küis* of contemplative character and epic genre (*tolghau*) called “Kertolghau.” A legendary account of the origins of these *küis* has it that in old times one *küi* from the cycle would be played before a khan each day of the year, and that nine of these *küis* were accorded special significance.³³ These cyclic *küis* have circulated in both *dombyra* and *qobyz* variants. Like other *küis* in the cycle, “Toghyz tarau” has a principal melody that includes sustained reiterations of the same tones, calling to mind the sound of the *qobyz*, and a recurring cadential motif typical of traditional *qobyz* tunes. Like some *qobyz küis*, “Toghyz tarau” is intended for a *dombyra* tuned to the interval of a fifth (*teris burau*), and its main theme (D) is played with an open drone string, producing a sound reminiscent of bowing across the *qobyz* strings. In example 14.10, “Toghyz tarau” is performed by the celebrated *dombyra* and *qobyz* player from the Qaratau region, Jappas Qalambaev (1909–1969). The form of the *küi* is shown in table 14.4.




LISTEN  **Example 14.10.** “Toghyz tarau” (Nine branches), composed by Sügir Äliuly, performed by Jappas Qalambaev. Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

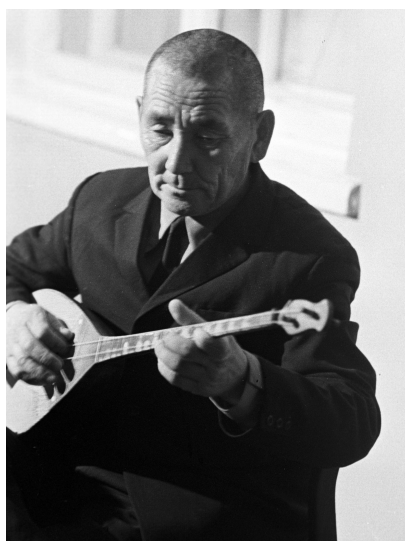
TABLE 14.4. FORMAL STRUCTURE OF “TOGHYZ TARAU”

TIME CODE	SECTION		
0:00–0:19	A	Introduction	Main motifs develop in the high register, with the widest intervals attained at the outset of the <i>küi</i> . Cadential motif in the low register adopted from the <i>qobyz</i> tradition.
0:20–0:31	B		
0:31–0:47	A		
0:48–0:57	B		
0:57–1:03	C		
1:04–1:23	D ¹	Main part	Melodic development in the high and middle registers against a bass drone, with occasional moves up a fifth and a sixth on the low-sounding string in D ² . The setting begins as D ³ but the bass then moves up a third before returning to the main tone in the conclusion.
1:24–1:50	D ²		
1:50–2:08	D ³		
2:08–2:33	D ²		
2:34–2:55	D ⁴		

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Compare this example with the examples of *qobyz küis* given in chapter 16. How is the sound of this *küi* similar to or distinct from them? What means are employed in *dombyra* performance to represent the sound of the bowed lute, *qobyz*?
2. Would you say that this *küi* is structurally unusual compared to the examples of *shertpe küis* you have heard earlier?
3. How would you characterize the general emotional mode or affect of the *küi*?

The assimilation of the stylistic features of *tökpe* in the Qaratau *shertpe* tradition can be observed in the *küi* “Saltanat” by a successor of Sügir, the twentieth-century *küishi*, Tölegen Mombekov (1918–1997). “Saltanat” belongs to a series of four



Tölegen Mombekov.

Courtesy of the archive of the Kazakhstan Republic Television and Radio Corporation.

biographical *küis* that he composed as a response to the death of his wife, in 1969. This *küi*, in particular, was dedicated to his young daughter, Saltanat, who missed her mother, and it expressed feelings of loss, sorrow, and nostalgia.³⁴ Evolving from a songlike tuneful melody and played primarily with a *shertpe* plucking technique, the *küi* progresses according to the sectional principle, with clearly defined sections in increasingly higher pitch areas (*orta buyn*, *birinshi*, and *ekinshi sagha*) alternating with the refrain. Unusually for a *tökpe küi*, however, each new section is repeated like a strophe in a song, the sectional division

thus assuming a strophic form. Example 14.11 features a performance of the *küi* by the composer himself during a recital in Almaty in the 1980s. A formal scheme of the *küi* appears in table 14.5.

WATCH

Example 14.11. “Saltanat,” composed and performed by Tölegen Mombekov. Fragment from a film, 1980s. Courtesy of the archive of the Kazakhstan Republic Television and Radio Corporation.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Which features distinguish “Saltanat” from “Toghyz tarau,” and which features identify both of them as originating from the Qaratau *shertpe* tradition?
2. Compare the structure of “Saltanat” with that of *tökpe küis* analyzed in this chapter. In what ways is its sectional division dissimilar from them?
3. Discuss Tölegen Mombekov’s manner of performance. Does anything in his music or his performance style suggest that he is a twentieth-century composer and performer?

TABLE 14.5. FORMAL STRUCTURE OF “SALTANAT”

TIME CODE	SECTION	NAME	CHARACTERISTICS
0:00–0:17 0:17–0:21	A a	<i>Orta buyn</i>	Initial section in the middle pitch area with intonations of the main theme (B), ending with a cadence that recurs later as a refrain.
0:22–0:47	B	<i>Negizgi buyn</i>	Main theme in the middle pitch area.
0:48–0:50	a	<i>Orta buyn</i>	Refrain
0:51–1:14	B	<i>Negizgi buyn</i>	Repetition of the main theme.
1:15–1:20	a	<i>Orta buyn</i>	Refrain with strumming across open strings.
1:21–1:51	C	<i>Birinshi (kishi) sagha</i>	First culmination section in the lower high register, followed by a descent that segues into the refrain.
1:52–1:54	a	<i>Orta buyn</i>	Refrain with strumming across open strings.
1:55–2:21	C	<i>Birinshi (kishi) sagha</i>	Repetition of the first culmination section.
2:22–2:24	a	<i>Orta buyn</i>	Refrain
2:24–2:48	B	<i>Negizgi buyn</i>	Repetition of the main theme.
2:49–2:51	a	<i>Orta buyn</i>	Refrain with strumming across open strings.
2:51–3:14	D	<i>Ekinshi (ülken) sagha</i>	Second culmination section in the upper high register.
3:14–3:29	C ¹	<i>Birinshi (kishi) sagha</i>	D segues into a shorter version of the first culmination section in the lower high register, followed by a descent to the refrain.
3:29–3:31	a	<i>Orta buyn</i>	Refrain with strumming across open strings.
3:32–3:53	D	<i>Ekinshi (ülken) sagha</i>	Repetition of the second culmination section.
3:53–4:08	C ¹	<i>Birinshi (kishi) sagha</i>	Repetition of the shorter version of the first culmination section.
4:08–4:09	a ¹	<i>Orta buyn</i>	Variant form of refrain.
4:10–4:35	B	<i>Negizgi buyn</i>	Reiteration of the main theme.
4:36–4:38	a	<i>Orta buyn</i>	Refrain

Unlike the Qaratau tradition, *dombyra* performance styles arising from the regions of Jetisu and Altai in the southeast and east of Kazakhstan and from neighboring areas populated by Kazakh communities in present-day Chinese Xinjiang, western Mongolia, and the Altai Republic of the Russian Federation, are associated with an early type of Kazakh instrumental music.³⁵ *Dombyras* historically current in these regions had a shorter fingerboard than instruments found in central or western Kazakhstan. In Altai, in particular, musicians used a *dombyra* with seven frets and an entirely diatonic scale. Accordingly, local *küis*, as distinct from many *küis* in Arqa, Qaratau, or the western region, have a small tonal range and are relatively simple in their melodic and modal organization, rarely including modal shifts or chromatic tones. Many of them are short and built up from reiterations of one tune or melody. Compared to *dombyra* pieces in the other *shertpe* traditions, *küis* in Jetisu and Altai tend to be less rhythmically complex and variable, and are based on regular rhythmic patterns. In this way, they are like the local songs, many of which have a small melodic range, simple strophic form, and regular rhythmic patterns. A distinctive feature of *dombyra* repertory in Jetisu and especially in Altai is the prevalence of *küis* whose strings are tuned to the interval of a fifth (*teris burau*)—a less common tuning for *dombyra* performance in the west of Kazakhstan. In such *küis* the melody develops on the higher-sounding string and is supported by a bass drone produced on the open lower string. Melodic development draws on pitches of the harmonic series, thus linking this stylistic type of *dombyra küi* with other kinds of music making among the Kazakhs and neighboring ethnic groups in the greater Altai region (see chapter 17). Another specific feature of *shertpe* in Jetisu and Altai is the occurrence of *küis* for the *dombyra* with strings tuned to a fifth or, more rarely, to

a fourth, that are played with basic wrist strumming (*qara qaghys*), either throughout or in alternation with finger plucking, which produces a sustained two-voiced sound or two separate “voices.” These features occur, in particular, in folk legend *küis* ascribed early origins that are prominent in the local repertory.

Example 14.12 presents one such *küi* that is current in Altai, performed by a renowned *dombyra* player and composer originally from western Mongolia, Qabykei Aqmeruly (1927–2012). The *küi* is dedicated to the Kazakh hero (*batyr*) Jänibek, who fought against the Jungars in the eighteenth century. According to the story of its origin recounted by the performer, Jänibek received a call to attack enemies who were approaching the Kazakh lands, and this call was



Qabykei Aqmeruly.

captured by *dombyra* players in a *küi* that articulates the words “*Jänibek, Jänibek, shap*” (Jänibek, Jänibek, strike), while at the same time depicting the galloping of Jänibek’s horse, *Kök dönen*.

WATCH

Example 14.12. “Jänibek, Jänibek, shap” (Jänibek, Jänibek, strike), or “Kök dönen,” folk *küi*, performed by Qabykei Aqmeruly. Aqjar, Taldyqorghan region, Kazakhstan, 2004.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How are the words of the call in the legend articulated in music?
2. In what ways is this folk legend *küi* distinct from the spectrum of *küis* in the two stylistic traditions of *domyra* performance presented in this chapter?
3. As you listen to the *küi*, do you find the idea of the early origins of the style exemplified in folk legend *küis* convincing?

Performer Profile: Abdulhamit Raiymbergenov, *Domyra* Player and Visionary Music Educator

THEODORE LEVIN

Abdulhamit Raiymbergenov (b. 1957) is a virtuoso *domyra* player who has focused his energy not on musical performance but on music education. Raiymbergenov is the founder and director of Kökil College, in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where he launched a pioneering program called “Murager” (Heritage) to provide musical enrichment on a mass scale to Kazakh schoolchildren. Students participating in the program are not specially selected for musical talent, and most do not intend to become professional musicians. Instead, Raiymbergenov’s goal is to build audiences for the next generation of traditional musicians under the assumption that their music will not survive unless it is performed within a social milieu that supports it. Raiymbergenov expanded the

“Murager” program to schools nationwide, and created curriculum materials and teacher training seminars to support its activities.

Abdulhamit Raiymbergenov was born into a family of musicians in the Aqtöbe region of western Kazakhstan. His great-grandfather was a famous *domyra* player, his grandfather a mullah and Sufi, and his father a professional musician who worked in a teacher’s college and composed many *küis* and songs. Abdulhamit listened to the music and stories of musicians who gathered in the home of his grandfather, where he heard the lore of their exploits and adventures. From his family and local *domyra* players he learned about the *küishi* Qazanghap Tilepbergenuly, originally from his home region of Aqtöbe, and became a leading performer,



Courtesy of Abdulhamit Raiymbergenov.

researcher, and promoter of his musical legacy. He also learned about Qurmanghazy Saghyrbaiuly, the eminent *küishi* from the Ural region, and came to master the performance of his *küis*. Qurmanghazy became one of Abdulhamit’s own heroes.

“Qurmanghazy was renowned for his cunning, courage, and skill on the *domyra*,” said Abdulhamit. “He lived at a time when czarist Russia had begun to exert a strong influence

Performer Profile: Abdulhamit Raiymbergenov, *Dombyra* Player and Visionary Music Educator (CONTINUED)

on the Kazakhs. He belonged to the Qyzylqurt tribe, and they all became followers of a revolutionary leader named Makhambet who led a revolt against czarist colonization. Qurmanghazy was accused of horse-thieving and czarist soldiers were sent from Orenburg to arrest him. They came to his home and, not finding him there, took away his wife and baby son. That evening when Qurmanghazy returned, people told him what had happened, and Qurmanghazy mounted a horse and rode off to find his wife. In the dark

of night, he spotted a fire burning in uninhabited steppe. Dismounting and scurrying closer, he saw his wife and son sleeping by the fire, and the soldiers asleep nearby. Silently, he crept up and removed the bullets from their rifles, took one rifle for himself, swept up his wife and baby, and ran away.

Later Qurmanghazy composed a *küi* about the incident. The music illustrates the way he ducked down into gullies and crevices in the steppe to avoid detection as he crept up on the soldiers. At

one point, he rolls down a hillock, and the music shows that with a portamento.”

In Qurmanghazy’s *küi*, the *dombyra* “speaks” the words “*Buqtym, buqtym, saida buqtym*” (I’m ducking, I’m ducking, I’m ducking in a ditch). The performer alternately damps and strums the strings to highlight speech rhythm and articulation. The *küi*’s loping rhythm and abrupt halts convincingly portray Qurmanghazy’s jerky movements as he sneaks up on the soldiers’ campfire to save his wife and son.

WATCH

Example 14.13. “*Buqtym, buqtym*” (I’m ducking, I’m ducking), composed by Qurmanghazy Saghyrbaiuly, performed by Abdulhamit Raiymbergenov. Almaty, Kazakhstan, 2005.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How successful is “*Buqtym, buqtym*” at representing Qurmanghazy’s physical movements? If you didn’t already know the “program” of the *küi*, would you be able to guess it from the music alone?
2. What is the central element of musical craft for a *dombyra* player? In other words, what is involved in playing the *dombyra* at a level of mastery like that represented by Abdulhamit Raiymbergenov?

Performer Profile: Talasbek Äsemqulov, The Art of *Küi*: “Tengri’s Whisper”

SAIDA DAUKEYEVA

“Eight faces, one essence” (*Segiz qyrlı, bir syrly*), a popular Kazakh expression that celebrates the cultural ideal of versatility, aptly

describes master *dombyra* player, *küishi*, writer, and music scholar Talasbek Äsemqulov (1955–2014). Äsemqulov represented the *shertpe*

tradition rooted in Saryarqa—the Golden Steppe—and belonged to the lineage of Baijigit, Tättimbet, and their disciples and successors in the

Performer Profile: Talasbek Äsemqulov (CONTINUED)

twentieth century. Äsemqulov was also an accomplished writer and scholar whose works illuminated the significance of *küi* in Kazakh culture and society, both historical and contemporary. Brought up by his maternal grandfather, Jünisbai Stambaev (1891–1973), a renowned *küishi* in the Semei (Semipalatinsk) region of eastern Kazakhstan, Talasbek Äsemqulov immersed himself in the study of *dombyra küi* from an early age, learning under the guidance of his grandfather and other famous *dombyra* players in the region, such as Baghanaly Sayatölekov (1895–1982). Before his grandfather died, he bestowed his blessing on the young Talasbek to follow the path of a *dombyra* player. By the age of eighteen, when he went to Almaty, Talasbek had mastered a large repertoire of *shertpe küis*, and in 1976, he recorded a solo LP of *küis* by Baijigit on the Soviet Union's Melodiya record label. Offered admission to study at Almaty Conservatory, he followed his grandfather's admonition not to make *dombyra* performance a means of livelihood, and declined the offer, noting that conservatory training departed from the traditional approach to musicianship that he wished to pursue. Instead, Talasbek devoted himself to his other passion, the study of literature. He became a writer and literary critic who wrote on Kazakh culture, history, mythology, literature, and music in both Kazakh and Russian languages in a variety of genres, including stories, novels, film scripts, and articles for newspapers and journals.

Uniquely for a Kazakh musician steeped in tradition, Talasbek Äsemqulov combined qualities of both a cultural insider and outsider. As a pupil of acclaimed *küishis* from the past and a master performer and composer in his own right, he promoted the transmission and preservation of the old *shertpe* repertoire and creatively interpreted the *shertpe* tradition in his own *küis*. A number of *küis* by Baijigit, a *küi* by Ketbugha, and a few formerly unknown *küis* by Tättimbet were rediscovered through his interpretations. At the same time, he offered insight into Kazakh music and *dombyra* performance from the perspective of a music scholar and cultural studies specialist with a panoramic knowledge of Kazakh folklore, poetry, and prose, Western philosophy and theosophy, and Russian, Indian, and Japanese literature. Through his publications on Kazakh music, students and researchers learned about the characteristic features of *dombyra* instrument types in western and eastern Kazakhstan and the related musical terminology, the traditional system of musical transmission from master to disciple, as well as technical, structural, and aesthetic aspects of *shertpe* and *dombyra küi* in general. At a time when the priorities of Soviet cultural policy sidelined the *shertpe* tradition in mainstream performance practice and led to a decline in its homeland of eastern Kazakhstan (see chapter 17), Äsemqulov was one of only a few musicians and music critics who raised awareness



Courtesy of Zira Naurzbaeva.

of this idiosyncratic style and actively promoted it through performances, compositions, and writings. Though Äsemqulov was never able to teach music officially because he lacked a conservatory degree, his musicianship and ideas inspired many performers and scholars as well as a small group of devoted students and followers, who continue his work today.

Talasbek Äsemqulov underscored the spiritual dimension of *dombyra* performance and pedagogy. In an article comparing traditional musical training to the academic education of *dombyra* players in Kazakhstan, he wrote: “The art of *küi* is a path for a mature consciousness imbued with a sense of spiritual quest. The musician revives the art of the past, creates contemporary art, and, if his level permits, shapes [the art of] the future . . . With due training, a person can be taught whatever he

Performer Profile: Talasbek Äsemqulov (CONTINUED)

likes, including the order of pressing frets and striking strings. But such a person is not a *küishi*, and what he performs is not *küi* . . . The true art is a high summit. But this summit is not something separate from the human soul and spirituality. Attainment of this summit is the inner state of one who has achieved spiritual maturity.³⁶ Referring to an old Kazakh expression that reflects an understanding of instrumental music as a sacred, divine art, Äsemqulov called *küi* performance “Tengri’s whisper” (*Tängirding kübiri*),³⁷ or “subtle matter” that has the power to reveal the presence of eternity in transient human life: “*Küi* is Tengri’s whisper, the Kazakhs thought, and they venerated *küishis* capable of hearing the voice of the Almighty inaudible to an ordinary person, the primordial silence from which the world was created.”³⁸

Another theme that Äsemqulov raises in his work is the expression of grief, anguish, and sorrow in Kazakh music. Interpreting the prevalence of major-sounding modes in the musical depiction of sorrowful images, he linked it with old beliefs among the Kazakh nomads according to which life and death are interrelated phases in the cycle of human existence, with death considered “an apotheosis, a culmination of life.”³⁹ In Äsemqulov’s view, the emergence of minor-sounding Kazakh *küis* dedicated to themes of grief and sorrow in the twentieth century resulted from a change in the understanding of death in that time of political upheaval and cultural modernization in Kazakh society.

The following examples present two *küis* in the traditional genre *qongyr* (deep-brown)—meditative,

sorrowful instrumental pieces that are current in both *shertpe* and *tökpe* stylistic traditions. The first *küi* was composed by the famous twentieth-century *shertpe dombyra* player, Äbiken Khasenov, who is discussed in the present chapter. Various accounts explain the *küi*’s origin as dedicated to tragic events in modern Kazakh history or to the death of a friend, but whatever the case, this plaintive *küi* in a minor mode powerfully evokes a state of distress and anguish. Once, while listening to this *küi* performed by another *dombyra* player, Talasbek Äsemqulov was reminded of the unconventional nature of *qongyr küis* in minor modes and, as a response (*nazira*) to Äbiken Khasenov, composed a version of this *küi* in a major mode, which he called “Äbikendi jubatu” (Consolation of Äbiken).

LISTEN

Example 14.14. “Qongyr” (Deep-brown), composed and performed by Äbiken Khasenov. Courtesy of Central State Archive of Film, Photography, and Sound Recordings of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

LISTEN

Example 14.15. “Äbikendi jubatu” (Consolation of Äbiken), composed and performed by Talasbek Äsemqulov. Courtesy of Zira Naurzbaeva.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How distinct is Talasbek Äsemqulov’s version from the original *küi*? Does it seem to you to be a sorrowful *küi*? If not, what state of mind or affect does it communicate?
2. Having listened to these and other *küis* in the chapter, would you agree with Äsemqulov’s perspective on the spiritual significance of *küi* that he called “Tengri’s whisper”?

PART 2. Kyrgyz *Küü*

NURLANBEK NYSHANOV

In Kyrgyz, the term *küü* refers to narrative music traditionally played as a solo on one of a variety of local instruments that include wooden and metal jaw harps, flutes, the two-stringed bowl fiddle *kyl-kiyak*, and the three-stringed lute *komuz*. Analogous narrative musical forms, for example, Kazakh *küi* and Bashkir *kuy*, exist among other Turkic peoples. Kyrgyz *küüs* are typically short, with the longest of them lasting around five minutes.

The traditional performance style of *küü* is based on improvisation, and many *küüs* exist in multiple versions, leading to comparisons with the art of oral poetic improvisation (*tökmölük*) practiced by bards (see chapter 10). Like improvising oral poets, instrumentalists extemporize a specific performance version of a narrative piece while preserving its core contents and key themes. The composition and performance of *küü* underwent a serious decline between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s—a period when Kyrgyz traditional music lost its popularity and Western instruments such as the guitar and accordion replaced indigenous instruments. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a revival of interest in traditional music stimulated musicians to compose new *küüs*. Many of them were fixed in music notation and designed for performance not by soloists—as was traditional—but by ensembles.

Table 14.6 shows brief characterizations of *küüs* performed on eight different instruments.

Komuz küüs constitute the largest portion of the overall *küü* repertory, analogous to the preeminence of *dombyra küüs* in Kazakh music. And just as the *dombyra* is widely regarded in Kazakhstan as the national instrument of the Kazakhs, the *komuz* is viewed within Kyrgyzstan as the national instrument of the Kyrgyz. In both cases, the present-day popularity of the instrument is due in part to the large and virtuosic repertory of instrumental music composed for it beginning in the nineteenth century and extending down to the present.

The repertory of *komuz* music is exceptionally rich. In the twentieth century, more than three hundred *küüs* were recorded from various Kyrgyz *komuz* players. Some of these *küüs* were composed by the players from whom they were recorded, while others were passed down to players from earlier performer-composers. Most *küüs* can be attributed to a specific composer—a striking contrast to many repertories of “folk” music in which the identity of talented composers from the past has been lost.



Gülbara Baigashkaeva
with *komuz*.

Photo by Katherine Vincent. Courtesy of
Aga Khan Music Initiative.

TABLE 14.6. CHARACTERIZATIONS OF *KÜÜS* PERFORMED ON EIGHT DIFFERENT INSTRUMENTS

NAME OF INSTRUMENT	TYPICAL NARRATIVE CONTENT	CHARACTERIZATION OF MUSIC
<i>Jygach ooz komuz</i> (wooden jaw harp)	Descriptions of nature or natural setting, e.g., summer pasture, a yurt, a nightingale	Short and simple
<i>Temir ooz komuz</i> (metal jaw harp)	Descriptions of animals and nature as well as legendary men	Repertory includes traditional songs and <i>küüs</i> played on other instruments
<i>Surnai</i> (clarinet)	Mainly played at traditional feasts and on military campaigns	Expressive—had a great impact on animals, including horses
<i>Sybyzgy</i> (side-blown flute)	Descriptions of nature ("Shepherd's <i>küü</i> ") or people ("Akmaktym"—a girl's name)	Lament-like; repertory includes variants of folk songs
<i>Chopo choor</i> (clay ocarina)	Old laments and <i>küüs</i> about nature	Main repertory consists of variants of folk songs
<i>Choor</i> (end-blown reed flute)	Widespread in Kyrgyzstan until the second half of 20th century; rich and diverse repertory including illustrative <i>küüs</i> (e.g., "Flight of the wild mountain turkey"), lament <i>küüs</i> , <i>dastan küüs</i> (i.e., narratives excerpted from epic songs), lyrical and descriptive songs, functional <i>küüs</i> used to accompany handcraft work or <i>biy</i> dance	Archaic character, expressive, special timbre
<i>Kyl-kiyak</i> (bowl fiddle)	Group 1: <i>küüs</i> originating from songs Group 2: purely instrumental <i>küüs</i> that portray images of nature, animals, and traditional customs	Skilled <i>kyl-kiyak</i> players can imitate human language, the howl of a wolf, the neighing of a horse
<i>Komuz</i> (three-stringed lute)	Group 1: <i>küüs</i> originating from melodies of songs and <i>dastans</i> Group 2: <i>küüs</i> performed with mimetic hand gestures, typically playful in nature. Group 3: classical <i>küüs</i>	Diverse melodic characteristics; see below

Komuz küüs can be roughly divided into three categories, listed below. The boundaries between these categories are not rigid, and some *küüs* fall into more than one category.

1. KÜÜS DERIVED FROM THE MELODIES OF SONGS AND EPIC POEMS PERFORMED AS SONGS (DASTANS)

Küüs in this category are sometimes called “*obon küülör*” (song *küüs*). Their name notwithstanding, song *küüs* are performed without words, as purely instrumental music, and constitute a distinct instrumental genre. Some song *küüs* have been refined by skilled musicians who have elevated them to the level of classics. Their subject matter encompasses lyrical, tragic, and historical themes; personalities, and events; for example, Genghis Khan, the subject of the *küü* “Ket Buka,” and Attila, the subject of “Shüdüngüt küü.”

2. GESTURAL KÜÜS, I.E., KÜÜS WITH GESTURAL MOVEMENTS OF THE HANDS

These *küüs* require great technical and acting skills from the performer. Before or during a performance, most musicians tell the narrative story of the *küü*. The performer must be at once a musician, actor, narrator, and sometimes a singer. In other words, this genre reflects the theatrical image of a single actor. *Komuz* players of the past century contributed significantly to the development and popularization of gestural *küüs*. Among the greatest of them was Niyazaaly Boroshev (1856–1942).

Niyazaaly was born in the Aksy region of southern Kyrgyzstan, and by the age of fifteen, he had become known as a *komuzchu*. In the past, musicians traveled on horseback from one region to another to meet with other musicians, exchange experiences, and entertain the public. Niyazaaly interacted closely with musicians from the Talas region of northern Kyrgyzstan. The art of playing *komuz* with elaborate hand gestures was widespread in the Talas region, and this tradition had a significant influence on Niyazaaly’s music. He was known as a great instrumentalist and left many masterpieces, among them “Arsar küü,” “Ker tolgo,” “Niyazaaly’s Kambarkan,” and “Kara özgöy.” Of these *küüs*, “Kara özgöy” (Impudent one) is the most popular. A performance of “Kara özgöy” by Emilbek Ishenbek uulu is reproduced in example 14.16. Emilbek (b. 1993) comes from a musical family, studied at the Ustatshakirt traditional music center in Bishkek, and was a *shakirt* (apprentice) of *küü* master Nurak Abdyrakhmanov (1946–2014).



The *komuz* is a fretless three-stringed long-necked lute.



Niyazaaly Boroshev.

WATCH

Example 14.16. “Kara özgöy” (Impudent one), composed by Niyazaaly Boroshev, performed by Emilbek Ishenbek uulu. Filmed by Nurlanbek Nyshanov, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2011.



Emilbek Ishenbek uulu.

According to one contemporary master *komuzchu*, Niyazaaly composed “Kara özgöy” when he went to the forest to collect firewood, and there encountered robbers who tried to kill him. Niyazaaly asked the leader of the robbers to give him a chance to say a few words and play his *komuz*. The leader agreed, and Niyazaaly grabbed his *komuz* and played a lively *küü* using elaborate and swift hand gestures and body movements. The robbers were mesmerized and asked him to play more. He played another *küü*, about his unruly cow, which almost killed his old wife by butting her when she tried to milk her. Last, he played a sad and mellow *küü* and put the robbers to sleep. As he tried to run away, the robbers awoke and ran after him, shouting to him to tell them the name of the first *küü* he played, which had purified them spiritually. They asked Niyazaaly to forgive them for their wickedness and impudence (*kara özgöylük*), and begged him not to tell people about this incident. He forgave them, told them about the power of the *komuz küü* to prevail over evil, and called them to be kind to people and leave their “profession” for good.⁴⁰

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What musical techniques does the composer use to express or evoke “impudence” in “Kara özgöy”?
2. What does “Kara özgöy” suggest about its composer—about his personality and the nature of his musical creativity?



Atay Ogonbaev.

Another well-known composer-performer of gestural *küüs* was Atay Ogonbaev (1900–1949). Atay, as he is known, was born in the Talas region of northern Kyrgyzstan. He first learned to play *komuz* from his grandfather and from *komuzchus* who lived in his village. He later became the student of the great *komuzchu* Toktogul. Almost all of Atay’s *küüs* represent the genre of gestural *küüs*. Among them, “Ak-Tamak—Kök-Tamak” (White-throat—Gray-throat) occupies a special place. Before playing this *küü*, the performer typically tells its story. The plot of the piece involves an argument between two birds, husband and wife, who disagree about whether to stay and nest where they are or fly south in search of warmer weather. The wife, Ak-Tamak, who wants to fly south, proposes that they settle their disagreement by engaging in a singing contest. They do, and Ak-Tamak wins.

The performance of “Ak-Tamak—Kök-Tamak” reproduced in example 14.17 is by Namazbek Uraliev. Namazbek (b. 1956) grew up in the Issyk-Kul region of northern Kyrgyzstan. He learned to play the *komuz* from his grandfather, Uraaly, and from a relative named Bekbay. For many years, Namazbek worked in the cultural sphere, winning first place at various music contests. He has a rich repertoire of *komuz* music and is known as a master *komuzchu* who plays classical *küüs*. He is also a skilled *komuz* maker (*usta*), and many well-known *komuzchus* value his instruments.



Namazbek Uraliev.

Photo by Katherine Vincent. Courtesy of Aga Khan Music Initiative.

WATCH

Example 14.17. “Ak-Tamak—Kök-Tamak” (White-throat—Gray-throat), composed by Atay Ogonbaev, performed by Namazbek Uraliev. Filmed by Theodore Levin, Semenovka, Kyrgyzstan, 2003.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does Namazbek Uraliev use hand gestures to illustrate the plot of the *küü*? To what extent are his gestures literal and representational or, conversely, symbolic and abstract?
2. Without knowing the story of “Ak-Tamak—Kök-Tamak” in advance, would you have been able to guess its plot based on Namazbek’s hand gestures—or, at least, that it concerns birds?

3. CLASSICAL (ZALKAR) OR GREAT/LARGE (KARA) KÜÜS

Zalkar küüs, also known as *kara küüs*, represent the most sophisticated category of *küü* in terms of form and content, and are composed by professional *komuz* players. They include several genres, such as *botoy* (“camel calf”), which are more archaic and generally historical *küüs*; *shyngyrama* (“ringing”), which are basically lyrical, sometimes epic *küüs* played in a high position on the fingerboard of the *komuz*; *kerbez* (“vanity”), which are facetious *küüs* played in a middle position on the fingerboard of the *komuz*; and *Kambarkan* (the name of the legendary inventor of the *komuz*), which are narrative, philosophical *küüs*. Each of these genres is played at a particular fingering position on the neck of the *komuz*, with the instrument’s three strings set in a distinctive tuning. Present-day *komuz* players use eighteen different tunings, four of which are considered to be core tunings. Of the eighteen tunings in current use, some are used for only a single *küü*.



TABLE 14.7. FOUR CORE KOMUZ TUNINGS

STRING PITCH	1ST STRING	2ND STRING	3RD STRING
Tuning 1	Mi	La	Mi
Tuning 2	Mi	La	Re
Tuning 3	Re	La	Mi
Tuning 4	Re	La	Re



Toktogul Satylganov.

Table 14.7 shows the four core tunings. The pitch relationships shown in the table are not linked to absolute pitches. Rather, within the physical limits of string length, thickness, and tautness, a *komuz* player can set the “do” of his or her instrument to whatever pitch best suits the sound of a particular instrument and the character of the particular *küü* being performed.

Some classical *küüs* do not belong to any of the three genres described above. Among these is the popular *küü* “Toguz kayryk” (Nine variations), composed by the great master *komuz* player and oral poet Toktogul Satylganov (1864–1933). “Toguz kayryk” indeed consists of a series of variations and permutations on a melodic theme; however, the number nine is conventional, and the piece actually has more than nine variations. (In the past, nine was considered to be a sacred number, and was held in great esteem by the Kyrgyz.) Toktogul experienced many difficulties, and “Toguz kayryk” is in some sense about the numerous major and sudden turns in his life.

Toktogul was born in the Ketmen-Töbö region of central Kyrgyzstan. He composed more than fifty *küüs* in almost every genre. Among the *küüs* that were transmitted through his pupils, “Toguz kayryk” became a favorite of contemporary *komuz* players, who play it with great enthusiasm. The following video clip shows *komuz* master Ruslan Jumabaev performing his version of “Toguz kayryk.”

WATCH

Example 14.18. “Toguz kayryk” (Nine variations), composed by Toktogul Satylganov, performed by Ruslan Jumabaev. Filmed by Theodore Levin, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2003.

An autobiographical “program” for “Toguz kayryk” that circulates among contemporary *komuz* players links the *küü* to a dark chapter in Toktogul’s life. In 1898, Toktogul participated in a major uprising against Russian administrative rule that took place in the city of Andijan, in the Ferghana Valley. The Russian



army put down the uprising, and the leaders, including Toktogul, were exiled to Siberia.⁴¹ Toktogul worked in terrible conditions, cutting wood and mining coal. He finally managed to escape and return home. Upon his return, he told his kinsmen and villagers what he had seen and experienced in that cold and faraway land. He grouped his experiences into nine stories and transformed each one into a *komuz* tune, with its story providing the tune's program. Toktogul himself improvised when he performed the *küü*, often adding more than nine parts, thus the program is best understood in a general rather than literal sense. The serial stories relate Toktogul's experience of exile—of being separated from his family, living in a cold prison where he experienced pain, suffering, and hunger while engaged in forced labor, trying to escape and being caught and punished, and finally escaping and returning home, only to discover that his son had died and his wife had married another man.⁴²



Ruslan Jumabaev.

Photo by Katherine Vincent. Courtesy of Aga Khan Music Initiative.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How does the use of gesture in “Toguz kayryk” differ from that in “Ak-Tamak—Kök-Tamak”?
2. What musical techniques did Toktogul use to alter the initial melodic motif of “Toguz kayryk” in successive variations? Are these variations discrete, with obvious beginning and ending points, or do they flow together seamlessly into a continuous stream of sound?
3. For some listeners, “Toguz kayryk,” with its slowly shifting variations on a short melodic motif, has a very contemporary sound. Does “Toguz kayryk” strike you this way?

Among the genres of classical *küü*, *Kambarkan küüs* are considered to be the most complex and musically deep. These *küüs* require both great technical skill and intense concentration. Traditionally, *Kambarkan küüs* do not include external effects such as playful hand gestures. A popular Kyrgyz saying links *Kambarkan küüs* to the very origin of *küü*: “*Küünün bashy Kambarkan*” (The origin of *küü* is *Kambarkan*.) The saying stems from a legendary figure named Kambar who is credited with inventing the *komuz* and composing the first *küü*. The legend recounts how, in ancient times, Kambar, a hunter, once heard a pleasant sound coming from the forest. Trying to identify the source of the sound, he saw that it came from a long piece of gut stretched between two branches of a tree. The stretched gut was the result of an accident involving a monkey: attempting to jump from one tree branch to another, the monkey fell and impaled its stomach on a sharp twig. As the poor monkey sailed through the air, its abdomen burst open and its gut was ripped out. Stretched thin in mid-air, the dried gut of the monkey vibrated in the wind, creating a rich sound. Kambar was inspired by his discovery to build



Toktomambet Orozov, known as Karamoldo.

a stringed instrument—the *komuz*—using animal gut for the strings, and on his *komuz*, he composed “Kambarkan.” No evidence suggests that monkeys ever lived in what is now Kyrgyzstan, but terra-cotta statues of monkey musicians dating back almost two thousand years have been unearthed in various parts of Central Asia. A variant of the Kambar legend was also known in India, where it turns up in fourteenth-century literary sources, underscoring historical links between Central Asia and the subcontinent.

Komuz players from all Kyrgyz regions know the genre of *Kambarkan*, but the *komuz* players of the Issyk-Kul region contributed the most to its development. The best known of these musicians was the great *komuzchu* Karamoldo (birth name: Toktomambet) Orozov (1883–1960).

Toktomambet Orozov was born in the Issyk-Kul region of northern Kyrgyzstan. As a teenager, he received a religious education, and neighbors nicknamed him “Karamoldo”—“Black Mullah” or “Mullah with Dark Skin.” Karamoldo first learned to play the *komuz* from his father, Oroz, and then from other well-known *komuz* players in Issyk-Kul and Naryn regions. He is the author of about thirty *küüs*.

Among the master *komuz* players known for performing Karamoldo’s “Kambarkan” was Nurak Abdyrakhmanov (1946–2014) (see the performer profile in this chapter). Nurak Abdyrakhmanov was from the Ak-Talaa region of Naryn province and was considered one of Kyrgyzstan’s leading *komuz* players and contemporary composers of *küü*.

LISTEN

Example 14.19. “Kambarkan,” composed by Karamoldo, performed by Nurak Abdyrakhmanov. From *Tengir-Too: Mountain Music of Kyrgyzstan*, vol. 1 of *Music of Central Asia* (SFR, 2005), track 17.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What musical qualities distinguish “Kambarkan” from the *küüs* in the preceding examples—“Ak-Tamak—Kök-Tamak,” “Toguz kayryk,” and “Kara özgöy”?
2. Does the performance of Karamoldo’s “Kambarkan” suggest a particular narrative program? If so, what is this program? If not, what does the *küü* evoke for you?
3. What is your critical assessment of Nurak Abdyrakhmanov’s performance of “Kambarkan”? Is it a good performance? Why or why not?

KOMUZ MUSIC TODAY

Komuz music remains popular in twenty-first-century Kyrgyzstan, and many contemporary *komuz* players are composing new *komuz küüs*. Through these new compositions, the tradition preserves its inner vitality, and the *küü* repertory is continually refreshed.

Some of the new *küü* compositions are intended for solo performance, while others are designed for group performance in an ensemble. The need to coordinate precisely the different instrumental parts of an ensemble performance has led to the use of Western staff notation, which represents an innovation in the overwhelmingly oral-aural history of *küü* composition, performance, and transmission.

Working with fellow members of the ensembles Tengir-Too and Ordo-Sakhna, and with students in Bishkek's Center Ustatshakirt, I have made my own contribution to this new repertory of notated *küüs* for two or three *komuzes* (see chapter 32). An example of such a *küü* is "Jol jürüş" (On the road), reproduced in the following audio example in a performance by members of Tengir-Too. This short *küü* expands on two traditional melodic motifs. Tengir-Too always played it from notation, and it remains a fixed composition in its present form. The initial two motifs are old; the rest of the *küü* is new.



Students of Nurlanbek Nyshanov use sheet music to learn his compositions for *komuz* and other traditional Kyrgyz instruments.

Courtesy of Theodore Levin.

LISTEN

Example 14.20. "Jol jürüş" (On the road), composed and arranged by Nurlanbek Nyshanov, performed by members of Ensemble Tengir-Too. From *Tengir-Too: Mountain Music of Kyrgyzstan*, vol. 1 of *Music of Central Asia* (SFR, 2005), track 12.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How many *komuzes* are playing in the piece?
2. In what ways is "Jol jürüş" different from older *küüs*?
3. What images does "Jol jürüş" create? What kind of "road" and what kind of transport do you imagine when you hear the piece?
4. Do you believe that fixing *küüs* in notation is a good idea, or does notation impede traditional processes of extemporized performance?

Performer Profile: A Conversation with Nurak Abdyrakhmanov

ELMIRA KÖCHÜMKULOVA

Nurak Abdyrakhmanov (1946–2014) was one of the best-known and most versatile musicians in Kyrgyzstan. He was at once a virtuoso performer on the *komuz*, a composer of tradition-based music, a music theorist, historian, philosopher, and educator. My conversation with Nurak took place in fall 2010, in the unique, yurt-shaped guestroom of the house where he lived with his family in a village not far from Bishkek.



Photo by Katherine Vincent. Courtesy of Aga Khan Music Initiative.

Elmira Köchümkulova (EK): How did you learn to play the *komuz*?

Nurak Abdyrakhmanov (NA): Our family lived in an isolated mountainous *jayloo* (pasture) in northern Kyrgyzstan, and I had no children my own age to play with. My brothers and sister were older, and I liked to spend time with my father, who played the *komuz*. He used to make me bite down on the tip of the *komuz*'s neck while he played so that I would feel the vibration of the instrument's strings in my mouth. I was four years old, and he'd take me on his lap and make me play the *komuz* by holding my hand. We did that often, and by the time I was six, I could play quite well. My father knew many *küüs*. Later, when I was already a professional, he would still point out even the smallest flaws in my playing and say: "My son, don't distort the *küü*!"

When I was around eleven, my father sent me to a *komuz* master named Kasymkul Köchörbay uulu. I had to travel four to five hours on horseback to reach his house, and in exchange for his teaching, my father would send along fresh mutton and *koumiss*, fermented horse milk.

As a child, I also learned *küüs* from recordings. When I was in fifth grade, I fell ill, and had to stay in the hospital for more than a month. My father borrowed a portable gramophone—at that time only rich people could afford a gramophone—and brought me records made by well-known *komuz* players. I learned two *küüs* a day by listening to records and trying to play along. I learned more than forty *küüs* while I was in the hospital. People in the region began calling me "*bala komuzchu*"—"the little *komuz* player." At that time, it was rare for small children to play the *komuz*. In 1962, when I was sixteen, I participated in a national music competition and won first place among *komuzchus*, and I was awarded a diploma and a gold-plated wristwatch. The more I began meeting talented people and performing at public gatherings, the more I became inspired to play the *komuz*. The fingernail of my right index finger would hurt from playing the *komuz* so much, and I'd play it with my middle finger. When my middle finger would start to bleed, I'd use my ring finger. Seeing blood on the top of the *komuz*, my mother made special finger covers

Performer Profile: A Conversation with Nurak Abdyrakhmanov (CONTINUED)

from deerskin that I'd wear on my fingers when I practiced.

In the 1960s, there were a lot of *komuz* players. They had all seen the older generation of master performers. When I played *komuz* for them, they'd get very excited and show me the techniques of the great masters from the past.

EK: What does it take to become a master performer of *küü*?

NA: First of all, you've got to have a gift. This gift is given by God. Second, you must undertake a long journey to come to the point where you understand and feel deeply the secret and power of a *küü*. When my father listened to a master performer, tears would well up in his eyes. Later, I also had the experience of listening to masters perform *küü*, and I understood why my father cried. He was a man of strong personality and mind, and for him, it was highly unusual to show his emotions.

EK: How many *küüs* can you play?

NA: About ninety, of which eighteen are my own compositions.

EK: Where do you draw your inspiration from when you compose a *küü*?

NA: In 1974, I began teaching at a music school, and at that time, there were only a couple of *küüs* suitable for teaching beginners. To enlarge the repertory, I composed a special *küü* called "Kulunchak" (Foal) for my young students. My students played this *küü* at various music

competitions, and people liked it a lot. After that, I developed the self-confidence to compose *küüs*. Not long after, I lost both my parents and my older brother, all within three months, and I experienced real psychological trauma. One night, lying in bed at home, I kept hearing a particular melody in my head. I grabbed my *komuz* and played that tune over and over all night long, and composed a *küü*. The next day, I played this *küü* to my teacher, who had taught me many traditional songs. After listening, he said: "Your father's spirit sent this *küü* to you. You should call it 'Father's Heritage.'" This experience confirmed my belief that inspiration comes from above, or from human spirits. I didn't know that I'd compose this particular *küü*; rather, it came to me from somewhere beyond myself.

EK: You have a powerful voice and a distinct singing style, and your repertory consists of popular Kyrgyz folk songs as well as classical songs that are not easy to sing. Did you learn singing around the same time that you began playing the *komuz*, or did you take up singing later?

NA: As a child, I listened to older men singing in the village. Their singing was quite different. There was a man named Orozobek, who was a friend of my father's. He was in his seventies and had a white beard. When he sang, the mountain cliffs echoed and accompanied his voice like an orchestra. I was mesmerized by his singing. And there was another



Photo by Katherine Vincent. Courtesy of Aga Khan Music Initiative.

man, Kashkary, who was born at the end of the nineteenth century—my father used to say, "When Kashkary sang, all the dogs in the village would stop barking and the sheep would stop bleating. Everyone would stand still and listen to his song." Orozobek had heard Kashkary's singing and sang like him.

In 1986, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Culture was seeking to hire someone who could sing old traditional songs and play the *komuz*. They invited many singers from various regions for an audition. I heard about it and decided to try out. When it was my turn, I sang a song, accompanying myself on the *komuz*. Afterward, the judges, who were well-known singers themselves, got up from their seats, applauding and shouting, "We found him! You're the one! We'll take you!" At that time, I was forty years old, and my beard had begun to turn gray. The judges all got up to bless me, and one of them said, "Your beard reminds us of those elderly singers

Performer Profile: A Conversation with Nurak Abdyrakhmanov (CONTINUED)

(literally ‘white beards’—*aksakals*) from the past. Don’t shave your beard. May the spirit of those fathers support you!” And since then, I’ve had a beard, like an *aksakal*.

EK: How do you see the relation of tradition and innovation in your *küü* repertory?

NA: Tradition and innovation are mixed together in my *küüs*. They’re not like traditional or classical *küüs*—especially “Sary-Özök,” which has a new melody and a different style. Old *küüs* don’t have this kind of melody. You can say that “Sary-Özök” is a contemporary *küü*. My other *küüs* also differ in many ways from traditional *küüs*. This could be a result of my individual artistic style. Sometimes I wonder whether my *küüs* are influenced by other contemporary music that I hear, but I don’t really think they are. They’re my own innovations.

EK: Is it right to say that if you want to compose a popular *küü* that has a long life, you should take into consideration people’s taste?

NA: Of course taste is very important. However, music that is composed solely for the sake of pleasing people is like words that are spoken simply as flattery. Such music may not be very deep, and may have a short life. In other words, when I’m composing my music, I don’t think about whether or not people will like it. First, I have to like it myself. This is very important to me. I don’t feel bad if people don’t understand or don’t like one of my compositions. I only hope that they will come to understand it later.

EK: You’ve invented your own system of notation for transcribing your compositions, and for teaching *komuz* to students. Why is your notation system more effective than European notation?



Photo by Katherine Vincent. Courtesy of Aga Khan Music Initiative.

NA: European notation doesn’t work well for the *komuz*. The *komuz*’s three strings are tuned differently for different *küüs*, and thus the position of notes and fingers also changes. When students play different *küüs*, they get confused by the changing positions of the notes on the fingerboard of the *komuz*. Other stringed instruments have one fixed tuning, but the *komuz* has eighteen different tunings, which means that learning to play it is like learning eighteen different instruments. In order to make learning easier



Photo by Katherine Vincent. Courtesy of Aga Khan Music Initiative.

Performer Profile: A Conversation with Nurak Abdyrakhmanov (CONTINUED)

and eliminate learning barriers, I developed a special notation that uses the old runic letters that were found engraved on stones near the Yenisey River, which flows through present-day Tuva, in south Siberia. That's the region that is believed to be the ancient homeland of the Kyrgyz. Recently, I published a *komuz* method book based on my notation system, which makes my teaching much easier.

EK: You are known as a master luthier who crafts his own instruments. Where did you learn this skill, and how is your *komuz* different from other *komuz* makers' instruments with regard to its shape and sound?

NA: My father used to make *komuzes*, and I learned from him. Well-known *komuz* players such as Karamoldo, Ybyray, and Asylbek Eshmanbetov owned instruments with a wonderful sound, since they traveled extensively and were able to select the best *komuzes* made by master *komuz* makers from different regions. I've been trying to make the ideal *komuz* for the past forty years. In the past, I used to take my tools with me on international tours and work on an instrument while staying in hotels. I use apricot wood because it's the hardest wood. It takes one summer to prepare the wood and two weeks to make an instrument. The sound of my *komuzes* began to differ from that of other makers' instruments. My *komuzes* have a more delicate sound. Most of the instruments I make are for playing *küüs*, not

for accompanying singing, which requires a different tonal quality for female and male singers. In the past, people played one *komuz* for all types of music because they didn't have a choice, and they didn't experiment much with their *komuz*.

EK: What do you see as the future of *komuz* music in Kyrgyzstan?

NA: I used to think that *komuz* music didn't have a future. When I was a child, music teachers who graduated from schools in Leningrad and Moscow used to ask me, "Why are you carrying around a *komuz*?" "The *komuz* is finished," they'd say. "It's for playing folk music, and folk music is dead. Don't waste your time; learn the violin, piano, or accordion." So, in 1966, I learned to play the accordion. It was considered shameful to carry a *komuz* on the streets of big cities like Bishkek (then called Frunze). Russians would ridicule us. If you were a musician, it was prestigious to carry a balalaika or a guitar. Through the 1970s and 1980s, the once-plentiful number of

komuz players in villages decreased year by year. I, too, began singing with an accordion. It was only after independence, in 1991, that the revival of the *komuz* began. Later, some music schools began teaching *komuz*, but only five to ten students would graduate each year—in many cases without adequate training to play professionally.

EK: Recently, in recognition of your outstanding talent and contribution to the preservation and development of Kyrgyz music, the government of Kyrgyzstan bestowed on you the honorary title "People's Artist of the Kyrgyz Republic." What does this title mean for musicians, and for you personally?

NA: Over the years, I've twice been honored with the title "People's Artist," but I have to say that for me, it's much more important to have the approval and respect of my listeners than to receive a title from the government. In the end, your legacy as a musician is decided by the people, not the state.



Performer Profile: A Conversation with Nurak Abdyrakhmanov (CONTINUED)

WATCH

Example 14.21. “Song of Attila Khan,” performed by Nurak Abdyrakhmanov, *komuz* and vocal. Filmed by Saodat Ismailova and Carlos Casas, Kyrgyzstan, 2003.

In example 14.21, Nurak Abdyrakhmanov performs his version of a song about Attila the Hun (d. 453 ce), who is known as Adil Baba in Kyrgyz. Nurak offered the following explanation about the origins of the song: “When the Kyrgyz were traveling back from

the funeral of Attila (in Europe, where he died), they became lost in the Balkan Mountains. To find the right path, the old women played a melody on the jaw harp: ‘Black lark, where are our lands, where is Attila, and where is our river?’ They say that a storyteller called Baliq

lived in the seventeenth century. He transformed funeral laments about Attila into an epic that described his life and how his people were walking back home after his death, and how funeral songs dedicated to Attila were created. This is one such song.”

*Balkan, Balkan, Balkan too,
Balkan toogo men chyksam,
Bashynda bar ayyr too,
Ayyr toogo men chyksam,
Köldö jatkan köp ördök,
Ylaachyn tiyse bölünböy(i)t.
Ylaachynday shumkarym,
Atillam senden ayyrylyp,
Kaygy-mungum bölüügö,
El karaany köünböy(i)t,
El karaany körünböy(i)t.
Atillam sendey el bakkan,
Erdi kaydan tabamyn?
Joonun jerin aralap,
Joldu kaydan tabamyn?
Edil jayyk jaylagan ooy,
Eldi kaydan tabamyn?
Arstanym senden ayyrylyp,
Kiyimdi kaydan kiyemin,
Achtan ölüp ketsem da,
Tamakty kaydan ichemin?
Atillam sen dep kaygyryp,
Men armanda ölör bekenmin.*

The Balkan, Balkan, Balkan Mountains,
I went up to the Balkan Mountains and
Saw the mountain range from their summit.
I went up to the mountain range and
Saw many ducks in the lake there.
When attacked by a hawk,
They stay together.
My hawk-like Attila,
I became separated from you,
I do not see any sign of my people
Who would share my grief.
Oh, my Attila,
Is there a brave man like you
Who cares for his people?
How will I find my way back [home] by
Traveling through the lands of enemies?
How will I find my people who
Inhabit the banks of the Edil (Volga) River?
Now, separated from my Lion,
How will I put on my clothes?
How will I eat when I am starving to death?
Oh, my Attila!
I will die in regret grieving for you.

NOTES

1. See Viktor Zhirmunskii, “Oguzskii geroicheskii epos i ‘Kniga Korkuta’” [Oghuz heroic epics and “The book of Korkut”], in *Kniga moego deda Korkuta: Oguzskii geroicheskii epos* [The book of my grandfather Korkut: Oghuz heroic epics], ed. Viktor Zhirmunskii and Andrei Kononov, trans. Vasily Bartold (Moscow and Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1962), 131–258; Qorqyt, *Elim-ai: Küiler* [Oh, my people: Küis], ed. Musabek Jarqynbekov (Alma-Ata: Öner, 1987).

2. See Aqseleu Seidimbek, *Qazaqtyng küi öneri* [The art of Kazakh küi] (Astana: Kültegin, 2002).

3. On the narrative dimension of küi and its genesis and evolution as a genre, see Bagdaulet Amanov and Asiya Mukhambetova, *Kazakhskaya traditsionnaya muzyka i XX vek* [Kazakh traditional music and the 20th century] (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2002), 119–152.

4. On küi genre types, see Tamara Djumalieva and Alma Temirbekova, eds., *Traditsionnaya muzyka kazakhskogo naroda: Pesennaya i instrumental'naya* [Traditional music of the Kazakh people: Sung and instrumental], vol. 1 of *Istoriya kazakhskoi muzyki v 2 tomakh* [History of Kazakh music in two volumes] (Almaty: Ghylym, 2000), 249–300; Amanov and Mukhambetova, *Kazakhskaya traditsionnaya muzyka i XX vek*, 88–92.

5. On the distinctive method of artistic representation in küi, see Talghat Sarybaev, “Kui kak kommunikativnoe yavlenie” [Küi as a communicative phenomenon], in *Instrumental'naya muzyka kazakhskogo naroda: Stat'i, ocherki* [Instrumental music of the Kazakh people: Articles, essays], ed. Asiya Mukhambetova (Alma-Ata: Öner, 1985), 49–62; Amanov and Mukhambetova, *Kazakhskaya traditsionnaya muzyka i XX vek*, 119–152, 172–186.

6. Images of lame animals and humans frequently found in Kazakh legends have been linked to the cult of ancestor-spirits among the nomads. According to this view, lameness represents a sign of sacredness, with lame legendary heroes acting as bearers of dead souls and mediators between this and the other world. See Abdulhamit Raiymbergenov and Saira Amanova, eds., *Küi qainary: Qobyzgha, sybyzghygha, dombyragha arnalghan küiler* [Küi sources: Küis for the qobyz, sybyzghy, and dombyra] (Almaty: Öner, 1990), 80–81.

7. The legendary *dombyra* player is sometimes identified as Ketbugha (Kerbuqa), the küi master and epic bard said to have lived in the 12th–13th century (Seidimbek, *Qazaqtyng küi öneri*, 267–279).

8. The account of the legend is based on: Akhmet Jubanov, *Struny stoletii* [Strings of the centuries] (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2001), 12–13.

9. Amanov and Mukhambetova, *Kazakhskaya traditsionnaya muzyka i XX vek*, 109.

10. See Asiya Mukhambetova, “Narodnaya instrumental'naya muzyka kazakhov: Genesis i programmnost' v svete evolutsii form muzitsirovaniya” [Folk instrumental music of the Kazakhs: Genesis and programmatic nature in light of the evolution of forms of music making], *Avtoreferat dissertatsii kandidata iskusstvovedeniya* [Abstract of candidate dissertation in art studies] (Leningrad, 1976), 12–13; Djumalieva and Temirbekova, *Traditsionnaya muzyka kazakhskogo naroda*, 260–264.

11. Bökei Orda (Horde) was a Kazakh khanate under the Russian empire north of the Caspian Sea, in the area between the Ural and Volga Rivers, which existed from 1801 to 1876.

12. The *dombyra* could also have three strings. Historically, such *dombyras* were found in various parts of Kazakhstan, but at present they have been retained only in the eastern region of Semei (Semipalatinsk). In its shape and sound production the three-stringed *dombyra* is close to the eastern Kazakhstan type, with a flat body, broad neck, and *shertpe* playing technique, its



low string serving as a drone. See Bolat Sarybaev, *Kazakhskie muzykal'nye instrumenty* [Kazakh musical instruments] (Almaty: Jalyn, 1978), 26, 103, 105.

13. A particular type of intermediate movable frets known as *Arqa* or *Saryarqa perne* produced neutral thirds, intervals between the standard major and minor third. See Talasbek Äsemqulov, “Domyragha til bitse: Qazaqtyng baiyrghy muzyqalyq terminologiyasy khaqynda” [If the *domyra* could speak: On the old Kazakh musical terminology], *Juldyz* [Star] 5 (1989): 186–190; Sarybaev, *Kazakhskie muzykal'nye instrumenty*, 100–101.

14. Ludmila Alekseeva and Jumageldi Najimedenov, *Kazakhskaya dombra i ee akusticheskie osobennosti* [The Kazakh *domyra* and its acoustic properties] (Almaty: Kazakhskii institut kul'tury i iskusstvovzaniya, 2003), 34–35.

15. Gülzada Omarova and Gülbarshyn Murzaghaliyeva, *Etnosolfeggio: Ädistemelik qural* [Ethnosolfeggio: Method manual] (Almaty: T. Jürgenov atyndaghy Qazaq ulttyq öner akademiyasy and P. I. Tchaikovsky atyndaghy Almaty muzykalyq kolledji, 2005), 14–16.

16. See Bagdaulet Amanov, “Kompozitsionnaya terminologiya dombrovyykh kuev” [Compositional terminology of *domyra küis*], in *Instrumental'naya muzyka kazakhskogo naroda* [Instrumental music of the Kazakh people], ed. Asiya Mukhambetova, 42–44; Amanov and Mukhambetova, *Kazakhskaya traditsionnaya muzyka i XX vek*, 220–223, 249–250, 283–284.

17. Where variant dates for the years of birth and death of *küishis* circulate in scholarly literature, as they do for Qurmanghazy, the years used in this chapter are those provided by Jubanov, *Struny stoletii*.

18. This *küi* is also known as “Qyz-Danaidyng Qyrghyny” [The fight for Qyz-Danai]. See Jubanov, *Struny stoletii*, 54.

19. Qazanghap, *Aqjeleng: Küiler* [Aqjeleng: Küis], ed. Abdulhamit Raiymbergenov (Almaty: Öner, 1984), 7, 10.

20. Amanov and Mukhambetova, *Kazakhskaya traditsionnaya muzyka i XX vek*, 107–108.

21. Säduaqs Balmaghambetov, *Saz zegeri Qazanghap* [The master of music Qazanghap], ed. Aitjan Toqtaghan and Murat Äbughazy (Almaty: Baspa, 2001), 3.

22. Qazanghap, *Aqjeleng*, 9–10.

23. This account of Dina Nurpeisova's biography is based on essays from Jubanov, *Struny stoletii*, 114–139, and Seidimbek, *Qazaqtyng küi öneri*, 615–622.

24. Jubanov, *Struny stoletii*, 133; Seidimbek, *Qazaqtyng küi öneri*, 616.

25. Pernebek Shegebaev, “Zhanrovye osobennosti kuya ‘Nauysqy’: Komicheskoe v dombrovoi muzyke” [Genre properties of the *küi* “Nauysqy”: The comic in *domyra* music], in *Instrumental'naya muzyka kazakhskogo naroda* [Instrumental music of the Kazakh people], ed. Asiya Mukhambetova, 106.

26. Balmaghambetov, *Saz zegeri Qazanghap*, 5.

27. See Saule Utegalieva, *Manghystauskaya dombrovaya traditsiya* [Manghystau *domyra* tradition] (Almaty: Almatinskaya gosudarstvennaya konservatoriya imeni Kurmangazy, 1997).

28. Omarova and Murzaghaliyeva, *Etnosolfeggio*, 18. For an alternative interpretation of *küi* structure in both *shertpe* and *tökpe* stylistic traditions, see Äsemqulov, “Domyragha til bitse.”

29. Jubanov, *Struny stoletii*, 170–172.

30. Talasbek Äsemqulov, who passed down this version of the cycle's origin, points to a symbolism of the image of the musician playing *küis* while sitting on the threshold of the yurt. In Kazakh tradition, it has been taboo to sit or stand on the threshold, perceived to be a boundary between the inner and outer world and between life and death. Accordingly, in



Äsemqulov's interpretation, the musician sitting on the threshold was akin to a shaman or the legendary Greek hero Orpheus descending to the underworld in order to lead out and bring back a human soul to this world (see Talasbek Asemqulov, "Vse prekrasnoe imeet edinyi istok" [Everything beautiful has one source], 2004, trans. Zira Naurzbaeva, accessed December 18, 2014, www.otuken.kz). He thereby occupied the liminal status of an intermediary between life and death.

31. Äsemqulov, "Dombyragha til bitse."

32. Äsemqulov, "Dombyragha til bitse"; Aitjan Toqtaghan and Murat Äbughazy, eds., *Tättimbet jäne Arqa küileri* [Tättimbet and Arqa küis] (Almaty: Bilim, 2005), 176.

33. Aitjan Toqtaghan, Gülperizat Ultarakhova, and Murat Äbughazy, eds., *Sügir: Qaratau shertpesi* [Sügir: Qaratau *shertpe*] (Almaty: Atamura, 2006), 89. The numbers nine and sixty-two in the *dombyra küi* cycles are considered sacred numbers among the Kazakhs.

34. Tölegen Mombekov, *Saltanat: Küiler* [Saltanat: Küis], ed. Biläl Ysqaqov (Almaty: Öner, 1995), 10.

35. Bazaraly Müptekeev, "Jetisudyng dombyra küilerining stildik erekshelekteri" [Stylistic properties of Jetisu *dombyra küis*], in *Traditsionnaya muzyka Azii: Problemy i materialy* [Traditional music of Asia: Issues and materials], ed. Saule Utegalieva, (Almaty: Daik-Press, 1996), 64–75; Saida Daukeyeva, "Dombyra Performance, Meaning and Memory among Mongolian Kazakhs." PhD Dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2010.

36. Talasbek Asemqulov, "Budushee iskusstva kuya" [The future of the art of *küi*], *Ruh-Miras* [Spiritual heritage] 2, no. 5 (2005): 86–87.

37. Tengri (*Tängir*) is the name of the sky deity and, more generally, an appellation for a supreme being in ancient nomadic beliefs.

38. Zira Naurzbaeva, "Sotvorennye iz ognya (o kinopovesti T. Asemqulova 'Smert' Kokbalaka)" [Created from fire (On the film-essay "The death of Kökbalak" by T. Äsemqulov)], accessed December 18, 2014, www.otuken.kz.

39. Talasbek Asemqulov, "Tema gorya, stradaniya i pechali v traditsionnom kazakhskom iskusstve" [The theme of grief, suffering, and sorrow in Kazakh traditional art], trans. Zira Naurzbaeva, accessed December 18, 2014, www.otuken.kz.

40. Adapted from Asan Kaybyldaev, *Kyrgyz küülörü: Iiktöölör, oyrlos, pikirler* [Kyrgyz küüs: analysis, thoughts, and opinions], ed. Elmira Köchümkulova (Bishkek: University of Central Asia, 2011), vol. 1: 542–543.

41. Soviet literary books and school textbooks gave a different version of Toktogul's exile to Siberia: he was a great democratic poet who sang against the rich men and tribal leaders (*bay-manap*) who exploited the poor. The rich men in Toktogul's village sent him to Siberia when he criticized their unjust rule.

42. Adapted from Kaybyldaev, *Kyrgyz küülörü*, 456–457.