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LISTENING THE TUVAN WAY

TIMBRE-CENTERED MUSIC

Valentina Süzükei did not set out to become Tuva's leading ethnomusicologist. As a student growing up in the 1960s and early 1970s, her passion was dance. Later, she studied conducting at the Moscow Institute of Culture, which trained arts specialists both to work in schools and to serve in the Soviet Union's sprawling network of community arts centers. These "houses of culture" or "palaces of culture" offered adult education classes and extracurricular activities for children with the goal of producing the emancipated and educated proletariat that was a cornerstone of early Soviet ideology. Working under Moscow conductor Alexei Kovalev, Valentina studied orchestration, composition, and music theory as well as conducting. After graduation, she returned to Tuva and became the conductor of the folk orchestra in Kyzyl's music high school.

The folk orchestra movement evolved from pre-Revolutionary balalaika orchestras, supported by wealthy patrons, which performed folk and popular music as well as arrangements of classical repertory *à la Russe*. As folklorist Eduard Alekseyev has pointed out, the original aim of these orchestras was a worthy one: to perform great music on Russian folk instruments to compensate for what, in the view of the orchestras' founders, was the limited scope of their traditional repertory. The orchestras featured not only standard-sized balalaikas but also, in the spirit of European string consorts, instruments of different sizes, including enormous bass balalaikas. During the Soviet era, these orchestras became a centerpiece of national culture policy, and they were reproduced all over the U.S.S.R., with Europeanized adaptations



of indigenous instruments substituting for—or sometimes playing alongside—Russian instruments. It was the orchestra conductor's job to modify local instruments for use in the orchestra and to figure out which parts of an orchestral score should be assigned to particular instruments. "I loved Grieg and Tchaikovsky," Valentina recalled with amusement, "and I arranged their symphonic works for my orchestra, which included both Tuvan and Russian folk instruments."

While researching Tuvan instruments in order to alter them for use in the folk orchestra, Valentina began to understand, as she put it, "that the whole approach to working with these instruments was artificial and false." Treating the instruments simply as sources of exotic coloration for orchestral music did nothing to advance knowledge of indigenous Tuvan music.

In 1985, after eight years as a folk orchestra conductor, Valentina left the music high school and accepted a position at the Tuvan Research Institute of Language, Literature, and History. There she continued her work on musical instruments, but from the perspective of a folklorist-ethnographer rather than a conductor-arranger. "I began to search for what these instruments meant to the traditional players themselves and tried to understand the way musicians thought about their instruments and the sound they produced," Valentina told me during a series of conversations about Tuvan music that took place in 2003. The transformative event that led her toward a new understanding of the Tuvan sound world came in the late 1980s, just before she left Tuva to undertake advanced studies in folklore and ethnomusicology in Novosibirsk and Saint Petersburg.

"I was in Kyzyl-Dag recording an old man who played the *igil*," Valentina recounted. "His name was Salchak Shombul Ulaachy. When we were done, I said to him, 'Now don't play anything in particular, just bow the open strings so that I can record their pitches.' And he played both of the *igil*'s two strings together. I said, 'No, play them individually. I have to write down the tuning of the instrument.' And again he played them together. I must have asked him five times, and always there was the same response. Finally he got angry. 'You're a strange girl,' he said. 'Go drink some tea, and I'm going out to have a smoke,' and with that, he got up and left. As I sipped my cold tea, I was also angry. Why is he so stubborn, I wondered? All I was trying to do was figure out the pitch of each string. Is it that hard to play one string and then the other?"

"It was only later that I understood the significance of this little episode. In my training as a folklorist, we were taught to record the range, register, and tuning of a musical instrument—for example, on a stringed instrument, that such-and-such a string is tuned to *sol*, another string is tuned to *do*, and so



on. But what I learned from that *igil* player was that the absolute pitch of the strings meant nothing to him. All that was important was the relative pitch of the two strings one to another. That's why, when I asked to hear how the instrument was tuned, he played both strings in order to show me the interval between them. And more important, he didn't hear these strings as separate pitches, but as part of one total sound. In other words, discrimination of pitch height, the fundamental building block of melody and of melodic perception, didn't play a significant role in the way this musician perceived the sound of the *igil*. For him, pitch was subordinate to timbre—the specific quality of a tone determined by the presence, distribution, and relative amplitude of overtones. His way of listening represented an entirely different approach to the perception of sound than what you have in cultures where the focus is on melody. You could call this other kind of listening 'timbral listening.'

"The way I learned about timbral listening was indirect. The musicians I spent time with didn't use any special musical terms. Everything was explained through analogy and metaphor using examples drawn from nature and from other sounds, rather than from music itself.¹ In those years, I spent a lot of time with a *byzaanchy*, *igil*, and jew's harp player named Idamchap Xomushku (1917–1994)² (see plate 6). Often, I'd be with him, recording an interview or talking with him, and suddenly, in the middle of the conversation, he'd stop and cock his ear toward a radio playing in the background, and he'd say, 'That's good music.' When someone was playing music, I noticed how he sat and listened attentively, and sitting next to him, I also began to listen a little differently than the way I normally did. At a certain moment, I understood that he heard things and focused his attention on sounds that I didn't always hear. After that, I began to ask him to describe what he'd just heard—I was interested in the words he used and how he described sound.

"We'd be sitting outside and he'd say, 'Look over there at those mountains. Look at the shadows. There's a spot from the sun, shadows from the clouds, there are mountains that are closer, mountains that are farther away. They have different colors. Now it's changed. A shadow has suddenly appeared where only a second before, there was light.' Idamchap was trying to point to the way that visual images have depth and volume. And the analogy he wanted to make was with sound—that sound works the same way. When you play the *igil*, there are different layers of sound, and the resulting effect for the listener is what you could call volumetric.

"Another musician, Marjymal Ondar [1927–1996], used to draw a similar analogy to the different environmental sounds that people readily hear all at the same time—dogs barking, birds chirping, the whistling of wind, children's voices. His point was the same as Idamchap's—that our normal perception of

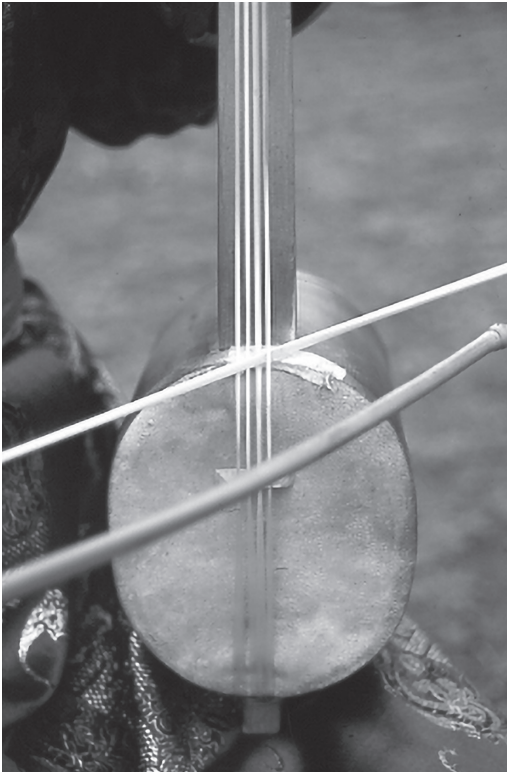


sound is multilayered. If you listen to instruments like the jew's harp or *igil*, they can completely fill a sonic space. But they don't do so through the use of melody, counterpoint, and harmony—the traditional tools of European music. Instead, each moment of sound is opened up and exposed to reveal a whole sonic universe within itself.” To demonstrate her point, Valentina picked up a Japanese paper fan that she'd placed on the table in front of us with its accordion folds neatly collapsed between the narrow wooden slats that bound either end. With a quick flick of the wrist, she unfurled the fan, and the paper folds spread out into a broad “V” shape.

“It's easier to express graphically than in words,” Valentina said. “When you make a sound on the *igil*, it's like spreading open the fan. Inside this one sound is a whole acoustic world created by the spray of overtones that results when you draw a bow across the instrument's horsehair strings.” To ensure that I understood, Valentina came up with more visual analogies. “If you pick up snow, pack it into a snowball and throw it, it goes in a single direction and, depending on the force of your throw, it can go quite far. But if you scoop up some loose snow and toss it, no matter how much force you exert, the snow just scatters. Sound is like that. In European music, sound is packed compactly into discrete pitches, with the fundamental frequency and overtones all perceived as one. But Tuvan music is like loose snow, and overtones are like the snow spray.”

Valentina plunged on with her explanation of timbral listening, turning next to a description of Tuvan instruments and how musicians produce sounds that lend themselves to such listening. She began with bowed instruments. “There's no Tuvan bowed instrument on which you press the string all the way to the neck. You touch the string lightly, and in the case of the *byzaanchy*, from underneath, using the fingernails. In European terminology it's called flageolet—touching a string lightly to produce a harmonic. But flageolet on the *igil* and *byzaanchy* is different than flageolet on Western bowed instruments like the violin, viola, or cello. On Tuvan instruments, flageolet tones are played everywhere, not just at the point of the harmonics, so the acoustical basis of sound production is different. Bowed instruments, like the bow itself, are strung with horsehair rather than metal or gut, and the resulting sound is rich in overtones although not very loud. In other words, volume and homogeneity of sound are sacrificed in favor of timbral richness.

“Bows and bowing techniques for the *igil* and *byzaanchy* are also different from what Western string players use. For example, on a violin bow, the tension is fixed before the musician starts playing. But an *igil* or *byzaanchy* player grips the bow from underneath the horsehair and constantly regulates the



Byzaanchy. The bow is locked between two strings and players use both upper and lower surfaces of the horsehair.

tension, making it now tighter, now weaker by tensing or relaxing the fingers. Changes in bow tension also affect the timbral characteristics of sound. The looser the bow, the more the ‘spray’ effect—just what Western string players don’t want. They want a sound that’s perfectly focused, consistent, unified.

“Jew’s harps are also designed to maximize timbral complexity. If you look at the tongue of a jew’s harp, it’s cut in a ‘V’ shape so that the timbral profile of the material, whether metal or wood, is a little different at the narrow end than at the wide end. But the most important aspect of timbre-centered sound-making and listening among Inner Asian pastoralists concerns the relationship of drone and overtone. Idamchap used to say that you can’t make sounds on a jew’s harp whose tongue is broken. What he meant was that in order to produce the overtones, you first have to be able to produce the fundamental drone. Both come from the same source, unlike, for example, the bagpipes, where the drone is produced by one pipe and the melody notes by another; or the kind of drone that’s used in many forms of vocal polyphony,



where one singer or group of singers holds the drone while another sings the melody.

“Westerners who listen to drone-overtone instruments like the jew’s harp, or to throat-singing, often ignore the drone and focus only on the melody. But for Tuvan listeners, drone and overtones form an inseparable whole, and the timbre of the drone is crucial to producing a harmonically rich sound that extends over a wide frequency range. When you are in this kind of sound space, you hear not only overtones but undertones—you can hear sound at all audible frequencies.³ If you’re the sound-maker, you can use these sonic resources to imitate or represent whatever kind of sound you want. All registers and pitch heights are theoretically available. The limits to what you can hear and reproduce are physical, not conceptual.”

In the Inner Asian sound world, even where drone is not an inherent part of the acoustical mechanism of sound production, for example, on the end-blown flute variously known as *shoor*, *choor*, *tsuur*, *kurai*, and *sybyzghy*, it is added anyway. Mongolian *tsuur* player Gombojav explained that the breathy, vocal drone he produced while simultaneously blowing into the flute provided a way of making a melody “richer.” What he evidently meant was that the combination of drone and melody produced a sound whose timbre was rich in overtones.

The evocation of timbral richness, however, could not account for all the diverse forms of music among the Inner Asian pastoralists. Melody-centered music also exists in many genres, both instrumental and vocal. When I pointed this out to Valentina, she nodded her head as if I had stated the obvious. “There are two sound systems in Tuvan music,” she said. “There’s the timbre-centered system, and there’s a pitch-centered system, in which pitch height and melody are the predominant organizing principles, just as in Western music. You can find many Tuvan songs with catchy melodies that are played on instruments, set to words, and performed as throat-singing.

“When the Turks were all united in the nomadic state known as the Turkic Khaganate, which existed from the middle of the sixth century to the middle of the eighth century with its center in the Altai region, the timbre-centered system must already have been in place, because it’s still present in the music of all the Turkic cultures of Inner Asia. It’s present in the jew’s harp playing of the Sakha, the *xai* and *kai* of the Xakas and the Altai, the mimetic instrumental music performed on the *qyl qiyak* of the Kyrgyz and the *qyl-qobyz* of the Kazakhs. And it’s present among Turkic groups who moved away from the center of ancient Turkic culture in the Altai-Sayan region toward the periphery of Inner Asia, such as the Bashkirs, who now live in the Urals and preserve the timbre-centered system in the music of the end-blown flute *ku-*



rai. This system has held together for fourteen centuries. To survive this long, it has to be really solid, and backed by a musical logic, by a specific form of musical thinking. And where it doesn't survive as a living practice, it survives in cultural memory. For example, when Turkic peoples hear overtone singing, it arouses something in them. The aura of this kind of music nourishes them. I witnessed this in the days of the Soviet Union when there used to be big music festivals, and Uzbeks, Turkmen, Azeris, and others would come and listen to our Tuvan musicians."

"Are the two systems mutually exclusive?" I asked Valentina, "or can you find them mixed together in the same music?"

"These days it's not unusual to find them overlapping in one and the same musical style, or even in individual pieces. In their music-making and listening, Tuvans can go back and forth between one system and the other. But if you've been brought up listening exclusively to pitch-centered music, like most Westerners, it's very difficult to switch over to timbral listening.

"On the performing side, the difference between pitch-centered and timbre-centered music involves a physical dimension. In pitch-centered music, each sound has a separate source, and to get from one sound to the next requires a discernible physical movement. For example, string players change pitch by pressing their fingers down on the neck or fingerboard of an instrument. Wind and brass players change the length of a tube by depressing keys or moving valves. Even the smallest ornament is produced by a physical movement that changes the sound source. By contrast, in the timbre-centered system, a performer enters the zone of sound turbulence and just stays there with almost no movement. Listeners observing throat-singers for the first time are often puzzled about where the sound is coming from and how it's being modulated. 'The singers are not moving their mouths!' listeners exclaim. It's true—if you look at a throat-singer, you'll see only the most minimal movement of the facial muscles. The vocal cords are fixed, and only the most minute adjustments inside the mouth are needed to manipulate timbre. It's like jewelry work. The same is true of jew's harp players. Once the tongue of the jew's harp has been struck, the modulation of the sound takes place inside the player's mouth. The point is, when you're physically moving, chasing after the melody, you can't focus on what's happening in the timbre. It was the nomadic way of life and its focus on the timbral qualities of natural sounds that created this kind of musicality."

After our discussions about pitch-centered and timbre-centered music, I went back over recordings from the *National Geographic* expeditions of 1987 and 1988 with the aim of finding examples of the distinctions Valentina had made. In those years, I had little understanding of the concept of



Ex. 1. “Artyy-Saiyr”

Harmonic number

Harmonic

Fundamental

The number above each note identifies the harmonic that produces it. By convention, the first harmonic (1) is the fundamental pitch; thus the second harmonic (2) is that which sounds an octave higher, and successive multiples of two produce harmonics at successively higher octaves above the fundamental.

timbre-centered music. On the contrary, I was attracted to throat-singers and jew’s harp players who performed pitch-centered music—in particular, cheery songs and melodies such as “Artyy-Saiyr” (The Far Side of a Dry Riverbed), transcribed above in a performance by throat-singer Vasili Chazir (b. 1958). Using the throat as a precise type of band-pass filter that reinforces certain frequencies while attenuating others, Chazir isolates and reinforces a sequence of harmonics that corresponds to the successive pitches in the song (this technique is explained in more detail in the following section, “Throat-Singing: The Ideal Timbral Art”). In the transcription, the number above each note identifies the harmonic that produces it (see Audio File, track 3).

In music, harmonics are pitches that are integral multiples (1, 2, 3, etc.) of some fundamental pitch (by convention, the first harmonic [“1”] is the fundamental). To produce the melody of “Artyy-Saiyr,” a singer reinforces harmonics that range between six and twelve times the frequency of the fundamental drone pitch—in other words, the segment of the harmonic series that extends from the sixth to the twelfth harmonic. These pitches form a pentatonic (five-pitch) scale: G-B^b-C-D-E-G, as shown in example 2. The nondiatonic eleventh harmonic, which falls halfway between E and G, is not part of this scale.



Ex. 2. First sixteen pitches of the harmonic series

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

♩ (fundamental)

Pitches typically used by Tuvan singers are indicated in black.

Note that the seventh harmonic, which produces a flatted seventh interval relative to the fundamental pitch (C–B^b), does not figure in the melody of “Artyy-Saiyr” (nor does the nondiatonic eleventh harmonic). The absence of the seventh harmonic in all Tuvan and Mongolian throat-singing that I have ever heard suggests that the harmonic series is not used naturalistically, in its raw form, but selectively, within a tonal system rooted in cultural preferences. (The flatted seventh scale degree does turn up in Tuvan songs that are not performed with throat-singing, for example, the well-known “Orphan’s Lament.”) Moreover, the harmonic series is not reified among Tuvan throat-singers. For them, harmonics are “voices” (*ünner*) and, asked to produce an ascending sequence of such “voices” in the form of a scale, namely, the harmonic series, throat-singers look puzzled.

Other examples of throat-singing occupy a liminal area between pitch-centered and timbre-centered sound-making. For example, in the piece “Alash,” named after a river in western Tuva, harmonics are used to articulate distinct pitches, yet the resulting pitch sequence, which leans heavily on repeated articulations of the ninth and twelfth harmonics, is banal from a melodic point of view. As Valentina put it, “If you listen from the perspective of melody, you’ll begin to get bored and wonder why the singer doesn’t change the pitch. So you have to listen in a different way, with more focus on how each reinforced overtone in succession opens the timbral qualities of a sound in a different way—as if you were holding a diamond up to the light and rotating it ever so slightly while observing the shifting prismatic effects of light passing through the crystals.” “Alash” is transcribed in example 3 and reproduced in the audio files online, track 4.

The transcription is from a performance of “Alash” by throat-singer Mergen Mongush on the Smithsonian Folkways recording *Tuva: Voices from the Center of Asia*. When Eduard Alekseyev, Zoya Kyrgys, and I did the sound



Ex. 3. “Alash”

The musical score consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a melodic line of eighth notes, starting with a rest. A dotted line above the staff indicates a long, sustained note. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a bass line of eighth notes, also starting with a rest. The piece concludes with a note marked "(aspirated exhalation)".

editing for the Smithsonian CD, I suggested shortening and standardizing the long and irregular pauses between each segment of throat-singing in order to create a more coherent sense of a “piece” (some of the pauses were as long as thirty seconds). Only later did I realize my error. Throat-singers themselves do not attach importance to temporally linking separate phrases through measured silence. On the contrary, each phrase conveys an independent sonic image, and the long pauses provide singers with time to listen to the ambient sounds and to formulate a response—not to mention, of course, taking a breath.

Valentina pointed out that timbre-centered music and pitch-centered music work from different conceptions of time. “In pitch-centered music, sequences of pitches progress through a form that has a certain duration and that moves toward a prepared conclusion. But it doesn’t make any sense to apply this conception of form to timbral logic. In timbre-centered music, the space dimension is different and the time dimension is different. Imagine being out in the steppe—nomads didn’t have limitations on time. There were no boundaries. Performances could be extremely varied in length, from very short to very long, depending on the atmosphere and the mood of the performer. The *topshuur*, *igil*, *shoor*—people would play these instruments for a long time sitting around the campfire. Before the hunt, when they’d go out at dawn, they’d sing and play the whole night. The eternity of being was part of the herders’ sense of time. It’s no accident that oral epic had such a great development among nomads. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that culture workers introduced the idea to performers that they shouldn’t sing or play for too long.”⁴

Valentina and I listened together to several other examples of the timbre-centered sound-making that for her constituted the quintessence of Tuvan music, and as we listened, she provided a running commentary. The first example illustrated the form of throat-singing known as *kargyraa* (see Audio File, track 6). “Here you have the feeling that the singer is just trying



to open the sound,” Valentina commented. “He’s playing with it—making it now narrower, now wider, adding nasalization, letting it play in his mouth. He’s not trying to perform anything in particular, or imitate anything. There’s no particular context for what he’s singing. It’s like when you have a certain feeling and you just express it with some kind of sound. It’s a spontaneous response to a mood.”

A second example presented a brief *xöömei*, a form of throat-singing in which individual harmonics are clearly articulated and manipulated (see Audio File, track 7). “When you listen to the sequence of harmonics with ears accustomed to Western music,” said Valentina, “it’s difficult not to perceive the sequence as a melody. But the fact that one harmonic is higher and the next one is lower and that they’re separated by precisely such-and-such an interval doesn’t really matter. When I listen to this *xöömei*, I have a physical sensation of three different levels or planes of sound that you could call lower, middle, and higher. But the planes don’t correspond to pitch height. It’s like being weightless in space, where there’s no up or down. You have to let go of your habitual tendency to hear the harmonics as forming a melody. Once you do that, you can float freely in the sound. You lose your bearings and swim around for a while, but then you begin to orient yourself and establish your balance. You understand that there’s sound coming from everywhere and that it’s not just one sound, but that it exists on different planes, in different dimensions.

“Try a little experiment,” Valentina advised, returning to the musical example we had just listened to. “Try not to listen to the high notes and instead, hold your listening close to the bottom—to the drone. Then bring the middle into focus. It’s like when there are a lot of people talking in a room and you’re trying to focus on what one person is saying. The middle of the *xöömei* sound is thick—vibrations are everywhere, but this is the part that habitual listening filters out. If you can focus in on this middle part, you begin to feel the extent to which the sound space is filled up. And you hear things the way they really are, rather than through our customary filters.”⁵

In an article titled “The Paradox of Timbre,” published in the journal *Ethnomusicology*, African music specialist Cornelia Fales points out that the isolation of reinforced harmonics from a fundamental pitch that occurs in throat-singing can create a “profound if momentary disorientation” when harmonics break free from the “perceptual fusion of timbre” and are consequently less subject to the effects of “perceptualization” that customarily act on the signals we receive from the acoustic world.⁶ In this condition, according to Fales, the perception of reinforced harmonics becomes “nearly identical to—or at least, directly dictated by—their character in the acousti-



cal world.” Another way, perhaps, of making Valentina Süzükei’s point that timbral listening may provide access to hearing things “the way they really are” or, at the very least, hearing them differently.

Fales’s article is based largely on a study of Burundi ritual song whose performers juxtapose isolated vocal harmonics with formant-rich, timbrally dense fundamental pitches in much the same way as do throat-singers (in the case of the Burundi ritual song, the harmonics and fundamental pitches are produced by different sources—the harmonics by high falsetto voices and the fundamentals by a plucked zither). In Fales’s view, the weakened border between the acoustic and perceived worlds that results from the “redistribution of perceptualization” is precisely what may lead human listeners to the sense of “perceiving something normally imperceivable,” such as the presence of spirits.⁷ Her inclusion in the article of a range of musical examples from beyond Burundi suggests that her hypothesis is not exclusive to a single musical repertory and social group.

Indeed, Fales’s work offers an attractive starting point for a psycho-physical explanation of the spiritual power attributed to throat-singing and jew’s harp playing. Both forms of sound-making exploit what Fales terms “timbral manipulation” as a way of entering a different perceptual world. Fales’s hypothesis may also explain why, for example, the end-blown flute (*shoor or tsuur*) commonly linked with access to spirits is always played with a vocal drone that increases the turbulence and timbral richness of the sound. This timbral richness is increased by still another order of magnitude when the instrument is played in a resonant acoustic environment or in consort with a natural sound source such as moving water or wind. Mongolian *tsuur* player Narantsogt acknowledged the effect of joining the sound of his flute to the wind, calling it “mountain *höömii*” (*uulyñ höömii*).⁸

A third musical example from the 1987–1988 recordings provided the sort of transition between timbre-centered and pitch-centered sound-making that Valentina had suggested is common in present-day Tuvan music. In this example, Oleg Kuular performs a composite piece using throat-singing and jew’s harp that begins with timbral “noodling,” then switches to a melodic medley, and finally returns to pure play with timbre (see Audio File, track 8).

After we’d finished listening, Valentina said, “The beginning and end of that jew’s harp piece are a perfect example of what Tuvans call *xomustung boduning ayalgalary* [lit., “jew’s harp-in-itself motifs” (*ayalga* can mean “motif,” “dialect,” “accent,” or “pronunciation,” as well as “melody”)]. Similarly, the *kargyraa* episode we just listened to [Audio File, track 6] illustrates *kargyraaning boduning ayalgalary* [“*kargyraa*-in-itself motifs”].” This “thing-in-itself” genre, attested not only for the jew’s harp and *kargyraa* but also for



other forms of throat-singing, as well as for instruments such as the *igil* and *shoor*, eschews melodic sequences and imitative gestures in favor of “pure timbral exploration of the sound source’s sonic space,” as Valentina put it.⁹ She added that while not explicitly mimetic, such sounds typically evoke the sonic atmosphere and acoustic qualities of a particular kind of environment associated with herding or hunting. For example, an episode of *kargyraa* might represent the specific and quite different timbral environments of the steppe (*xovu kargyraazy*) or of a mountain (*kojagar kargyraazy*). Moreover, the noun *kojagar* does not refer to just any mountain but specifically to a steep-sided mountain with barren slopes. Both steppe and mountain *kargyraa* differ from taiga *kargyraa* (*arga-aryg kargyraazy*), which evokes the atmosphere of the forests where Tuvans hunt.

The boundary between the atmospheric timbral evocations of “things-in-themselves” and the imitation of specific sound sources—what Tuvans generically call “voices imitation” (*ünner öttüdüreeri*)—is still less distinct than the boundary between timbre-centered and pitch-centered sound-making. At what point does a sonic description or evocation of the steppe or taiga cross the line into an imitation of a particular sound phenomenon? In execution, the distinction may not always be immediately evident, but musicians have been clear that such a distinction exists. For example, Gombojav, the Mongolian *tsuur* player, made a point of distinguishing between praise-songs or pieces (*magtaal*) that create a general sound image of a site of spiritual power, such as a mountain or a river, and pieces that are explicitly imitative.

The sound world of the Inner Asian pastoralists extends along a continuum that ranges from abstract timbral evocations of “things-in-themselves” to rounded song forms with fixed melodies. Spanning the middle are various genres and styles of mimetic sound-making and pitch-centered music that may coalesce into hybrid forms. For example, long-song (Tuvan *uzun yr*, Mongolian *urtyн duu*) is a genre characterized by pentatonic melodies and fixed texts, yet the swooping leaps and virtuosic ornamentation of the long-song preserve vestiges of a purely timbral art, in which the voice plays with the acoustical properties of resonant spaces. An example of Mongolian long-song, “The River Herlen,” appears in the audio files online (track 9). Similarly, episodes of throat-singing commonly begin with a text sung or chanted in a guttural voice on discrete pitches and then proceed to a timbre-centered section dominated by reinforced harmonics that may or may not comprise a melody. The same range of performance style characterizes the *igil*, used to accompany vocal songs, perform instrumental melodies, or simply evoke the quintessential timbre of the instrument in an episode of *igilding bodunung ayalgaly*—“*igil*-in-itself motifs.”



For an ethnographer with an unslaked curiosity about the early history and prehistory of music, there is a temptation—admittedly a romantic one—to claim great antiquity for timbre-centered sound-making, to imagine that it represents a protomusical form that antedates the rise of melody (or more generally, fixed pitch-height) as a musical organizing principle.¹⁰ But more sober reflection persuades me that no hard empirical evidence supports such a claim, and that the issue of relative antiquity is in any event moot. More important is to recognize that timbral listening is an ideal sonic mirror of the natural world. The timbral subtlety and variety of this world is a ubiquitous—and evidently, inspiring—presence for the herders who pass an entire lifetime of days and nights, dawns and dusks, the turning of seasons in intimate proximity to the primal sounds of nature.

“You have to have inside your head this stock of sounds that’s built up over years of living on the grasslands,” Valentina said, summing up the phenomenology of timbre-centered sound-making. “And you have to learn how to distinguish all the various sounds—for example, by going hunting with your father in the taiga forest, where the sounds are different than on the grasslands. All of these sounds filter into a child’s sound world, and when they pick up an instrument and start to play it, or start to do throat-singing, they can easily reproduce those sounds. Moreover, you can’t destroy the timbre-centered system, even if there is a lapse of a whole generation, because the sounds are lodged in the cultural memory of nomads. Timbral sound-making and timbral listening will survive as long as herders live in nature and listen to the sounds of the taiga and the steppe, birds and animals, water and wind.”

THROAT-SINGING: THE IDEAL TIMBRAL ART

It was the third week of May 1998, and Tolya Kuular led the way as we zig-zagged across a thin crust of corn snow that stubbornly clung to the forested foothills of the Sayan Mountains, a half-hour drive north of Kyzyl. Tolya, sound engineer Joel Gordon, videographer Bill Gasperini, and I had driven up to the mountains with Kaigal-ool, Sayan Bapa, and Valentina Süzükei in search of flowing water. In particular, we were on the lookout for just the right stretch of river, stream, brook, creek, or rivulet—any kind of flowing water was fair game—to play a costarring role in an artistic collaboration with Tolya. After intermittent experimentation, including the episode in the Shemi River when Tolya spoke about spirit offerings (see chapter 2, “Musical Offerings”), he felt ready to make a definitive recording of *borbangnadyr* with water—or, as he preferred to think of it, of water with *borbangnadyr*. I



had invited Joel Gordon to join me in Tuva with a four-microphone portable recording system that he assembled specially for our work, and now we were ready to put it to the test.

None of the Tuvans in our party had ever previously been to the larch-covered hillside, where we'd left our cars on the side of the road by a bridge and climbed down toward the streambed that transected the road. We'd picked this spot because it was the closest place to Kyzyl where there were steep slopes, and thus, we reasoned, swiftly flowing water. Fed by melting snow, the streams were running fast and full, and as we tromped through the woods, the hiss of churning water reached our ears long before we could see the source of the sound.

The first stream we considered as a recording site was the one we'd spotted from the road. Translucent wavelets rushed between ice-coated rocks with odd shapes and overhangs, forming a series of small reverberant pools and eddies. Sayan liked the "blup-blup" sounds of water being sucked into a whirlpool under a sheltering slab of stone. "Reminds me of a *tabla*," he said, referring to the paired drum used in North Indian classical music. But after standing back and listening to the composite sound of the stream, Tolya vetoed it.

"Not enough jazz," said Tolya. By that he meant that the sound was too homogenous, without the rhythmic detail and contrapuntal play of timbral colors that would make for a lively fusion with the rolling sounds of his *borbangnadyr*. Tolya had become the authoritative arbiter of taste in water sounds, and with his negative critique, we piled back into the cars and headed for higher elevations further north. As the road passed through a col between two ridges, a stream came into view, tumbling steeply between rocks on one of the ridge faces before swerving away from the road in a broad curve that descended into a forested glen.

"Too fast, too wide," said Tolya, barely getting out of the car. In other words, the sheer volume of water created so much sound that the subtle rhythms and timbral colors issuing from spots of turbulence were smothered by the overall white noise of the stream. Back into the cars, this time we headed downhill to flatter ground, where water might not be moving so quickly and loudly. We turned off the main Kyzyl-to-Abakan road onto a dirt track that led toward a clump of sheds in the distance. Along the track, cows grazed in pasturage that, warmed by direct sun, had shed the last of its snow and sprouted a thick carpet of velvety green grass. A narrow rivulet ran straight along the edge of the pasture. It wasn't much to look at—no craggy boulders or whirlpools with their gossamer of foam, no standing wave patterns clinging to the aft side of submerged rocks. But as we sat beside the brook and let our ears absorb the surrounding silence, the gentle music of flow-



ing water came ever more sharply into the sonic foreground. Rounded stones created irregular popping and slurping sounds as the water slithered around them—just the sort of timbres that Tolya found seductive. For the recording, however, Sayan proposed increasing the amount of turbulence in the water and thus boosting the timbral complexity and dynamic range of the sound.

“Bring me stones,” Sayan ordered. “We need to do some construction work.” The rest of us fanned out along the length of the stream, collecting stones to bring back for Sayan’s and Tolya’s inspection. Sayan chose a few stones of different sizes, placing them strategically in the flow of the brook to create various sound effects, and in one spot he fashioned a small cascade. When he was done, we all listened attentively to the results of Sayan’s craftsmanship.

“That’s it!” said Tolya at last. “That’s the sound Tuvans like. It’s when you can hear sound coming from all directions at all levels—when sound maximally fills a space.” Or something like what audiophiles would call “surround sound.”

Joel quickly set up microphone stands, and our portable recording studio was ready for business. Tolya stood next to the brook, and began to sing *borbangnadyr* (Audio File, track 10). He intoned a phrase of text on a drone fundamental pitch that his ear told him corresponded to the fundamental pitch of the flowing brook, then began rhythmically modulating the fundamental to produce rippling sounds that merged with the rippling of the water. Next came a sequence of harmonics that led quickly to a sustained elaboration of the twelfth harmonic, three octaves and a fifth above the fundamental. Introducing a rhythmic shimmering made by subtle movements of his lips, Tolya propelled the harmonic forward, giving a sense of mass and velocity to what an instant before had been simply an inert pitch. The cycle repeated twice more, each time with intoned text, gurgling and rippling sounds on the fundamental, and the shimmering, pulsating twelfth harmonic. Each repetition presented new rhythmic and timbral effects, including a feather-light harmonic fantasia over the fundamental drone and a coda of soft, cloud-like harmonics at the end.

In Tolya’s rendition, *borbangnadyr* became not only a representation of the turbulence of water as it roiled in a stone-studded stream bed but also a sonic collaboration with it. Tolya’s stylization of the rippling water sounds did not, of course, sound exactly like the water itself. How could it? Talented mimics can imitate the sound of many birds and animals with great verisimilitude, and almost anyone can make a convincing wind sound simply by blowing and whistling at the same time. But the timbral complexity of flowing water defies the mimetic capacity of even the most supple human vocal apparatus. The artistry of representing this sound is precisely what makes



it an object of interest to throat-singers—and to ethnographers who study throat-singers.¹¹

Tolya's *borbangnadyr* exposes the inventive stylization represented by his transformation of water sounds to the apparatus of the human voice. But unlike, for example, the idylls, pastorales, and romantic song cycles of European composers, which represent water through musical conventions far removed from the actual sounds of water, Tolya's sonic stylizations strive to engage the sonic texture of flowing water directly and interactively through submersion, as it were, in the acoustical properties of water itself.¹² His collaboration starts from the supposition that rivers sing just as humans sing, and assumes the form of a sonic dialogue honed through control and manipulation of timbre, articulation, rhythm, pitch, tempo, and dynamics.

Tolya Kuular had not always sung *borbangnadyr* with water. Growing up in Chadaana, he had performed in an amateur music ensemble, and was one of the shy, costumed singers mobilized by the local culture authorities to demonstrate throat-singing during my 1987 visit. Tuvans of his generation—Tolya was born in 1965—grew up and were initiated into the world of throat-singing at a time when the tradition's center of gravity had already shifted from extemporized sound-making in natural conditions to formal performance by "artists." The sing-alongs with water came later, in the mid-1990s, after Tolya had joined the ensemble Huun-Huur-Tu and we had agreed to work together on re-emplacing Tuvan music and sound-making in the natural acoustical environments that had inspired it.¹³ The topic of water had come up one evening while Tolya, Sayan, Kaigal-ool, and I were taking an after-dinner stroll along the bluffs overlooking the Yenisei River opposite Kyzyl. We were discussing the onomatopoeic meaning of the terms used for various kinds of throat-singing, and Tolya mentioned that *borbangnadyr* comes from the Tuvan verb *borbangnaar*, a causative verb form that means "to cause to roll," "revolve," "spin."

"What kind of rolling sound can it refer to?" I had asked. At that very moment, the trail we were walking along dipped down into a gulch to cross a shallow, stone-filled stream.

"For example, the sound of water rolling over rocks in a stream," Tolya answered, as we hopped across the stream.

"I heard from my grandfather that herders used to sit by a stream in the evening and throat-sing with the water," Kaigal-ool added. "It was a way of honoring the spirit-master of the stream."¹⁴

"Try it right here," I had coaxed Tolya. And that was the beginning of the trial-and-error experiments with *borbangnadyr* that led to the high-tech recording session by the cow pasture. In preparing for this session, Tolya worked not only on his vocal technique, but on his listening—on reengaging



the mimetic faculty at the root of throat-singing. In doing so, he was striving to retrieve an older understanding of throat-singing that existed before it was transformed into a performance art centered around displays of vocal virtuosity.

Looking backward in throat-singing, however, is not like looking backward in the music of sedentary civilizations. There, particularly in traditions glossed as “classical,” one can typically trace a chain of transmission from father to son or master to disciple through lineages that are sometimes centuries old. By contrast, in the culture of Inner Asian nomads, even though ancestors are venerated and oral genealogy is of vital importance, the concept of musical lineage among throat-singers is all but nonexistent. Throat-singing, like music performed on the jew’s harp, *igil*, and other instruments, is absorbed through perceptual osmosis. As Valentina Süzükei had said, nature is the school of throat-singers. Even now, when actual schools of throat-singing have begun to appear in Tuva, older singers do not demonstrate to younger ones where to position the tongue to yield a certain overtone, how to move the lips to produce a certain rhythm, and so on. Rather, a teacher might ask a student to imagine a pastoral scene from his own experience and then illustrate it in sound.

Learning begins not from physical techniques, but from aural models; not from memorization of fixed sequences of sounds, but from a process of sonic self-exploration. It is not particular melodies and canonical performance styles that comprise the core of the throat-singer’s art, but something more basic: a sound ideal that models the desired timbral quality of the voice. Once this basic model has been internalized, the shaping and sculpting of timbral, melodic, and rhythmic characteristics becomes a matter of personal sensibility and skill. Personal sensibility of course exists within boundaries of culturally determined style, taste, and technique. For example, in broad terms, one can contrast Mongolian throat-singing with Tuvan throat-singing or Xakas throat-singing. Yet within these broad realms, individual stylistic invention has flourished. Unbound by the constraints of collectivity imposed on ensemble-based music, throat-singers, the quintessential soloists, are free to experiment and indulge their artistic whimsy. The most revered among them have done precisely that.

To emulate the basic timbral sound model at the root of all throat-singing, singers manipulate their vocal tract—tongue, lips, jaw, soft palate—to shift the frequency of a formant, or resonant frequency, and align it with a harmonic naturally present in the voice, thus reinforcing the harmonic.¹⁵ Although reinforced harmonics can be produced from a wide variety of fundamental drone timbres, with the exception of the rounded vowel sound “o” that issues from a pure sine wave, the timbral model for the fundamental



drone sound ubiquitous in the Altai region emphasizes a raspy, tensed chest voice. This chest voice is often given additional power and depth through the use of double phonation—the production of a second vocal source pitched an octave below the fundamental frequency.¹⁶

The vocal tract contains many potential sources of double phonation, but the effect of all of them is to produce a deep, growling, harmonically dense, fundamental drone (the addition of the lower octave doubles the number of harmonics at play in the sound). Differences in the pressure and velocity of air delivered from the chest cavity through the vocal tract affect the timbre and amplitude of the drone pitch as well as the harmonics, and these differences are evident in the various styles of chanting and intoned recitative that draw on the double phonation technique. Controlled double phonation is the basis for many kinds of throat-singing, most notably, the basso profundo style that Tuvans call *kargyraa* and Mongolians call *harhiraa* (Audio File, track 6).

Mark van Tongeren, a Dutch student of throat-singing who wrote a lucid survey of overtone-centered music from the perspective of both a singer and an observer, noted that the density of harmonics in double phonation chanting “allows for an enormous variation of timbral nuances.” Van Tongeren added that from his own experience as a singer, “there are more variables at stake in *kargyraa* than in any other type of throat—or overtone—singing.”¹⁷ One artifact of the double phonation technique is that it leaves the upper vocal tract free to articulate consonant and vowel sounds, and thus it may be used as a basis for intoning texts within a harmonically rich drone.

Among the Xakas and the Altai, two Turkic ethnolinguistic groups whose languages and cultural traditions link them closely to the Tuvans, double phonation drones are used as the sonic model for the recitation of oral poetry. The Xakas call this style of recitation *xai* and the Altai call it *kai* (for examples of *xai*, see Audio File, track 27, and Video File, track 16).¹⁸ *Kai* is used to perform epic poems as well as shorter poetic texts. A superb illustration of the latter is the hymn (*alkysh*) transcribed below from the performance of Altai musician Sarymai Orchimaev (see Audio File, track 11).¹⁹ Sarymai accompanies his singing on the *topshuur*—a long-necked lute similar to the Tuvan *doshpuluur*. “The *topshuur* gives an impulse,” Sarymai explained. “It supports the voice, and I can’t sing for long without it.”

Starting from fir wood,
I planed my *topshuur*.
Tightening the strings made from the
Beautiful mane of a pacer horse, I sing.
Sing, sing, my *topshuur*,
Let your strings not break,

Joigon agash bu tözineng
Jonup etken bu topshuurum
Jorgo maldyng jarash kylynyang
Kyldap, erep em oinogon
Oino, oino, topshuurum
Kylyng sening üzülbezín



Let those who hear your singing	<i>Oigor kalyk ugala</i>
Offer you praise.	<i>Alkysb-byianyn emdi aitsyn</i>
Starting from cedar wood,	<i>Emil agash bu tözineng</i>
My <i>topshuur</i> is made.	<i>Eptep etken bu topshuurum</i>
Tightening the strings made from the	<i>Erjine maldyng jarash kylyn</i>
Mane of a sacred horse, I sing.	<i>Kyldap, erep em oinogon</i>
Sing, sing, my <i>topshuur</i> ,	<i>Oino, oino, topshuurum</i>
Let your strings not break.	<i>Kylyng sening üzülbezin</i>
Let those who hear your singing	<i>Oigor kalyk ugala</i>
Offer you praise.	<i>Alkysb-buian em jetirzin</i>
Starting from white birch wood,	<i>Ak kaiyngnyng bu tözineng</i>
My <i>topshuur</i> is made.	<i>Alkap etken bu topshuurum</i>
Tightening the strings made from the	<i>Argymak attyng bu kylynang</i>
Mane of a racing horse, I sing.	<i>Kyldai erep em oinogon</i>
Sing, sing, my <i>topshuur</i> ,	<i>Oino, oino, topshuurum</i>
Let your strings not weep,	<i>Kylyng sening yilabazyn</i>
Let the words to my praise-song not know lies.	<i>Alkysb sözim jastyrbagyng.</i>

Double phonation drones and reinforced harmonics are also used in the liturgical chanting tradition of certain Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, where they serve as a vehicle for communal prayer. The Tibetan sound, which some researchers call “chant mode,” yields overtones that are audible but not exceptionally loud, or “sensed without being explicitly heard,” in the words of Huston Smith, the philosopher of religion whose 1967 reports on the biphonic chanting of Tibetan lamas in the Gyütö Monastery near Dalhousie, India provided the first glimpse of overtone-singing for many Westerners (including this writer).²⁰

While to the uncultivated ear the various double phonation techniques sound broadly similar, singers and scholars often emphasize their differences rather than similarities. For example, Tuvan folklorist Zoya Kyrgys takes pains to distinguish Tuvan *kargyraa* from Tibetan-style double phonation chant, noting patriotically that *kargyraa* demands considerably more chest tension than the sound produced by Tibetan monks.²¹ Mark van Tongeren also offers a comparison, remarking that “the secret of the esoteric [Tibetan] *yang* technique, though widely demonstrated in the West by lamas in recent years, is neither revealed nor imitated as ‘easily’ as *kargyraa*.”²²

In contrast to the extremely low-pitched fundamental drone characteristic of Tibetan Tantric chant, *kargyraa*, *harhiraa*, *kai*, and *xai*, another variant of the basic timbral model at the root of throat-singing uses as its starting point a fundamental pitch in the baritone range. This variant does not employ double phonation, but it depends on a large supply of air under strong pressure from abdominal and chest muscles. Simultaneous contractions of muscles in the neck constrict the trachea, further increasing pressure as air passes through the engorged vocal folds of the larynx into the upper vo-



Sarymai Orchimaev playing the *topshuur*. Near Ongudai, Altai Republic, 2000.

cal tract. The result is a husky, guttural fundamental drone with a rich harmonic spectrum. This sound model is the basis for diverse forms of throat-singing associated with Tuvan practitioners, most commonly *sygyt* and *xöömei*, as well as for the most widespread throat-singing style in Mongolia, generically called *höömii*. (For a good example of *sygyt*, see Audio File, track 4, “Alash.”)

The timbre of the fundamental pitch is of cardinal importance in any type of overtone-singing. Neophyte overtone singers from the West often tend to focus on the seemingly magical sounds of harmonics, but among Tuvans and Mongolians, the timbral quality of the fundamental is considered the most important criteria for distinguishing authentic throat-singing from inauthentic, good from less good, powerful from flaccid. It is no accident that Zoya Kyrgys, who created a neologism for the overall phenomenon of Tuvan throat-singing in an apparent attempt to distinguish it from neighboring styles, in particular Mongolian *höömii*, chose the word *xörekteer*, from *xörek*, which means “chest”; thus “chest-singing.” (Kyrgys may face an uphill battle in gaining acceptance for the term. As she admitted in her 2002 book, *Tuvan Throat-Singing*, “Not one Tuvan language dictionary treats the term ‘*xörekteer*’ in relation to singing. It is usually used to mean ‘raising one’s voice at someone,’ ‘swearing.’”)²³



Scholars who have written about Tuvan music have typically described “styles” of throat-singing as representing normative categories—that is, as prescriptive models for performance. For example, in *Tuvan Folk Music*, published in 1964, A. N. Aksenov identified four melodic styles: *borbangnadyr*, *sygyt*, *ezeנגgileer*, and *kargyraa*. In *Tuvan Throat-Singing*, published almost forty years later, Zoya Kyrgys repeats Aksenov’s four basic styles and adds a fifth: *xöömei*. She also includes a host of “substyles.” Kyrgys notes, however, that “the understanding of ‘style’ includes diverse concepts. Among them are the individual features of different performers. . . . In this sense, [style] approaches the notion of a creative manner and method linked to particular techniques of solo polyphony.”²⁴ In other words, style as personal self-expression rather than style as generalized convention.

Kyrgys is on the right track here. At root, stylistic classification of throat-singing comprises an open system, not a closed one with a finite number of fixed categories. It is open to expansion and evolution as a consequence of individual ingenuity and innovation. Conversely, stylistic diversity can contract as a result of homogenizing forces that work against innovation. While stylistic diversity is hard to measure, throat-singing in Tuva may indeed have become more stylistically homogenous in the decade-and-a-half since I first went there in the late 1980s. The cause seems clear. Increasingly distant from its origins as a spontaneous, expressive response to the sound world of the steppe and taiga, throat-singing as concert art is motivated by more practical concerns. What kind of singing will rouse an audience? What kind of singing works well with musical instruments, percussion, and other kinds of vocal music in the various hybrid and fusion forms that have become popular among musicians and audiences alike? Answers to these questions have led most concertizing throat-singers in the same direction: toward the well-established styles that Tuvans call *sygyt* and *kargyraa*.

When I first came to Tuva, elderly throat-singers performed *ezeנגgileer*, which means “stirrups” and imitates the rhythmic clacking of a horseback rider’s boots, and *borbangnadyr*, whose pulsing harmonics Tolya Kuular used in his collaboration with flowing water. Well-known singers alive or recently deceased had lent their names to eponymous styles: Kombu *xöömei*, Oidupaa *kargyraazy*.²⁵ These so-called “styles” were in practice embodied in particular melodies that became identified with their creators, no matter who else performed them. And idiosyncratic styles such as *tespeng xöömei*, *kanzyp*, and *chylandyk*—the work of anonymous creators—circulated among an older generation but did not find a ready place in the repertory of younger concert throat-singers.

The full force of Soviet cultural politics that had waged the “struggle against the old” in Tuva may have had little effect on the underlying diver-



sity of the throat-singing tradition. Tuvan musicians, for example, could perform choral odes to industrialization on the stage of a House of Culture and also sing *xöömei* while riding horseback or sitting alone atop a hill. But the transformation of Tuvan music into a globalized cultural commodity was showing signs of winning the struggle that Soviet cultural politics had ultimately lost. In throat-singing, the old had begun to fade away, and the new, for all its technical polish and global chic, was less diverse, less eccentric, less rooted in its original inspiration. The self-regenerating power of Tuvan culture, which Sasha Bapa of Huun-Huur-Tu had lauded during my 1995 visit when we had first discussed the idea of trying to reanimate the musical past, was focused elsewhere—at least for the moment.

Tuvan musicians and scholars, however, remain proud of the breadth and depth of their throat-singing tradition. In *Tuvan Throat-Singing*, Zoya Kyrgys compares the plethora of documented Tuvan styles with what in her view are the more homogenous styles characteristic of neighboring regions—Mongolia, Xakasia, the Altai Republic—and concludes that Tuvan throat-singing is the oldest of them all. The longer throat-singing exists, Kyrgys reasoned, the more opportunity it has to evolve and develop in different directions, and thus greater stylistic diversity is evidence of greater antiquity.²⁶

Tuvan throat-singing may indeed be very old, but Kyrgys's explanation is by no means the only way to account for its apparently greater stylistic diversity, and other explanations may be more persuasive. For example, throat-singing may have existed long ago in more diverse forms elsewhere, but it may have atrophied due to the loss of cultural "habitat" when pastoralists became sedentarized, as happened in Xakasia. Or old styles may have become fixed in canonical forms, as in Tibetan Buddhist chant. Or, as in Mongolian *höömii*, distinctive features of vocal production perceived as differences of style by local musicians and listeners may be imperceptible to outsiders. The example of Mongolian *höömii* offers a good illustration of the diverse ways in which throat-singing has been taxonomized and metaphorized in the Altai region.

While Tuvans describe styles of throat-singing by the sounds they are said to represent, for example, *sygyt* ("whistle"), *kargyraa* ("wheeze"), *ezenggileer* ("stirrup"), and *borbangnadyr* ("rolling"), some Mongolian singers have used taxa rooted in anatomy. Carole Pegg describes three such classification schemes in *Mongolian Music, Dance, and Oral Narrative*, all of which describe the anatomical locus of timbral resonance or manipulation.²⁷ The most sophisticated was provided by Tserendavaa, of Chandman Sum, who worked out his scheme with the help of Ulaanbaatar-based musicologist Badraa. Tserendavaa wrote an almost identical taxonomy in my field notebook during our visit to Chandman in the summer of 2000. It divides me-



lodic *höömii* into seven categories: labial (*uruulyyn*), palatal (*tagnain*), glottal (*bagalzuuryyn*), nasal (*hamryyn*), throat (*hooloin*), chest cavity (*tseejiin*), and, finally, a combination of all of the above (*hosmoljin*).²⁸ Tserendavaa distinguished these varieties of *höömii* from *harhiraa*, which in his view should be classified separately because it is not a melodic style.

Sengedorj, the throat-singer from Hovd, was skeptical about the proliferation of styles proposed by Tserendavaa. “Nose *höömii* doesn’t really exist,” Sengedorj told us. “It’s just a variant of palatal *höömii*. And chest *höömii* shouldn’t be a separate category. All breathing is from the chest.” Sengedorj described his own classification scheme when we met in Hovd in summer 2000.²⁹ He divided Mongolian throat-singing into three broad categories: *hargaa*—a “light” form of *harhiraa* used in Buddhist temple rituals; *harhiraa*—good for accompanying the *tsuur* and also used by reciters of oral epic; and finally, “liquid *höömii*” (*shingen höömii*), which Sengedorj described as a “Mongol-Altai” style. This was the style for which he was renowned (at our first meeting, Sengedorj had ticked off his extensive performing credits, including nine visits to Japan and two to Germany and France; a year later he traveled to Washington, D.C., to participate in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival). The style’s name provided an apt description of the loud and lubricious melodies Sengedorj produced with harmonics.

Liquid or solid, the sheer vocal power of Sengedorj’s *höömii* was remarkable. Two examples of his singing are included in the audio files online (tracks 12 and 13). The first is a *höömii* version of a song melody called “Buyant Gol,” the name of a river that flows through his homeland of Hovd. The second is a popular folksong called “Gooj Nanaa,” the name of a young woman, who, according to Sengedorj, lived around a century ago.³⁰ Sengedorj sings the words and then reproduces the melody with *höömii*:

Young geese are honking outdoors	<i>Galuu shuvuuny degdeexei</i>
My beloved Gooj Nanaa is singing on and on	<i>Gadnaa garaad ganganaj baina</i>
Young swans are honking in the bamboo grove	<i>Golyn xairtai Gooj Nanaa</i>
Happy Gooj Nanaa is singing	<i>Galav yültel duulj suunaa Gooj</i>
in her native place.	<i>Nanaa xö.</i>

Sengedorj’s poetically named “liquid *höömii*” represents a personal interpretation of the timbral *ur*-model at the root of all throat-singing, yet it closely resembles the performance style of other Mongolian *höömii* singers while differing noticeably from throat-singing typical among Tuvans. An acculturated listener can easily distinguish “Mongolian” *höömii* from “Tuvan” *xöömei* purely by the timbral and dynamic qualities of the sound and also by the tendency of Mongolian throat-singers to reproduce flowing pentatonic song melodies using harmonics. How and when did different personal ap-



Mongolian throat-singer Sengedorj performing at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, “The Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust,” on the National Mall, Washington, D.C. Photo by Coriolana Simon, summer 2002.

proaches to throat-singing coalesce into reified national styles? Comparison of these styles has become a burning issue among performers, scholars, and cultural authorities in both Tuva and Mongolia, who continue to spar over claims to the origins and purest form of the tradition.

Tserendavaa, for example, told us that sometimes he gets angry when he hears Tuva claims that *höömii* comes originally from Tuva. This is impossible, Tserendavaa said, “because Mongolian people say it’s from Chandman.” Moreover, Tuva *höömii*, in Tserendavaa’s view, is not authentic *höömii*, but a simplified, reduced form produced in the throat rather than in the chest, lacking the physical power of Mongolian *höömii*.³¹ Representing the opposite view, Zoya Kyrgys devotes large parts of her recent book, *Tuvan Throat-Singing*, to defending the claim that the origins and most sophisticated development of throat-singing are incontrovertibly Tuva. But since scholarly ethnographic accounts of throat-singing date back only about a century, and the earliest usable recordings are from the 1930s and 1940s, claims about throat-singing’s origins and prehistoric development are invariably reduced to conjecture based on circumstantial evidence.³² What is beyond cavil is that in both Tuva and Mongolia the elevation of throat-singing to the status of a “national” music is a recent phenomenon that belies its proliferation among specific social groups living largely within a limited geographical region.



Among Tuvans, for example, the most tenacious practice of throat-singing has been documented in areas of central and western Tuva that comprise the traditional herding territory of around ten clans, and it is these clan names that turn up repeatedly in the pantheon of throat-singers: Ondar, Oorjak, Kuular, Kyrgys, Xovalyg, Dongak, Mongush, Tumat, Sat, Xomushku.³³ The correlation between throat-singing expertise and clan names is particularly striking in light of evidence that, as anthropologist Caroline Humphrey wrote, “The Tuvian clans and lineages more or less disappeared in the Manchu period (mid-eighteenth to twentieth centuries) as functioning units in society.”³⁴ In other words, the concentration of throat-singing talent among members of these nonfunctioning kinship units may provide one of their principal cultural legacies.

In other parts of Tuva, most notably the eastern region of Todzhu—where vast, thickly forested hills, bogs, and lakes provide the habitat for around 5,000 Todzhu-Tuvans, who form an ethnolinguistic subgroup among Tuvans—throat-singing is all but nonexistent.³⁵

The case of Todzhu is an interesting one. Difficult to access, with rivers providing the main means of travel, Todzhu maintains an ethnolinguistic and cultural identity distinct from other parts of Tuva. The traditional economy of the Todzhu-Tuvans centers on hunting and reindeer herding rather than stockbreeding. The Todzhu dialect differs from Tuvan as it is spoken in the center and west of Tuva and is related to Tofa, the language of the Tofalars, a small Turkic group living southwest of Lake Baikal whose language is endangered.³⁶ During a visit to Todzhu in 1988, Eduard Alekseyev, Zoya Kyrgys, and I recorded a variety of material that included songs and intoned speech addressed to animals and spirits, melodies played on wooden jew’s harps, and imitations of wild and domestic animal sounds. In its focus on sonic interaction with the natural environment and with the spirit world, this material overlapped broadly with what we recorded in other parts of Tuva, with one exception: in Todzhu, we found only minimal throat-singing, and none of it displayed the vitality and inventiveness of throat-singing in the west of Tuva.

Was the paucity of throat-singing among the Todzhu-Tuvans a result of differences in the topography and environmental conditions in which they lived? Or was it due to their focus on reindeer herding rather than steppe pastoralism or cattle- and horse-herding? Or did differences perhaps arise from social tradition that may have been only indirectly related to physical environment and occupation, for example, a taboo? Living just several hundred miles from the western grasslands and maintaining trading contacts with other parts of Tuva, Todzhu-Tuvans have certainly not lacked exposure to throat-singing. But in a landscape of densely forested hills, lakes, and



bogs that lacks the magnificent open vistas and constant sonic stimulation of the windblown grasslands, it is possible that the practice of throat-singing is simply one that did not resonate with the Todzhu-Tuvans, literally or figuratively.³⁷

Like Tuva, Mongolia also owes its tradition of throat-singing to a compact local geographic region. The relatively small size of this region becomes apparent when compared to the vastness of Mongolia as a whole, which is many times larger than Tuva. Sengedorj and Tserendavaa had told us that throat-singing came from the west of Mongolia, from Chandman, and they invoked as evidence the legendary figure of Bazarsad, who was inspired to throat-sing by the sound of wind whistling through bamboo on the shore of Lake Har-U. But among a small population of Tuvans who have long inhabited Tsengel Sum, the westernmost district of Mongolia, we heard a different legend of origin, which was not set in Chandman but farther south, beyond the border of Mongolia, in what is now the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. There, so the legend goes, flows a river called the Eev or Eevi, and it was the sound of its waters tumbling in reverberant waterfalls that first inspired humans to throat-sing. Curiously, although the Tsengel Tuvans venerate the Eevi, our fieldwork turned up no evidence that throat-singing has flourished in Tsengel in recent times, nor does it seem to have flourished among the separate community of Tuvans who live among the Oirats and Halha Mongolians of Hovd Aimag, farther to the east of Tsengel.³⁸

The complex ethnogenesis and continual movements of Turkic and Mongolian groups in the Altai region suggest that, rather than pitting Tuvan and Mongolian throat-singers against one another in a pointless contest of antiquity and authenticity, it is surely more sensible to regard them as broadly sharing a common geocultural origin. The particular intersection of environment and culture—of topography, animistic beliefs, and musical practices—that provided the crucible of throat-singing was almost certainly the zone of mountains and high grasslands that extends from the center and west of present-day Tuva into western regions of present-day Mongolia and the northwest corner of what is now Chinese Xinjiang. There, herders from a variety of Turkic and Mongolian tribal and clan groups intermingled, intermarried, and shared techniques of representing the powerful forces of their natural environment in sound.

Even after the creation of the Tuvan People's Republic in 1921 and continuing after Tuva became part of the Soviet Union in 1944, herders crossed back and forth freely between Tuva and Mongolia (see plate 16). The characteristic performance styles that have come to define Mongolian throat-singing and Tuvan throat-singing may actually be of quite recent vintage. The origin of these styles may not lie in deeply rooted cultural distinctions but



rather in the quirks of particular singers, whose influence became magnified in recent years through the cultivation of “national” musical styles.

Tserendavaa had explained how a few singers from the west of Mongolia brought throat-singing to Ulaanbaatar, and how throat-singing has come to play a central role in performances by national folk troupes, festivals, radio and television broadcasts, and recordings representing Mongolian music.³⁹ These days even a brief visit to Ulaanbaatar cannot help but confirm Tserendavaa’s account. Throat-singing in Mongolia has become reterritorialized in Ulaanbaatar to such an extent that, during our month of field research in the west of the country in summer 2000, my colleagues and I documented far fewer *höömii* singers than we were able to document in several days in the capital city.

Ethnomusicologist Carole Pegg chronicled this transformation of throat-singing from a regional tradition in decline to a much-celebrated form of national art and cultural heritage. She also noted that the story has a political edge, for the musicians from Chandman who lay claim to the origins of the present throat-singing revival belong to the Halha group, which is the dominant force in Mongolian politics and, by extension, cultural politics.⁴⁰ The elevation of throat-singing to a national art is symbolically understood as the elevation of the Halhas, to the consternation of Oirats who see throat-singing as their own cultural legacy, or at least a shared one.

Conflicting claims to the cultural ownership of throat-singing are possible because of the elusiveness of its origins and evolution. But in the end, this “musical phenomenon born in the steppes,” as the Russian ethnographer Sevyan Vainshtein termed throat-singing in the title of a scholarly article, merits a place in the annals of human musical diversity, not as the musical shibboleth of any particular group but as a jewel in the artistic legacy of an entire civilization that arose in the mountains and grasslands of Inner Asia.⁴¹

Throat-singing is but one element of a coherent musical world in which jew’s harps, fiddles, plucked zithers, end-blown flutes, and raspy-voiced recitative all exploit the timbral dimension of sound as a way of representing sensory experience in broadly shared conventions of musical style and genre. While the accumulated history of centuries of migration, intermingling, hostilities, and empire-building, as well as the charismatic influence of individual musicians, has led to aesthetic divergences among different performance traditions, their similarities are far more striking than their differences, offering compelling evidence of a common past. Perhaps, like the proto-Indo-European language whose existence is conjectured by linguists, a proto-Turkic musical language once existed as a comprehensive whole among the Inner Asian nomads in the halcyon days of the Khaganate.