

EASTERN AND WESTERN MUSIC IN AZERBAIJAN

Azerbaijan is a country that sits on the edge of Eastern Europe and Western Asia which has an indigenous, traditional eastern style 'art' music called *mugham*. *Mugham* is an integral part of the Azerbaijani national identity which is more Asian in flavor, and is a core feature of the artistic creativity and native genius of their repertoire of art culture in general. Azerbaijan is also home to western musical genres, from classical music to jazz, blues, rock and pop. Azerbaijan was the winner of Eurovision 2011 and hosted the following year, attracting large numbers of Azerbaijani fans of pop music. Azerbaijan also plays host to a yearly jazz festival called Jazzerbaijan. One of the world's greatest cello players and conductors of symphony orchestras was born and raised in Baku, Mstislav Rostropovich.

The main distinction between eastern music and western music is monophonia vs polyphonic harmony, respectively. In monophonic music, the melody is composed in reference to one note, usually - but not always - the tonic (first note) of the scale that the melody is played in. In polyphonic harmony, melodies are composed in reference to a chord or a chord progression. There is a significant difference between these two basic forms of music, not just structurally, but also in the nature of the experience of listening to them.

In order to discuss this crucial difference, it is important to not create the impression that one form may be 'better' than the other. Both forms of music have their own measures for what is great about the best expressions in their respective realms. But the same criteria for judging the greatness in one form may not be able to be applied in the other. The greatness in western music should be self evident to western people but the greatness in eastern music may need to be articulated.

In monophonic music, the melody is the whole event. There are no chords or chord progressions to frame the melody and serve as the basis for composing them. So the musicality of the musicians, all the creativity that goes into the playing of monophonic melodies must be invested in the artistic expression of the melodic line. Musical virtuosity is a universal concept, and virtuosity in monophonic music can be expressed in the complexity of the composition and the speed at which it can be cleanly executed. It can also be expressed in depth of feeling.

In eastern monophonic melodies, one can express a profound depth of feeling through the expression of only a few notes. The outer musical composition and the inner depth of feeling are not opposed to each other, but an overly complicated melody played at dizzyingly fast speeds does not lend itself to being a good vehicle for the depth of feeling that monophonic music uniquely expresses. Each interval should be given sufficient time to register, and the occasional bursts of speed should be reserved for small clusters of notes that were first played slowly enough so we can savor the depth of feeling in them.

Among the various forms of traditional indigenous musical cultures of the eastern world, there are two fundamental categories which musicologists have identified by the terms

folk music and art music. Folk music is played with a definite meter. It has a steady beat that is repeated throughout the composition. Art music does not have a definite meter. It is played without a steady beat, and expresses an ambiance that calls to mind classical European opera.

The melodies in both art and folk versions of eastern traditional music follow what is called in musicology 'staircase' construction; one note follows the other in a procession that resembles exercise scales. Exercise scales can be rather boring and repetitive, so the musical creativity of eastern musicians seeks to create interesting patterns in the otherwise straightforward melody of a simple exercise scale by altering the progression of the notes.

Perhaps the most significant way of altering the otherwise straightforward progression of a staircase-form melody is the unexpected ways that the notes can be clustered into distinct musical phrases. Especially in eastern art music which is entirely meter free, the clusters, or grouping of notes into short phrases becomes a study in asymmetry. Instead of predictable, symmetrical clustering in even numbers of notes, the clustering is both even and odd, interspersed with pauses of varying duration. The music is thus rendered as an unpredictable unfolding of the otherwise simple melody, yet it must sound complete at the conclusion of the phrase, with nothing hanging in the air so to speak, waiting to be resolved.

Staircase melodies have a property, or power to influence our state of mind that is not evoked by ordinary melodies which skip around. Music played in a series of tones beginning with the tonic, the Do of Do, Re, Mi, and proceeding 'up' the scale, conveys the inexplicable feeling of being transported from one 'place' to another. Depending on the number of notes selected from the possible number found within one octave, that feeling can be intensified or mitigated. It turns out that for reasons too complex to cover in this short essay, that scales composed of seven notes relatively evenly distributed across the octave interval produce the most profound examples of the mystical sense of transport when played in the ordered sequence of Do, Re, Mi and so on, up to the octave Do.

I use the word 'mystical' because there is no explanation for why listening to a series of musical tones will affect everyone the same, to feel transported, and one must marvel at the inexplicability of the power of music to have such a profound effect. Not just transported, but we feel a palpable sense that the first note in the series is 'home' and the last note is the 'destination' evoking an even more palpable sense of 'arrival'.

Furthermore, when a musician plays that sequence in a scale and deliberately delays the sounding of the final note in the series, a profound sense of incompleteness dominates the mind of the listener, and can even induce a state of true anguish until that last note is played.

We should stop and marvel at the power of music, a power that cannot be explained, at least, not in normal terms, that (one), we feel transported, and (two), we feel anguish at

being denied the expected sensation to ‘arrive’ at the ‘destination’ of that last note. In addition to those two inexplicable phenomena, there are a few other features of monophonic music we ought to know about. Thanks to the absence of chords, it is possible to play all the tonalities existing within the framework of the octave interval, not just the familiar twelve notes on the piano.

It has been determined by researchers who measure what is called the “just noticeable difference” in all our sensory modalities that the untrained human ear is capable of distinguishing the difference in pitch between two notes that are only $1/84^{\text{th}}$ of an octave apart in frequency of vibration. Between every one of the 12 notes on the piano keyboard, there exists a veritable micro-octave of seven divisions that anyone is capable of hearing and responding to. Musicologists refer to the notes on these micro-octaves as microtones.

Eastern musicians have access to the 12 standard (in western terms) notes in an octave plus an additional 72 microtones. To the best of my knowledge no musical composition exists which employs all the tones and audible microtones in any one composition. Usually only a few or several select microtones are used in conjunction with a seven tone scale to compose traditional eastern melodies.

There is something strange about microtones; unless the listener is convinced that the musician intended to play that microtone, it will sound ‘off’, as if the musician had played out of tune.

How is it possible that one and the same frequency of vibration will have two completely diametrically opposite effects on the listener, depending exclusively on how the listener feels about the musician’s intent? It sounds impossible, but in fact that is exactly what eastern musicians do every day. They deliberately play microtones, some of them so noticeably different from the ‘normal’ tone nearby, with the intent to induce a specific effect. The intended effect is to increase the profoundness of the depth of feeling that monophonic music is especially good at inducing in the attentive listener.

Azerbaijani *Mugham*, like the related musical traditions in surrounding countries, makes extensive use of meter free, asymmetrical phrasing and heavy microtones to induce the most profound depth of feeling. The origins of this unique musical tradition are from (at least) two ancient sources. The first is ancient Egypt. The same people who built the great pyramids and invented a language from scratch that conveys a deeply spiritual philosophy also discovered the power of musical scales to induce extravagant states of mind, what we can call transcendence.

When Pythagoras studied sacred geometry in Egypt, he also discovered musical scales there. Exhibiting a strong preference for the neat geometry associated with the most harmonious intervals, Pythagoras sanitized the Egyptian musical scales of all microtones, and brought those simple scales of only harmonious intervals back with him to Greece, which launched the western tradition of music based on chords.

Meanwhile, the original concept of Egyptian musical scales with their microtones spread across North Africa and also migrated to Mesopotamia, the Middle East, Central Asia and East Asia. The esoteric idea of using monophonic meter free microtonal scales for transcendence met with the native indigenous folk music already a part of the local cultures throughout the east and produced a synthesis of musical forms of great diversity. By the time the Egyptian idea of scales reached the South Caucasus, the tradition of the Ashiq, the bard or minstrel singer / storyteller was well developed, and the two great musical traditions merged and evolved into the eastern style art music we call *mugham*.

Like many native indigenous cultural elements around the world, *mugham* appears to be threatened by the upsurge of interest in all things western by the young generation. Many people in Azerbaijan recognize the importance of their native indigenous art music as an integral part of the Azerbaijani national identity. Currently there is a resurgence of interest in *mugham* in Azerbaijan. There is a vigorous effort to teach the children of Azerbaijan the art of *mugham*, and starting at a surprisingly early age for such a complex, nuanced and sophisticated form of music. But in order for the children who are learning *mugham* to have a future in the performing of *mugham*, they must have an audience, and most children in Azerbaijan consider *mugham* to be grandpa's music, and not appropriate for them. I feel confident that when they grow up and become adults, they will rediscover the magic of *mugham* and treasure it as much as my generation does.

For more information about Azerbaijani *mugham*, please visit the website www.mugham.net