

Soviet Asia: A Multi-Ethnic Non-Melting Pot

by Theodore Levin

Astride the banks of the Yenisei River in the city of Kizil, capital of the Soviet Autonomous Republic of Tuva, stands a monument whose trilingual plaque in English, Russian and Tuvan, a Siberian Turkic language, announces its location as "The Center of Asia." Local legend has it that at the end of the 19th century an errant Englishman, having already visited the centers of Europe, Australia and Africa, set out to add the center of Asia to his conquests. His compass led him to the Yenisei – not, in fact, to the site of the present monument, which was erected not long ago to complete a pleasant riparian park, but to a spot downriver on the grounds of an old estate.

The cheerful nonchalance with which the site of the monument was shifted upriver is appropriate to the approximative spirit of the Englishman's geographic discovery. For where are the boundaries of Asia, to begin with, and which ethnic groups count as Asian? Answers to these questions might be straightforward in the case of East Asia or the Indian subcontinent, but clear definitions become murky at the extremes of the vast part of Asia that falls within the Soviet Union. In the Caucasus Mountains of Southwest Asia, for example, the ancient Georgian nation straddles a traditional but still vaguely defined border between Europe and Asia. Georgians, however, are nonplussed by geographical ambiguity: they consider themselves European. To the northeast, the Ural Mountains form still another traditional but imprecise border. A number of the major ethnic groups that inhabit the ostensibly European region west of the Urals, such as the Chuvan, Bashkir, Tatar and Kalmyk peoples, are clearly more closely related to the indigenous populations of Siberia and Central Asia than to those of Europe. In the extreme northeast of Asia, the Chukchis, who dwell on the shores of the Bering Strait, form a cultural bridge with the Inuit, Yupik and Inupiaq residents of northern Alaska, even if the land bridge that once united them has disappeared beneath the sea.

In the towns and villages of Soviet Asia, away from the allures of assimilation offered by cities the world over, ethnic identities remain strong. Ethnic groups that have achieved political recognition have maintained a discrete traditional territory and national culture. Each Soviet republic, autonomous republic, autonomous re-

gion and national district is centered around the identity of a particular national group. Still, officially recognized Soviet nationalities do not always coincide with the identities of ethnic groups based on earlier clan or tribal affiliations.

The "separate but equal" status of official Soviet nationalities is reinforced by both law and tradition. Popular support of ethnic and national identities forestalls any melting pot society. Non-Russian rural residents of Soviet Asia tend to speak and understand little Russian, and the younger generation of rural workers and collective farmers, with little need to use Russian, shows little interest in learning it.

Nature and history have both affected the movement of peoples within Soviet Asia, creating an ethnic and demographic map whose anomalies reflect the past's turbulent political history. Yet a present-day traveler, journeying overland along any of the endless chains of villages that stretch the length of the continent, would be struck as much by the continual, gradual shift of dialect, dress, music and customs as by ethnic and linguistic disjunctions. The sharp borders that are the inevitable result of political gain, loss, compromise and convenience often ignore ethnic and linguistic continuities and divisions.

Through much of Soviet Asia, the common ethno-linguistic thread that runs through the gradually shifting fabric of rural life is that of Turkic cultural heritage. The Turks of modern Anatolia are descended from a variety of nomadic groups that migrated westward from points in Inner Asia beginning more than a millennium ago. However, not all the migrants traveled the full distance to Anatolia. The result is a band of Turkic settlements that stretches from Turkey eastward to the source of Turkic civilization in the Altai region of South Siberia and the oases cities of Xinjiang in the West of China. In fact, if Turkic cultural roots bind together large parts of the Central Asian and Siberian countryside, Russian culture serves a similar role in the urban life of Soviet Asia. This is not to say that cities are inhabited exclusively by Slavs and villages by people of Turkic descent. Rural Siberia is peppered with Russian settlements, the legacy of pioneers and prisoners who came, or were sent, from Western Russia as early as the 16th century. Conversely, there are also significant populations of



A group of amateur Uzbek musicians meet regularly at a community cultural center in Khiva. Photo by Theodore Levin

non-Slavs in the cities of Soviet Asia. However, ethnic origins notwithstanding, the present common language of Soviet Asia's young urban professionals is Russian, not a Turkic tongue, such as the Chagatai language spoken in the Central Asian renaissance of the 16th century.

Ethnic diversity among the peoples of Soviet Asia is mitigated by common patterns of culture that have produced unifying features of style and genre in music and other arts. For example, the nomadic inhabitants of the Central Asian and South Siberian steppe share a rich oral musical and literary tradition that includes epic poems many times longer than *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, strophic folk songs and virtuoso solo instrumental repertoires. The latter are performed on lute-shaped instruments with two or three strings, such as the Kirghiz *komuz*, Kazakh *dombra* and Uzbek and Turkmen *dutar*, as well as on jew's harps made of wood, bone, or metal and called by a variety of local Turkic names. Jew's harp traditions also exist among Russians, who call the instrument *vargan*. Among Siberian peoples, it is frequently played by women, sometimes in consorts of three or four.

The traditional music of professional musicians in the great Silk Route cities of Bukhara and Samarkand also displays a unity that cuts across ethnic lines. There,

Uzbeks, Tajiks and Bukharan Jews perform a repertory called *shashmaqam*, which once flourished under the feudal court patronage of Muslim khans and emirs. It incorporates poetry associated with the Islamic Sufi tradition and is sung in Uzbek and Tajik, an Eastern dialect of Persian. The *shashmaqam* in turn displays a number of musical similarities to the *mugam* repertory indigenous to Azerbaijan. Like the *shashmaqam*, *mugam* is a highly aestheticized music closely connected to a venerable tradition of Islamic science, philosophy and music theory traceable to the Middle Ages. This tradition left its imprint on much of what can be regarded as classical music in Central Asia and the Near East.

In the Caucasus, particularly in Western Georgia, an abiding predisposition towards vocal polyphony (multi-part singing) has permeated most musical genres, from lullabies to sacred hymns. Polyphony is widely practiced among members of the large variety of ethnic groups indigenous to the region and contrasts sharply with the predominantly monophonic (unison) music of nearby Armenia.

For outsiders, it is often difficult to perceive distinctions of musical genre and differences in the social status of musicians that are clear to insiders. As mentioned earlier in the discussion of music of the steppe

dwellers and urban professional music from the Silk Route cities, both folk and classical musics exist in Soviet Asia. Soviet musicologists and folklorists have used the expression "professional oral – tradition music" to designate orally transmitted musical repertoires that in musical complexity, rigorous training and social status correspond to what in the West would be called classical music. The Azerbaijani *mugam* and the Uzbek *katta ashula* (literally "big song") fall within this category. By contrast, the more "down home" music of the steppe reflects the proximity of herders and horsemen to the natural world. Much of the music played on the jew's harp is devoted to onomatopoeic reflections of natural sounds: wind, rain, horses, the cries of animals. The "throat singing" of the Tuvans, Western Mongols and Bashkirs, in which one singer produces simultaneously a fundamental tone and overtone, is also said to imitate the sounds of nature.

In the late 20th century, the social role and the status of music and musicians in Soviet Asia seems to be tied less to the practices of individual ethnic groups than to the policies and cultural conventions of the multi-ethnic state. In the Soviet Union, music education, scholarship, performance and recording are supported and administered by branches of the Ministry of Culture. For official purposes, musicians are designated as either "professional" or "amateur." These designations have less to do with a musician's talents or social status than with the niche he occupies in the eyes of the cultural bureaucracy. "Professional" musicians may be paid for concerts or recordings, play in radio station collectives and belong to the official musicians' trade union. "Amateurs" tend to perform without pay at local cultural centers, amateur arts festivals or at weddings and private gatherings. Often it is the "amateur" musician who preserves the traditional spirit or flavor of a musical repertoire to a greater extent than polished and choreographed "professional" ensembles.

In recent years, the audience for authentic music played as much by "amateurs" as "professionals" has grown rapidly in many parts of the Soviet Union. Records, concerts, films, television and radio have focused on living, traditional cultures and their fragile equipoise with the modern age. The participation of a superb group of Soviet traditional musicians in this year's Festival and of their American counterparts in a folk festival in Moscow later this summer is a welcome sign of commitment in both countries to promoting the values of living traditional musics.

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Suggested reading

Belyayev, V.M. *Central Asian Music*, ed. and trans. M. and G. Slobin. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1975.

"Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, vol. 19. London, Washington, D.C. and Hong Kong: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980.

Suggested recordings

Georgie: chants de travail et chants religieux, vols. 1 and 2 (Ocora, 1976-79).

Georgia I (Barenreiter). [UNESCO Collection: a musical anthology of the orient]

Mongolie, chants kazakhs, et traditions epique de l'ouest (Ocora, 1986).

Voyage en URSS: Anthologie de la musique instrumentale et vocale des peuples de l'URSS: caucase de nord, volga-ural, no. 9; azerbaijan, turkmenistan, no. 8; georgie, armenie, no. 4; kazakhstan-kirghizistan, no. 7; ouzbekistan (La Chant du Monde – Harmonia Mundi, 1986).