

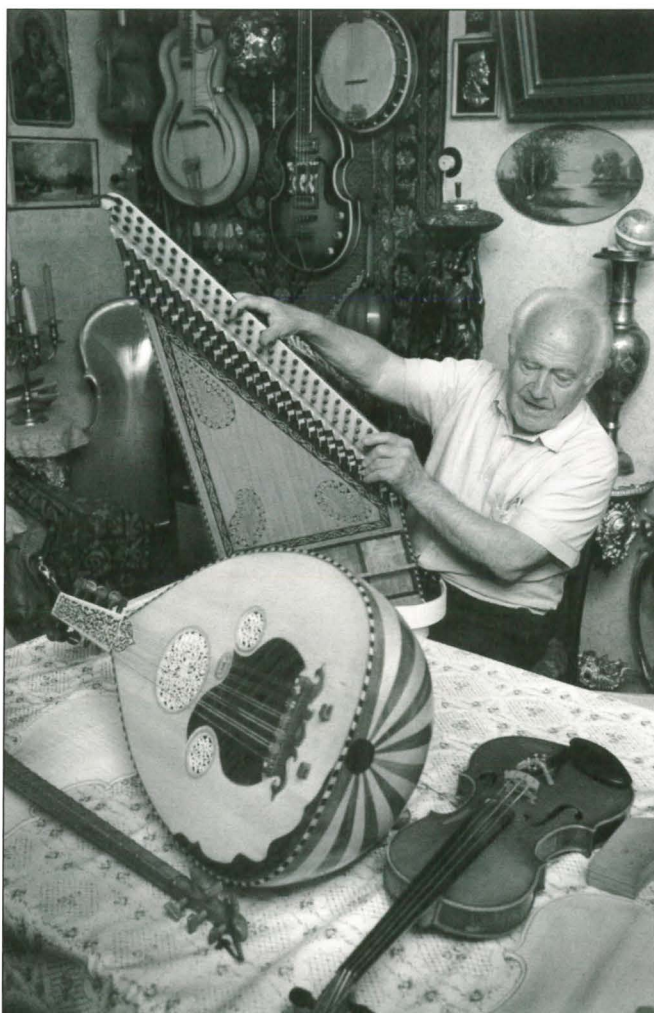
Music and Musicians along the Silk Road

by Theodore Levin

So many musicians, so many stories — each a window into a life, a society, a history. Each story is unique, yet connected to other stories, other histories. The lands of the Silk Road contain a remarkable musical cross-section of this dense web of human connectedness. What are the origins of musical connections? How is it that musicians separated by great distances play similar instruments or perform in similar musical styles? And conversely, why, in some cases, do musicians living only a valley or mountain pass away perform music that is utterly different?

Musicians, musical instruments, and music itself have surely been on the move since antediluvian times. The astonishing diversity of the world's music is matched only by the reassuring similarity of the basic tools used to produce it: foremost, of course, the human voice, followed by instruments made from ubiquitous natural materials such as wood and animal parts and classified into groups such as flutes, fiddles, lutes, and drums; melodies and scales usually containing no more than three to seven separate pitches; rhythms that organize the temporal dimension of sound. Indeed, music along the Silk Road illustrates overarching regularities not only in the way it is physically produced, but also in the role it plays in society and culture.

In music, as in other aspects of culture, the history of the Silk Road has largely been the history of interaction between two large cultural domains: the sedentary world and the nomadic world. Nomadic and sedentary people have coexisted in Eurasia for millennia, and their relationship has not always been an easy one. In the 13th century, for example, Genghis (Chinghis) Khan's nomadic armies laid waste to great cities such as Samarkand and Baghdad, while in the 20th century, the Soviet Union, an empire built on the power of industry and agriculture, tried forcibly to sedentarize some of Inner Asia's last nomads. Yet despite periods of hostility, pastoralists and sedentary dwellers have both relied on an intricate commercial and cultural symbiosis that is one of the hallmarks of Inner Asian civilization. This symbiosis is evident in the way that music and musical instruments have traveled from one cultural



realm to the other.

It may well have been along the Silk Road that some of the first "world music" jam sessions took place. For both Europeans and Asians, the mesmerizing sound of exotic instruments must have had an appeal not unlike the visual allure of exotic textiles, ceramics, and glass. Innovative musicians and luthiers adapted unfamiliar instruments to perform local music while simultaneously introducing non-native rhythmic patterns, scales, and performance techniques. Before the Crusades, numerous instruments from the Middle East and Central Asia had already reached Europe: lutes, viols, oboes, zithers, drums, and other percussion. Following trade routes in both directions, many of these instruments also turned up in China, Japan, India, and Indonesia. For example, the Central Asian short-necked lute called *barbat* is the ancestor of the Middle Eastern *oud* and

European lute as well as the Japanese *biwa* and Chinese *pipa* — an instrument that Chinese documents record as belonging to the "northern barbarians," which is to say, nomads. Turkic and Mongolian horsemen from Inner Asia were not only lutenists, but also were probably the world's earliest fiddlers. Upright fiddles

Armenian instrument maker Hakob Yeritsyan displays a qanun (rear), oud (on table), and violin, which illustrate the migration of musical instruments along the historical Silk Road. The qanun originated in the Arabic Middle East, the oud is related to the European lute and Chinese pipa, and the violin and other European strings may have evolved from horsehead fiddles first played by Turco-Mongol herders.

Photo © Sam Sweezy

strung with horsehair strings, played with horsehair bows, and often featuring a carved horse's head at the end of the neck have an archaic history among the nomadic peoples of Inner Asia and are closely linked to shamanism and spirit worship. Such instruments may have inspired the round-bodied spike fiddles played in West Asia (*kamanche*, *ghijak*) and Indonesia (*rebab*) and the carved fiddles of the subcontinent (*sorud*, *sarinda*, *sarangi*). Loud oboes called *turnai* in Central Asia became the *shahnai* in India, *suona* in China, and *zurna* in Anatolia. Central Asia in turn imported musical instruments from both East and West.

Nomad Performance Competition in Central Asia

Two bards take their place before an audience of several hundred onlookers, who squat in a loose semicircle on a grassy hillside. One of the bards ceremoniously addresses the gathering in an elevated rhetorical style, then sings a lyrical poetic text while strumming an accompaniment on a small lute. The other bard follows, repeating the same performance sequence but with greater eloquence, livelier gestures, and crisper strums on the lute. Such oratorical contests, variously called *aitys*, *aitysh*, or *deish* in local Turkic languages, are one of the cornerstones of nomadic culture in Central Asia. An analogous event for virtuoso instrumental soloists is called *tartys*.

The rules of the contest vary widely and depend on the particular genre in which the competitors excel. For example, bards may improvise poetic verse without ever using the sounds "p" or "b," or reply to the verse of a competitor using the same rhyme scheme. Virtuosos on strummed lutes like the *dombra* or *komuz* may try to outdo one another in complex fingering techniques and hold their instrument in eccentric postures — upside down, behind the neck, with crossed hands, and so on — while continuing to play it.

Each bard tries to outdo the other in strength, eloquence, and humor. Strategies are numerous. Mockery is one, but watch out for the reply! A single word can cause a technical knockout, and indeed, the public watches such contests as if they were viewing boxing matches.

The power of the bardic word has always been useful to persons in authority both to defend their own supremacy and attack the position of an adversary. Just as the great religions have ascribed the power of the sacred to the physical sound of particular words and syllables, nomadic spirituality, rooted in an intimate relation with the natural world, maintains the magical power of words and music through the vocation of the bard. Like shamans, bards are often regarded as healers who can summon spirits and as living repositories of cultural memory. For one who performs such a vital social role, qualifications are crucial. And what more democratic way to certify excellence than through competition? All of the nimble qualities of mind and body required to endure

Notwithstanding millennia of cultural exchange, however, pastoralists and sedentary dwellers preserve distinctive musical identities. Moreover, music may serve as a telltale vestige of a nomadic past among groups that are presently sedentarized. In nomadic cultures, the preeminent musical figure is the bard: a solo performer of oral poetry who typically accompanies himself or herself — for women have played an important role in the Inner Asian bardic tradition — on a strummed lute with silk or gut strings. Nomadic cultures have also produced virtuosic instrumental repertoires performed by soloists on strummed lutes, jew's



and flourish in the harsh conditions of the Inner Asian grasslands are exuberantly summed up in the nomadic performing arts and their quintessential traditional showcase, the *aitys*.

ADAPTED BY THEODORE LEVIN FROM A TEXT BY JEAN DURING, A DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH AT FRANCE'S CENTRE NATIONAL DE LA RECHERCHE SCIENTIFIQUE. CURRENTLY BASED IN TASHKENT, UZBEKISTAN, HE ALSO SERVES AS PROGRAM MANAGER OF THE AGA KHAN MUSIC INITIATIVE IN CENTRAL ASIA.

Abdurahman Nurak, a Kyrgyz musician, strums a three-stringed komuz.

Photo by Jean During



harps, flutes, fiddles, and zithers. The distinguishing feature of these repertoires is their narrative quality: pieces typically tell stories by using a kind of musical onomatopoeia, for example, the pounding of horse's hooves or the singing of birds, all represented through musical sound. Individual innovation is highly valued, and bards are performance artists who combine music with gesture, humor, and spontaneous improvisation to entertain their audience. One of the most intriguing aspects of nomadic music is rhythm, which tends toward asymmetry and is never expressed on percussion instruments (with the exception of the ritual drum used by shamans). Such rhythmic asymmetry may be an abstract representation of the natural rhythms of wind and flowing water, the shifting gait of a horse as it adjusts its pace to changes in

Aygul Ulkenbaeva plays the dombra, a Kazakh long-necked lute.

Yedil Huseinov is a jew's harp virtuoso from Kazakhstan.

Photos by Cloé Drieu

terrain, or the loping of a camel — all central to the nomadic soundworld.

In sedentary cultures, by contrast, metrical drumming is a highly developed art. Reflecting perhaps the deep impact of Islam as a spiritual and cultural force among Inner Asia's sedentary populations (in contrast to its relatively limited impact among nomads), the central artifact of musical performance is the elaboration and embellishment of words and texts by a beautiful voice. Singers are typically accompanied by small ensembles of mixed instruments that almost always include percussion. The beauty of the voice may also be represented symbolically by a solo instrument such as a plucked lute, violin, or flute, which reproduces the filigree embellishments and ornamentation characteristic of a great singer.

From Istanbul all the way to Kashgar (Kashi), in the west of China, the highest artistic aspirations of urban musicians were realized in the performance of classical or court music known as *maqam* (or cognate terms such as *mugham*, *mukam*, *makam*) and in Iran, as *dastgah*. Local styles and repertoires of *maqam* are like regional dialects of what is at root a common musical language. The *maqam* represents a vast yet integrated artistic conception that encompasses music, metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics within a worldview that is specifically Islamic. Like classical music in the West, *maqam* demands specially trained musicians and has evolved over at least a millennium in conjunction with erudite traditions of music theory and poetics.

Islam is not the only great religion to be represented in musical life along the Silk Road. Buddhism has shaped the form and style of monastic chanting which, like *maqam*, exists in a variety of local and regional traditions bound by common spiritual and aesthetic ideals. It has also created a cultural context for a vast array of music that celebrates festive events tied to holidays and life cycle rituals. Assyrian Christianity, based on the doctrine of the 5th-century Syrian bishop Nestorius, spread eastward along the Silk Road between the 7th and 10th centuries and survives as a living spiritual tradition among adherents in Syria and in diaspora communities in the West. Present-day Assyrian choirs represent an ancient tradition of liturgical song and chant rooted in the same "Oriental" scales and melodic modes as Middle Eastern music commonly associated with the Islamic



world. Similar scales and modes also turn up in the music of Armenia, one of the Middle East's oldest Christian cultures, and in Jewish music and chant, for example, cantillation of the Torah and spiritual songs sung on the Sabbath and other holidays. Jewish communities have lived since ancient or early medieval times in the great cities of the Middle East and Central Asia: Baghdad, Bukhara, Balkh, Damascus, Samarkand, and others. As a minority living in a culturally symbiotic relationship amid a Muslim majority, Jews both absorbed elements of Muslim musical traditions and served as musical performers at Muslim courts and for Muslim festivities. On the subcontinent, Hinduism inspired a rich practice of Vedic chant, devotional songs, and sacred dance, as well as framing the aesthetics and metaphysics of raga, one of the world's great art music traditions.

Much music along the Silk Road is not linked to a single faith or religious worldview, but is the result of syncretism and intermingling. For example, the mystical songs of the Bauls of Bengal reveal a synthesis of Hinduism and Sufism, the mystical

trend in Islam. The ecstatic chant and dance favored by some Sufi groups is itself very likely an adaptation of archaic shamanistic practices. Shamanism and animism have also syncretized with Buddhism to create forms of vocal chant, instrumental music, sacred dance, and theater that pay homage not only to Buddhist deities, but also to the spirit world. The brilliantly eclectic form of early Japanese masked dance-drama known as *gigaku* exemplifies just such Silk Road syncretism, bringing together ritualized performance that may have been influenced by contact with the mask art of ancient Greece, Iran, India, and China.

The great religions each have their own liturgical repertoires, but the lines between sacred and secular so sharply drawn in Western music are muted in the traditional culture of the Silk Road lands. Festive calendar and life-cycle celebrations inspire music that covers the entire spectrum of human spiritual needs, from meditation and prayer to rejoicing and dance. In the tradi-

Chinese men playing huqin (a two-stringed Chinese fiddle).

Photo © Jean-Luc Ray, Aga Khan Foundation



tional world, boundaries between sacred and secular dissolve: the world is sacred, life is sacred. Moreover, in traditional societies, there are no “traditional” musicians. There are simply musicians. The essence of tradition is transmission from one generation to the next, and it is common to see people of diverse ages enjoying the same songs, tunes, dances, and stories. The association of particular musical styles and repertoires with specific age groups so pervasive in contemporary Western music is largely absent in traditional Silk Road music.

While music along the Silk Road is strongly rooted in local traditions, not all of it is strictly speaking “traditional.” Ensembles such as Sabjilar from Khakasia and Roksanake from Kazakhstan represent what one might call neo-traditionalism, that is, music consciously modeled on tradition yet itself the product of a post-traditional world. How could it be otherwise, for in music, as in everything else, today’s Silk Road links not only territorial communities, but also imagined communities — communities



scattered by emigration and diaspora yet joined by common cultural ideals. For example, expatriate Afghan musicians living in Peshawar, New York, Toronto, and Fremont, California, are all writing new chapters in the history of Afghan music. Bukharan Jewish music barely exists in its homeland, the city of Bukhara, but is vibrantly alive in Tel Aviv and New York. Some of the most imaginative music by Chinese composers is being written and performed not in China but in the United States. The music of this new Silk Road responds quickly and resourcefully to changes in fashion and taste in the communities it serves. Indeed, it is this connection, between musicians and the spiritual needs of living communities, that is the lifeblood of musical tradition, or neo-tradition. Each in its own way, the personal stories of the musicians who have journeyed from afar to perform at this year’s Folklife Festival are testimony to the abiding strength of the communities that have inspired and supported their art.

Musicians from the city of Khiva in the Khorezm region of northwest Uzbekistan perform music for dancing. Photo © Theodore Levin

Ghewar Khan, from Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, India, plays the kamaicha, a long-necked bowed lute with a skin-covered body.

Photo by Henry Glassie/Pravina Shukla

THEODORE LEVIN BEGAN MUSICAL FIELDWORK IN INNER ASIA IN 1977 AND IS A FREQUENT VISITOR TO THE REGION. HE TEACHES IN THE MUSIC DEPARTMENT AT DARTMOUTH COLLEGE AND IS CO-CURATOR OF THIS YEAR’S FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL, *THE SILK ROAD: CONNECTING CULTURES, CREATING TRUST*.



Baul musicians from Bangladesh performing: Sunil Karmakar, violin; Momimul Islam, tabla; Bably Ami, flute; Anjali Ghosh, singing with harmonium; and Belal Siddique with cymbals.

Photo by Henry Glassie/Pravina Shukla

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