

Tuvan Throat Singing
and the Legend of the Horse Head Fiddle

At the geographical center of Asia, surrounded by the Altai-Sayan mountain system, lies the country of Tuva. Fifty percent of its mountainous territory is covered with forests of firs, Siberian larches, cedars, pines, and poplars. Four hundred lakes spot the region, many of which are glacial, (though Tuva is also known for its warm, curative waters); and the Jenisej river, one of the longest rivers of our planet, originates in the territory of Tuva and flows over two thousand miles north to the Arctic Ocean. Additionally, more than 1,500 species of plants, 240 types of birds, and a large variety of animal species (including the lynx, the glutton, the sable, the beaver, the yak, and the camel) inhabit Tuva. (Geography 1) “Tuva is a country of great variety with almost every type of landscape: luxuriant meadows, green taiga [or, forests], boundless steppes, medicinal springs, beautiful lakes, rushing mountain rivers fed in spring by melting snows, dusty semi-desert and snowy chains of mountains.” (Tuva 2)

There is archaeological evidence of tribal warfare and settlement in the Tuvan region since the Paleolithic era, but in the year 1207 AD, when Genghis Khan swept through the area with his troops, Tuva was brought under Mongolian rule and remained a state of Mongolia for the next five centuries. Then, from the mid-eighteenth century until 1911, after the dissolve of the Mongolian empire, the people came under the Chinese Ch’ing or Manchu dynasty. From 1914 to 1917, Tuva was a Russian protectorate, and, in 1921, the independent Tuvianian People’s Republic, with the city of Kyzyl as its capital, was established. Then, “[i]n 1944, Tuva was brought into the USSR as an Autonomous Region of the RSFSR and in 1961 became the Tuvianian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR)” (Nomads, pg. 44). Today, Tuva remains a republic within the Russian Federation.

At 170,500 square kilometers, Tuva supports about 308,000 inhabitants, two-thirds of whom are of Turkish decent and one-third of whom are of Russian decent (Tuva/Mongolian 2). For eons, the Tuvan people have remained sheltered within this natural reserve, nestled within the boundaries of the mountains. Thus, due to its isolation from the great trade routes of old, to the Soviet Union's restriction of the area to the outside world for nearly half a century, and to the general inaccessibility of the landscape, Tuvan culture has remained virtually untouched. (Tuva 4)

The economic-cultural way of life of the Tuvan people can be categorized into three distinct types: the pastoralists of the steppe zone, the hunters and reindeer-herders of the taiga zone, and the pastoralist hunters of the taiga-steppe zone. The steppe zone pastoralists base their existence on the herding of cattle, sheep, goats, horses, and camels, supplemented by land cultivation and occasional hunting, fishing, and gathering. The hunters and reindeer-herders base their economic life on hunting for meat and fur, gathering, occasional fishing, and reindeer-breeding, which animals are used for carrying loads, riding, milk, and, in cases of extreme necessity, meat. Finally, the pastoralist hunters base their existence on both pastoralism and hunting, depending on the numbers of livestock available. (Nomads, pg. 49-50) Whatever shape their economic culture takes, a majority of Tuvans still follow a nomadic way of life, migrating their homes and property with the cycle of the seasons in search of hunting grounds or pastures for their livestock.

True to the ways of other nomadic peoples, the horse remains a most cherished possession for the Tuvans, and is of particular importance to their way of life. Aside from its primary role of transportation and pack animal, the horse provides the nomadic herdsman with meat, milk, leather, and hair. "It is quite logical, [then,] that the number of horses kept by a Tuvan herdsman [is] a direct measure of his wealth." (Nomads, pg. 65) More than a mere possession, the horse is accorded a high place of honor beside its master, for the modern Tuvans still carry on the ancient nomadic custom

of burying a horse with its deceased rider, and, in epic Tuvan literature, the hero of the tale “does not even bear a name until he acquires a horse.” (Nomads, pg. 66)

Dwelling in this natural haven, where their existence is dependent on the land and surrounding animals, the Tuvans and, thus, “Tuvan pastoral music, [are] intimately connected to an ancient tradition of animism, the belief that natural objects and phenomena have souls or are inhabited by spirits . . . According to Tuvan animism, the spirituality of mountains and rivers is manifested not only through their physical shape and location but also through the sounds they produce or can be made to produce by human agency. The echo off a cliff, for example, may be imbued with spiritual significance. Animals, too, are said to express spiritual power sonically. Humans can assimilate this power by imitating their sounds” (Scientific American, pg 80-82).

Stemming from both this profound system of belief and the nomad’s love for his horse, the Horse Head Fiddle is an important part of Tuvan pastoral music. According to ancient Mongolian legend, this special fiddle was brought into existence by the desperate grief of a poor shepherd boy named Suho. The tale says that when Suho was young, he lived with his grandmother and tended their small flock of sheep. One evening, the boy was late in returning home, for he had come across a newborn foal, abandoned and alone. For the next months and years, Suho cared for the beautiful white horse, who became to him “as dear as his own life”. (Suho, pg. 8) Then, one spring, news spread among the local shepherds that the governor (or, according to other versions, the *khan*) was holding a big race in the city, promising the winner his daughter’s hand in marriage. Suho’s comrades admired his horse very much and urged him to enter the race, which he did. Naturally, Suho’s brilliant white horse out-raced the others and won, but the governor was unwilling to make this poor shepherd his son by marriage. So, the governor offered Suho three pieces of silver for his horse and demanded that he leave. But, when Suho adamantly refused, the governor then ordered

that Suho be beaten and his glorious horse confiscated! Suho's comrades carried the broken and unconscious boy home, where his grandmother tended his wounds. Meanwhile, proud of his new possession, the governor attempted to ride the white horse in the sight of his noblemen; however, the horse would not have it and bucked until the governor had fallen off. Swiftly, the horse galloped away, but the irate governor commanded that the horse should not get away alive. His guards drew their bows and shot relentlessly at the fleeing creature, yet the horse did not stop, though the arrows struck its flanks and bristled from its back. Finally, the horse made its way to Suho's loving home, and, though Suho carefully watched over the ailing animal, the horse grew weaker and soon died. Suho spent many sleepless nights, struck with grief, until one evening when his beautiful white horse appeared to him in a dream. It spoke kindly to Suho and told him that if he would take its bones, hide, and sinews "and use them to make an instrument to play on . . . then [it would] be able to stay by [Suho's] side forever" and would always bring him peace and delight. (Suho, pg. 40) "The moment Suho awoke, he set about making a new kind of musical instrument. He did just as the white horse had told him to do, fashioning the instrument from the bones, sinews, hide, and hair of his beloved horse." (Suho, pg. 42) When he finished his work, he ornamented his creation with a carving of a horse's head, and, when he played the instrument, he could sense the white horse beside him, listening.



According to Seth Augustus in his paraphrase of the liner notes from Huun-Huur-Tu's recording, "60 Horses in My Herd", there are only slight differences in the Tuvan version of the tale, namely that a peasant named Oskus-ol in ancient Tuva "rescued a colt that was abandoned by a wealthy landowner--a Noyon." When the Noyon found that the horse could outrun all of his own horses, he became jealous and had the horse put to death. Everything else in the legend from then on is the same, except that, when Oskus-ol finally played his new instrument, "the clouds parted at

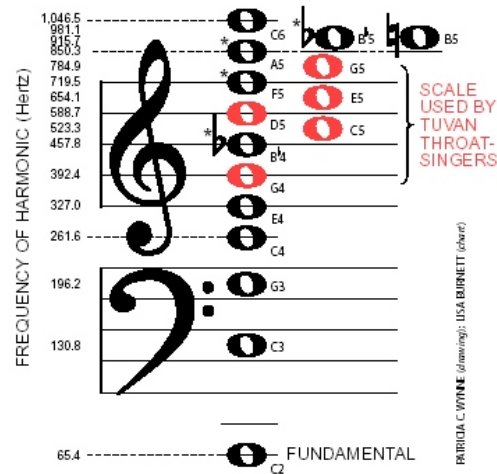
the top of a high mountain and the horse's double came charging down along with a whole herd of horses just like it” (Igil 2), illustrating, again, the equivalence of many horses to great wealth. Thus, even after the death of his horse, Oskus-ol was rewarded in his grief with prosperity, perhaps equal or greater to that of the Noyon.



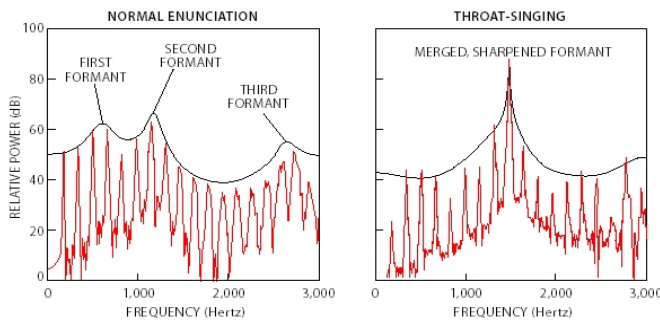
The extent of Mongolian contact with Tuva naturally gave Tuvan culture an instrument of equivalent background and construction, though it is uncertain who first influenced who. Called the *igil* (pronounced ih-GILL), this horse head fiddle is Tuva’s version of the Mongolian *morin khuur* and dates back about one thousand years. The slender, tear-shaped body is made from a soft wood (such as pine) and skin, and supports two strings of horsehair. The bow is also of horsehair and wood, and is not fixed to the strings. The neck is fret-less, and, when playing the instrument, the player’s fingers or nails touch the strings without pressing down onto the surface of the neck. With the use of specific bowing techniques, such as “the galloping horse, the walking horse, the walking camel (kind of like the walking horse, but slower)” (Brubeck 2), the igil can be “used to re-create equine sounds.” (Scientific American, pg 80)

According to Stefan Kamola, “the igil is used by singers to search for melodies, and the voice of the instrument works along with the human voice to present khoomei [throat singing] not just as song, but as a distinct and deeply meaningful type of sound.” (Music and Language 7) The igil, therefore, is an integral part of Tuvan culture, and it is one of the several different instruments that can accompany throat singing. “The Igil has a hauntingly beautiful sound and goes very well with throat singing . . . as it is in a similar frequency range.” (Igil 1)

Throat singing, also commonly referred to as overtone or harmonic singing, is a type of folk singing whereby the singer may enunciate a series of specified harmonics above a fundamental pitch, a drone. In the pure nature of sound, any fundamental frequency, or pitch, will inherently ring with a series of harmonics, specifically lined up in ascending order above the fundamental. “In normal speech and song, most of the



energy is concentrated at the fundamental frequency, and harmonics are perceived as elements of timbre – the same quality that distinguishes the rich sound of a violin from the purer tones of a flute – rather than as different pitches. In throat singing, however, a single harmonic gains such strength that it is heard as a distinct, whistle-like pitch.” (Scientific American, pg. 84) In other words, the



SOUND SPECTRA show the difference between normal enunciation of the vowel /a/ in “hot” (left) and throat-singing (right). In both cases the power is concentrated at distinct frequencies—the harmonics produced by the vocal folds (red). When harmonics align with the formant frequencies of the vocal tract (black), they gain in strength.

throat singer, by careful maneuvering of the vocal tract, tongue, lips, and jaw is able to single out one of the many overtones above this fundamental pitch: “[b]y refining the resonant properties normally used to articulate vowels”, the throat singer can “strengthen the harmonics that align

with the narrow *formant peak* [or, the narrow region of frequency within a sound spectrum], while simultaneously weakening the harmonics that lie outside this narrow peak. Thus, a single overtone can project above the others.” (Scientific American, pg. 84) Additionally, when “[s]ingers draw on organs [throughout the vocal tract] other than the vocal folds to generate a second raw sound,

typically at what seems like an impossibly low pitch” (Scientific American, pg. 84), they are able to reinforce *two* separate harmonics at the same time, one above each of the two “fundamental pitches” – in essence, singing in two voices, with the drones below them. As complex as this whole phenomenon may seem, “[t]hroat-singing is not taught formally (as music often is) but rather picked up, like a language.” (Scientific American, pg. 82)

“Variation in the character of throat singing styles is dictated by careful positioning and movement of the tongue, lips, and jaw.” (How To’s 3) Though there is no widespread agreement, due to discrepancies between the few studies that exist on the subject and the continuing development of modern hybrids and variations, most scholars yet agree on three to five basic styles of Tuvan throat singing: khoomei, kargyraa, sygyt, borbangnadyr, and ezegeiler. At the heart of every style is *xorekteer*, meaning “chest voice”, a harsh, bright tone of voice which is often used to launch the singer into the khoomei and sygyt styles. While the term *khoomer* can be used to mean Tuvan throat singing in general, it is also a style unto its own. It is “a soft-sounding style, with clear but diffused-sounding harmonics above a fundamental usually within the low-mid to midrange of the singer’s voice. In Khoomei style, there are two or more notes clearly audible . . . The pitch of the melodic harmonic is selected by moving the root of the tongue and the epiglottis.” (Types 3, after intro) Kargyraa is distinctive for its heavy, croaking chest drone; the formation of this style is closely linked to the shape of sung vowels, for both throat manipulations and the shape of the mouth cavity affect the harmonic pitch. It is the style for which Paul Pena (of *Genghis Blues* fame) took first place in the second international Khoomei Symposium and contest in Kyzyl, “and became known as ‘Earthquake’ for his amazingly deep voice.” (Pena 8).

Sygyt “is usually based on a mid-range fundamental. It is characterized by a strong, even piercing, harmonic or complex of harmonics above the ‘fundamental,’ and can be used to perform

complex and very distinct melodies, with a tone similar to a flute.” (Types 11, after intro) The formation of this style is akin to that of khoomei, with a drastic increase in tension. To filter out unwanted harmonics and gain that desired clean, piercing tone, the tongue must rise around the gums and completely seal off the mouth cavity, save for a small hole left open on one side of the mouth or the other, behind the molars, which then sends the sound between the teeth, producing the sharpening effect. The technique for changing the pitch is the same as that for khoomei, “and in sygyt, it is possible to nearly remove the fundamental.” (Types 12, after intro)

It is debatable whether borbangnadyr and ezengileer are two more distinct styles, or merely enhanced versions of the previous three. Borbangnadyr consists of a combination of wide trills and warbling effects on, most often, the Sygyt style (the result being termed *Sygyttyng Borbangnadyr*), though it has been applied to the lower-pitched styles as well. “Ezengileer comes from a word meaning ‘stirrup,’ and features rhythmic harmonic oscillations intended to mimic the sound of metal stirrups clinking to the beat of a galloping horse. The most common element is the ‘horse-rhythm’ of the harmonics, produced by a rhythmic opening-and-closing of the velum.” (Types 14, after intro)

“The popularity of throat singing among Tuvan herders seems to have arisen from a coincidence of culture and geography: on the one hand, the animistic sensitivity to the subtleties of sound, especially its timbre, and on the other, the ability of reinforced harmonics to project over the broad open landscape of the steppe.” (Scientific American, pg. 82) The true origins of Tuvan throat singing remain obscure; however, “legends . . . assert that humankind learned to sing in such a way long ago. The very first throat-singers, it is said, sought to duplicate natural sounds whose timbres, or tonal colors, are rich in harmonics, such as gurgling water and swishing winds.” (Scientific American, pg. 82) And, according to Tom Vitale, reporter for the National Public Radio station, “It is said to have begun with a monk hearing overtones produced by a waterfall in a particularly

acoustic canyon in Western Mongolia.” (Tuva or Bust!, pg. 66)

While, according to *Scientific American*, many male herders can and do throat sing, though “not everyone is tuneful” (*Scientific American*, pg. 82), there is a taboo within Tuvan society concerning throat singing and women. It is strongly believed that if a woman engages in throat singing:

“[She] is unhappy and brings misfortune of various kinds. Her khoomei may affect her brothers, her husband and her father who may fall ill or be deprived of material well-being. She gets problems in her abdomen or she will encounter great difficulties when she gives birth to a child. The child of a female khoomei singer itself isn't any better off either as it can fall ill of her singing khoomei. The most common concern about female throat singers, however, is that they may become infertile. In the worst case scenario her khoomei leads to the death of her male relatives.” (*Overtone Singing*, pg. 110)

In spite of continual verbal warnings of these dangers, from men and women alike – Tuvans who instinctively feel that women and *khoomai* are an unnatural combination – women may have actually been throat singing for their own personal enjoyment behind the men’s backs, for many years now. Afterall, “every epoch has its female throat singers that were considered as exceptions to the rule that women cannot and do not sing *khoomai*.” (*Overtone Singing*, pg. 110) Aylangma Dambyrang – a member of the first and, so far only, all-women’s group of traditional Tuvan folk music and throat singing – was born to a family of herdsmen and has been throat singing since childhood. “In the morning or evening she pulled the blankets over her head, so that nobody would hear her, and sang for herself.” (*Overtone Singing*, pg. 110, quote from Choduraa Tumat) Some, like the former



Khunashtaar-ool Oor-zhak, a master throat singer and teacher, proclaim that women were actually the first to sing khoomei. Indeed, true to the nature of a nomadic society, the men's place is out in the wilderness, the forests and the steppes, while the women are left to tend domestic affairs in the *yurt* or *aal* (nomadic dwellings). "This age-old division of labour maintained marked differences in a male and a female world, each with secrets of their own for the opposite sex." (Overtone Singing, pg. 110).

With a modern, growing openness toward women, however, and the general lightening of women's household loads, more and more women are performing in public. The aforementioned women's performing group, Tyva-Kyzy ("Daughters of Tuva"), was established in 1998 and, to many, "their appearance on the stage was a brave step of delicate women . . . The group has been valued for the originality of its repertoire and instrumentation. They have recently been recognized as the best players of national instruments". (Tyva-Kyzy 8)

Another notable Tuvan throat singer is Sainkho Namtchylak, a woman born to a Tuvan family of nomadic ancestry. According to Yu Sen-lun, reporter for the *Taipei Times*, "Namtchylak grew up singing and later studied vocals in Moscow. Apart from classical training, she also learned traditional Tuvan throat singing (khoomei) and Tibetan Buddhist singing. In 1989, she first crossed into the European avant-garde improvisatory music scene, dedicating herself to expanding the potential of throat singing in combination with various musical styles. The same year she worked and toured with former Soviet Union avant-garde jazz band Tri-O." (Taipei 6) Namtchylak is known for her "unique throat singing technique and her experimental spirit" (Taipei 2); however, her own people do not appreciate her incomparable sound, and instead view her as a traitor to their long-standing traditions. In 1997, "Namtchylak was physically assaulted and hospitalized in Moscow by



a group of people claiming to be Tuvans. The 2001 album ‘Time Out’ was released after her rehabilitation from the assault. She wrote in the CD that the album is dedicated to Tuva and its people. ‘I hope one day my fellow countrymen can understand, that I am an artist belonging to the whole world. The music I create has no boundaries,’ she said.” (Taipei 12-14)

A final important figure in the world of women and khoomei is Moon Heart, a female Tuvan shaman, born to a celestial shaman-woman and a horse thief. Moon Heart’s mother passed away when she was only a child, and she was given unto the care of relatives who did not understand nor appreciate the girl’s shamanic gift. When this gift



began revealing itself to her at an early age through persistent voices and visions, Moon Heart’s relatives punished her by locking her in a cellar. Prior to Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika* economic reform in Russia of 1987, atheism was the established “religion” of the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist totalitarian state, and “the shamans were persecuted, considered charlatans, drunkards, seen like the scum of the society” (Moon Heart 3). After trying to “heal” Moon Heart of this gift passed down from her mother, to no avail, the family had her committed to a psychiatric hospital. This proved useless, however, “and Moon Heart started to foretell events, to diagnose diseases, and in some cases she foresaw the death of her relatives. At this point, they accused her of being a witch and . . . sent her to Moscow.” (Moon Heart 5) With the voices constantly harassing her and the spirits revealing themselves to her, Moon Heart felt neglected and alone in Moscow; however, she did meet her husband during her time there, and, when *Perestroika* was instituted, Moon Heart and her new family returned to the capital city of Kyzyl in Tuva, where she still works today as a serious shaman.

Moon Heart’s story is intriguing, as is this whole other dimension to the Tuvan connection with animism: shamanism. As with everything else in Tuva, shamanism has been preserved in its

original form, and the people still strongly respect the traditions and ancient rituals.

“The Tuvan shamans have various lineages: there are the celestial shamans, those who come from the mermaid of the steppe, or the taiga, there are the shamans who come from the waters and those who derive from the spirits of the demons. All of them have a common task: to help the people. In order to [achieve] this, they use the secret language of the animals, of the khoomei, throat singing, of the drum and the trance, of the fumigation with the juniper of the taiga, artish. Every Tuvan shaman considers himself the continuation of the life of his own fathers and grandfathers.” (Tradition 3)

According to Moon Heart:

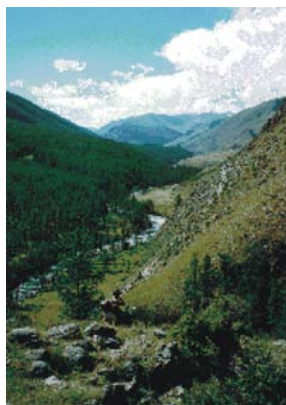
"In order to cure and in order to calm a person or in order to recall the positive spirits, I use the khoomei and the drum. The contact with the spirits happens mentally, in an altered state of consciousness, through the use of the voice. We believe that the narration and the music have a magical force; in fact the spirits of the mountain love music and the stories and listen to us gladly . . ." (Moon Heart 8) "To get in touch with the spirits of the mountains and to soothe them, we use our traditional throat singing chants whose melodies derive from our contemplation of life, of the sound of nature, of the birds, of the whistling of the steppe wind, of the mountain's draft." (Women of Power 5)



Here, we discover another interesting facet of the Tuvan tradition of throat singing. For one, Moon Heart, though she be a woman, she is also a shaman, one who is deeply in tune with the spirits; so, who can possibly bring any taboos against her for her throat singing, which she uses to help her own people? For another, connected to the spiritual power running through Nature around them, the Tuvan shamans utilize khoomei in reaching the plane where contact with those spirits happens.

As Moon Heart stated in the quote above, the shaman's drum also plays a vital role in the ancient ceremonies. To most Siberian shamans, the drum is a horse and the drumstick is a whip to drive that horse forward. (Tuva or Bust!, pg. 140) In one ceremony, as the shaman falls into an otherworldly trance, his beating of the drum becomes faster and more rhythmic, and the shaman may begin roaming violently about, "flushing out evil spirits . . . yelling at them while beating his drum", until he has corralled them into his drum and wrestled them into submission before utterly destroying them. (Tuva or Bust!, pg. 140)

In conclusion, the people of Tuva, secluded in a natural haven in the center of Asia, have an intimate, multi-faceted relationship with their environment. According to *Scientific American*, "Sound mimicry, the cultural basis of Tuvan music, reaches its culmination in throat singing . . . [It is] one of the many ways the pastoralists can interact with and represent their secluded aural environment . . . [It is] the quintessential achievement of their mimesis, the revered element of an expressive language that begins where verbal language ends. For the herders, it expresses feelings of exultation and independence that words cannot." (pg. 80, 87)



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