

**AZERBAIJAN DIPLOMATIC ACADEMY
AZERBAIJAN IN THE WORLD**

**AZERBAIJANI CULTURE IN DIASPORA:
A CONVERSATION WITH JEFFREY WERBOCK**

1. How did it happen that you began performing mugham? Was this a conscious choice or rather something more contingent?

This question touches on why I play mugham. One can love a certain kind of music and just listen to it; one doesn't have to learn to play it in order to enjoy it. But for me there was never any question, I had to apply myself to learning to play mugham and I never asked myself why. From the first moment of hearing it played live, right in front of me; I was already thinking how to ask for lessons so I could learn to play it too. And at first I was only concerned about learning how to play mugham.

However, thanks to the curiosity of a few friends, I had cause to play this music for others even though I was just beginning my studies. They encouraged me to perform this music, unknown to all of us, as much as I can, so I took that advice to heart and soon after I arranged for a performance at UCLA (University of California in Los Angeles) and another one at Grinnell College in the State of Iowa. I noticed that being on stage performing for others didn't bother me or make me nervous so I decided to arrange for more public demonstrations of mugham, as I understood it those early days.

Shortly after moving to New York City in 1974 I had my first public appearance there in the Gallery of Musical Antiquities at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The audience response was positive and showed me that public demonstrations of my fledgling ability to play mugham should become a parallel study, how to best present mugham to western audiences. I've been following that track ever since. Many years later I also came to realize there is only one way I can show Azerbaijanis just how much I venerate their great art music, which is to let them hear me play what I know. Only then will they understand my crazy heart.

2. What is mugham for you?

Mugham is the means through which I approach a transcendental state of mind. It is equivalent to meditation and is more like a spiritual experience than entertainment.

3. Has the subject matter of your music (mugham) evolved over time and what influences have affected you in this evolution?

My first teacher, Zevulon Avshalomov, was originally from Daghestan. He lived in Baku for one year as a teenager learning to play Azerbaijani music on kamancha. His version of mugham was very simple, yet incredibly powerful emotionally and spiritually. When I met him in Los Angeles in 1972 I had no knowledge of mugham; all I knew was that this man was able to speak directly to my innermost feelings with his music, in a way that is beyond the reach of language to describe. I studied his version of mugham for nearly 15 years. There were some technical challenges; the oriental scales rich with microtones unknown in western music, the meter free cadence, the bowed and fretless kamancha – I was formerly a

guitarist. But the bigger challenge for me was being able to recreate the extraordinary atmosphere that my first teacher was able to generate with his music.

Then he passed away in 1987. Losing my first teacher was more than I could bear. We not only forged a close relationship akin to father and son; his presence was a very important part of my life and his music was necessary to me in a way that few people can understand. I could not understand it myself; all I knew was that I needed that music like a person needs air and the thought of living without him drove me to wish to find another teacher as soon as possible. One year passed like this when Zeynab Xanlarova came to the United States with her ensemble. I paid keen attention to her tar player Zamiq Aliyev and kamancha player Adalat Vezirov. Listening to those two master musicians made me realize that mugham is far more complex than what I had been learning, and it was as if the 15 years I studied with my beloved first teacher and his inscrutable, mysterious music was merely a preparation for learning real mugham. Thus I endeavoured to travel to Azerbaijan to meet mugham masters and find a teacher.

I got a few lessons from both Zamiq and from Adalat, but because they lived in Baku and I lived in New York City, lessons were few and far between. On a few occasions, I was able to grab a few lessons from two tar players who visited the USA, Firuz Aliyev and Nisim Nisimov from Guba. Each time, they gave me a little more material to work with.

Then one day in the year 2000, 28 years after the first time I heard mugham, a young virtuoso kamancha player and graduate from the Azerbaijan Music Academy in Baku, Imamyar Hasanov had moved to Brooklyn, a suburb of New York City, and I took lessons from him once a week for 14 months. Imamyar taught me the basics of all the important mughams before he moved to Virginia and stopped teaching me. I diligently practiced what he taught me for several years until one day all the other versions of mugham that I had learned began to manifest in a kind of synthesis. One important factor that led me into a deeper understanding of mugham and its potential for improvisation was, having assimilated the basic structure of the major mughams, I was now in a position to appreciate what other musicians were able to do with mugham.

Over the course of the 40 years I've been applying myself to learning mugham, I may be lucky in that I learned from three kamancha masters and two tar masters, which gave me an interesting perspective on mugham since they were all great musicians and all very different in their playing styles. Also, I am impressed with the way mugham is played on both eastern and western instruments at weddings where it appears that the strict rules of mugham are a bit looser and they render mugham in a way that calls to mind blues and jazz, more open and free to improvise. So I would say my mugham playing has evolved in that direction, a bit less strictly classical and a bit more open to the search for ever fresh ways of getting through a mugham and making the most of each passage.

4. Do you feel you represent Azerbaijan and its culture when performing mugham to international audiences, or do you rather feel your music is more cosmopolitan in terms of the message it seeks to communicate? What is the overall message?

For the first 30 years of my studying instrumental mugham, I was obsessed with authenticity. The people who invite me to perform and speak about mugham deserve to have an authentic experience and because I am not Azerbaijani, I need to concern myself with this. It must sound and feel like mugham and not some interpretation of it, through the filter of some foreign culture. But the overall message is something which goes beyond the questions of authenticity or provenance. Of course mugham belongs to Azerbaijan; the people of Azerbaijan are the creators and inheritors of mugham so they deserve to get the credit that is their due for being the source country of such a remarkable and extraordinary form of musical art. But Azerbaijan belongs to the world, and the world belongs to the universe, so the overall message is that Azerbaijan is the conduit through which this utterly cosmic music has appeared on this earth.

5. In what ways, if any, do you think you, and/or your music, are different from *Azerbaijani* artists performing mugham?

I worked very hard over many years to sound correct and so far no one has told me I play mugham incorrectly. That said, I have to admit that I do not put in the many hours of daily practice that a professional musician of any genre ought to. I have to support myself and my family so I must work at a normal job, and play as much mugham as I possibly can as time permits. I started listening to mugham very late, when I was already 21 years old so I needed many more years than an Azerbaijani student should need to develop the capacity to play this music as it should be played. Perhaps the single most important aspect of learning mugham for a musician is the milieu, the environment of learning, surrounded by other struggling students, comparing playing styles, talking about the structure and meaning of mugham in groups. I was not able to avail myself of the support that the Azerbaijani student of mugham can take for granted. That didn't stop me, but it certainly slowed me down.

My repertoire is not as extensive as professional musicians. I focus almost exclusively on mugham and as a result have learned only a few dozen songs out of the hundreds of traditional tunes in the repertoire of Azerbaijani folk music. Since I mostly perform as a soloist demonstrating various mughams on tar, kamancha and oud, I have the luxury of dwelling on mugham. Without at least a percussionist, there is really no point in demonstrating song and dance music. In any case, my mission is about mugham. Those who come to my program of mugham can listen to other musicians and singers too of course. I make sure everyone knows about the MSA website, www.mugham.net where they can listen to the professional Azerbaijani musicians and singers which I personally enjoy the most, and those links can also take them to hear samples of the rhythmic repertoire of traditional Azerbaijani music as well.

Another point of departure between my style of mugham music and many professional musicians is that I am not particularly interested in music technically. My interest is in the depth of feeling that mugham alone is capable of bringing audiences into. I lose interest when musicians feel obliged to show how fast they can play and how complicated they can render some of the passages. No one who I perform for seems to be interested in watching someone play another version of Flight of the Bumblebee or some other technical challenge resembling a NASCAR race. What I and my audiences hunger for is the incredible depth of mugham,

how deep it reaches into the human imagination and evokes an effect there which is unprecedented and not found in any other music I know of.

Also, please bear in mind that virtually all Azerbaijani professionals play in ensembles, so they must practice with other musicians and play in a way that is stable and recognizably the same from performance to performance. By contrast, soloists don't need to be concerned with that as much, so it does offer more freedom to just let whatever is in one's heart at that moment to be made manifest.

Most of my performances are actually lecture demonstration programs inside classrooms at colleges, universities, academies and museums. Even on those occasions when I am invited to perform in a nice concert hall, I try to be true to the general aims of the Mugham Society of America, which is to also educate, not just entertain. That has a definite effect on the nature of the experience and the way the music is presented.

6. Have there been instances of, or are there plans for, collaboration between yourself and other artists from Azerbaijan or indeed elsewhere?

Over the years, some professional musicians and singers from Azerbaijan have been very kind and generous with me, allowing me to perform with them in various venues both in Azerbaijan and elsewhere. I hope to continue to be invited to perform more with my music colleagues in Azerbaijan who play mugham at the professional level.

7. Which of your concerts do you consider a particular success?

None of them. I have yet to feel that what I was able to do in this realm so far was worthy of the word success.

8. You are Chairman of the Mugham Society of America. When and how was the Society established and what is its primary focus/agenda? What kinds of activities are carried out under the Society's realm?

MSA was formed in 2002. Its one and only mission is to promote mugham and increase awareness about Azerbaijan and its traditional art culture. The activities are two, one is performing and lecturing, the other is documentary filmmaking.

9. How do your international audiences respond to your presentations of mugham? What kind of questions do people ask?

The responses are uniformly positive. I am always amazed at the degree of attentiveness of western audiences listening to mugham, many of them for the very first time. Of course, first time listeners do not understand everything about mugham, but when they are invited to listen carefully, they will feel what we feel, which I like to characterize as a pause from the daily concerns and an entry into an entirely new way of feeling, a more cosmic feeling, for lack of a better word. Sometimes their questions will reflect that euphoric uplifting feeling, sometimes their questions are prosaic, such as, what kind of wood is the tar made from, what is that skin on the face of the instruments, why is the bridge on the kamancha at such an angle, and so forth. Musically inclined listeners sometimes ask technical questions about the scales of mugham, the microtones, the unusual way the notes are clustered and what effect they have. Sometimes audience members ask surprisingly sophisticated questions

like, "You explained to us that mugham is a system of music based on the idea of using musical scales to have a profound effect on human consciousness. What is going on in your consciousness when you are playing mugham, rather than just listening to others play?" To this unusual and intriguing question, I explained that a mugham musician must partition his or her consciousness so that one part remembers which mugham is unfolding and where in the progression of the mugham we are, while the other part is undergoing the incredible euphoria, the uplifting feeling of being transported to a mystical realm that all attentive listeners must surely experience.

10. What is your assessment of the current state of the music scene in Azerbaijan? What should be done to prompt, and contribute to, its further evolution? That is, what forms do you think the government's support for music, and perhaps art in general, could assume?

Azerbaijanis love every kind of music. The music scene in Azerbaijan is incredibly diverse and that diversity is guaranteed to evolve because of how much the people there love music in general. Regarding your government's support promoting mugham, I haven't seen or heard of another government in the world contributing to its national musical traditions to the degree found in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan appears to be a world leader in this regard.

11. Azerbaijani government has by now come up with a number of mechanisms, including the international festival in Gabala and international mugham festival, through which it exercises its cultural diplomacy. What do you think about these efforts?

I remember meeting with the past president, Heydar Aliyev, in May of 1997, on the day of a concert to be held in the newly renovated Opera House and in which I was going to perform that evening. He made it very clear to me he believed it was important that Azerbaijan supports its traditional arts and that mugham in particular was very important, very central to Azerbaijani national identity, and that he regarded the development of a strong sense of national identity as the highest priority. It seems to me that the people who are making the decisions today regarding where to allocate resources have respected Mr. Aliyev's wishes and in diverse ways. You mention two venues, the Gabala Music Festival and the International Mugham Festival. Both are highly effective in reaching out to people living all over the world. In addition to the programs ongoing within Azerbaijan is an outreach effort which could be called cultural diplomacy as you put it, because it is casting Azerbaijan in the best possible light in countries around the world. From my point of view as someone who came to feel about Azerbaijan as I do thanks to mugham, I would have to agree that cultural diplomacy is the best way to educate the world about Azerbaijan.

12. Azerbaijani government has invested a great deal in promoting mugham within the country and internationally. Are there other potentially promising strands of music that should receive more attention?

Azerbaijan is becoming a modern country and like in all modern countries, the young generation is attracted to modern culture and that includes music. Since mugham – along with Ashikh music – is traditional music from the past, it may need more support than other forms of music in order to survive the passage of the 21st century. Mugham is uniquely

Azerbaijani and for that reason alone it deserves extra attention. But mainly, because mugham is the most powerful, most astonishing and most authentically Azerbaijani example of Azerbaijan's overall musical genius, I have to agree with the position of supporting organisations and individuals devoted to promoting Azerbaijan via mugham programs around the world.