

A WESTERNER'S VIEW OF AZERBAIJANI MUGHAM

By Jeffrey Werbock

In 1971, at the very beginning of my adult life, I read a book; a kind of spiritual / mystical travelogue about the Caucasus and Central Asia that made a deep impression on me. Among other things, it told of the people of Azerbaijan and the strange power of their traditional music. About 18 months later while living in Los Angeles, California, I had the great fortune to meet Zevulon Avshalomov, an elderly man originally from Derbend, Daghestan – in the Caucasus just north of Azerbaijan - who played a version of Azerbaijani mugham on the kamancha. He was mostly self taught, and although his rendition of mugham was very simple - I only understood that much later – nevertheless it was very powerful, and it stirred something unspeakably deep within me. From the first moment of hearing mugham, I felt compelled to learn how to play it, and that launched a 13 year teaching / learning relationship with Mr. Avshalomov.

During those years, my love of mugham only strengthened and that pulled me deeper and deeper into its magical aura. This continued until 1987 when Avshalomov passed away. The following year I went to a concert of Azerbaijani musicians and singers, one of whom was an accomplished master of mugham on kamancha, Mr. Adelat Vezirov. After all the years of struggling to learn to play mugham in the way that my first teacher taught me, hearing Mr. Vezirov perform made me realize that mugham was a much bigger subject of study than I ever imagined. I felt compelled to take some action because I had for years been convinced that playing mugham was a part of my destiny. I wrote a letter to the proper agency in Baku, and the next year received an invitation for my first visit to Azerbaijan.

Since then, I have visited Azerbaijan many times, each time taking advantage of the opportunity to advance my understanding of mugham. In addition, over the years, several mugham musicians on tar and kamancha had visited the United States, and whenever possible, I would study from them. In the year 2000 Imamyar Hasanov, a young Azerbaijani virtuoso on kamancha, immigrated to Brooklyn where I drove every week for lessons for over one year and I finally learned all the major mughams in the classical way. His teaching helped me to acquire a view of mugham that added to the view I already had since that fateful day in Los Angeles when I experienced the awesome power of mugham for the first time.

Mugham provides an uplifting experience, an exhilarating, euphoric transformation of consciousness. Even the simple version of mugham I first learned brought comments from members of the audience who would tell me about their experience listening to mugham that it was incredibly intense, hypnotic, transporting, transcendent, and for some even mildly hallucinogenic.

Mugham releases an extraordinary energy in the mind of the active listener. Azerbaijanis who love mugham regard that effect as an essential component of its value as music. For us westerners who have been lucky enough to have heard mugham, we do not take this for granted; we are astonished by it, and we marvel at it. For some of us it is a genuine spiritual experience. On behalf of all westerners who now love mugham, let me express our gratitude to Azerbaijan for having evolved such a wonder, a miracle in music.

Why Azerbaijan? Mugham evolved in Azerbaijan from the convergence of diverse traditions from three distinct cultures, the local folkloric one, and two foreign musical influences, an esoteric one from ancient Egypt and a shamanic one from Central Asia.

It seems in many eastern countries, their music owes much to the Islamic call to prayer, an eerie, otherworldly chant that does not follow the rules of tonality that guide western composition, nor have a time signature; it's without a regular rhythm. When this unusual form of vocal prayer spread out across North Africa, the Middle East, the Caucasus, North and South Central Asia, Western China and Indonesia, it met with the local indigenous folk music of those regions, and produced a wide variety of related musical traditions.

In Azerbaijan, the local folk music is an extraordinarily powerful form of singing known as the tradition of the Ashikh, dating back perhaps thousands of years. High pitched, high volume, full throated mountain yodeling, rendered in the dramatic declamatory cadence of epic storytelling, the tradition of Ashikh singing and playing (on *saz*) is an electrifying musical experience that has to be heard to be appreciated. When the chanting of the Islamic call to prayer, an eerie, otherworldly sound, met with the ancient dynamic music of the Ashikh, mugham was born.

Mugham has an outer simplicity that veils an inner complexity which is breathtaking. The melodies of mugham are not particularly 'melodic', as it were. Mugham melodies are mostly composed of a series of tones that proceed up and down the chosen scale. Although there may be sequences of the melody skipping over some adjacent notes in the scale on occasion, and patterns reminiscent of the intricate loops of Arabesque, primarily the sequence of tones rises and falls in a manner known as staircase composition.

At times, one may get the impression that the melodies of mugham may be nothing more than highly embellished exercise scales, except that they can be rather unpredictable in the direction they may take at any moment, a feature of mugham that can be intriguing to the point of utter fascination. Even after all these years of dedicated listening and increasing familiarity with the melodic structure of mugham, the sequence of notes and the timing of their execution still can surprise me and make me shake my head with a mix of delight and disbelief.

Staircase composition melodies are used in mugham because they convey a strong impression of a sense of transport in a way that melodies which skip and jump around the scale do not. The magical feeling of being transported by a musical scale is an integral part of the overall effect of mugham and the melodies composed by the rules of mugham take advantage of that strange and inexplicable phenomenon. However, staircase melodies are more difficult to make interesting to listen to; in mugham we compose intricate and intriguing melodic phrasing with a continuous stream of peculiar asymmetries, one segueing into the next in a fluid manner that holds the attention and fascinates. The point is partly to fascinate but mainly to keep the listener in a state of heightened listening.

Professor Theodore Levin of Dartmouth College wrote a book titled, *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*, in which he divides music into two fundamental categories: pitch centered music and timbre centered music. He sites as an example of timbre centered music the overtone singing from Tuva in southeastern Russia. Dr. Levin relates how a Tuvan overtone singer friend

spent a whole day searching for a brook that had the right soundscape to sing in. By sundown the singer failed to find what he was looking for so he went into the stream and rearranged the stones until the sound of the burbling water flowing over the rocks was just right.

The melodies of timbre centered music such as overtone music tend to be very simple. The melodies are there so that the singers and their audience have a varying signal, because a one note song can't hold anyone's attention for long, no matter how awesome the soundscape. In contrast, pitch centered music emphasizes the notes and the musical patterns they make in composition. Mugham, with its complex melodies, is somewhere in the middle between pitch centered and timbre centered music. The timbres of kamancha, tar, and balaban have a distinctly vocal quality which best support the timbre of mugham because they evolved along with the music.

In mugham, there is enough melodic structure to give the listener sufficient tonal variety to keep the attention riveted on the sound. Some of that structure is in the sequence of tones (notes), but most of it is in the phrasing and timing. The algorithm of mugham - the 'formula' we strive to understand that tells us when to start and stop, when to play and when to pause - delivers best when it is supported by a certain vocal timbre. It is an eastern sound, and the overall effect conveys the sense of being told a story in classic oriental epic style. Although the melody is an important part of the support system, the goal is the feeling of being enchanted by an ancient story being told about some deep and enduring mystery, the mystery of musical intervals and the powerful feelings they evoke in us.

The musical traditions of the ancient eastern world are based on a deep understanding about the relationship between the energy of sound and states of mind. Many of these ancient musical traditions continue to carry this knowledge, bringing to us the opportunity to feel the depth and intensity of music composed many centuries ago when spiritually powerful music shared the stage with other great works of art and monuments.

One important feature of mugham is the extensive use of microtones. Microtones are all the tones that are found in between the 12 tones (notes) on the piano. Microtones can be very dissonant when played in the context of chordal (polyphonic) music, but when used in modal melodies such as mugham, they augment the mystical power and emotional depth of the melody.

Microtones represent another dimension of musical power. However, the musician must be able to convince the listener that the dissonance coming from the microtone is intentional, or the listener will react to it as if it was a 'wrong note', as if it was out of tune, and will not be able to experience the immense feeling in it. It is a great mystery how a melody that includes the intense dissonance of microtonal intervals can have two completely different effects on the listener depending on the intent of the musician.

Intent can be practiced. In fact, it has to be practiced; there is no other way to get it right. Once the intent to harness the power of the dissonant intervals of microtones arrives at the requisite level of intensity, the musician will be able to create the desired effect every time. Although the desire to play mugham belongs to the player, the intent needed to play mugham does not. It must be passed on to the student along with the music itself from a teacher, and the traditional musical

soundscape of that culture. The student of mugham absorbs the intent of mugham musicians in a chain of transmission going back to the remote past.

Another important feature of mugham is the meter-free rendition of the melodies. Meter free melodies have no time signature, no beat, no regular, steady rhythm. With no steady rhythm to inform the musician *when* to play a given note, the musician must play the note, be it micro-tonal or macro-tonal, with a refined sense of exquisite timing, and the effect of that timing is, like the microtones, a sense of great intent.

I am thinking that by now, the reader must be wondering what the writer means by the use of the word 'intent'. This is not a word that lends itself easily to uniform agreement on interpretation, so perhaps a few words on behalf of clarity – or at least, the attempt to try to clarify – is warranted.

In fact, it is not easy to think of a word with more potential for multiple interpretations, more ambiguity of meaning. We know what we mean when we say we intended to do something, which simply means that we experienced a thought about an action prior to the action itself. And yet, there may be more to intent than mere pre-cognition. Moreover, pre-cognition, it turns out, can be just as automatic as the action, revealing a lack of genuine intent where by all appearances intent is being expressed through the action.

So what then, is intent, and how can it be expressed in music? For mugham, it is the intent to cast a certain definite mood over everyone, and every musical gesture on the part of the musician should serve that purpose. There needs to be at all moments a weightiness, what in Azerbaijani language is called *sambali*. I think we can translate that to gravitas, but without the morbid, archaic associations.

Mugham should be *sambali* in delivery, and it seems that this mood, this texture, is the emergent power that mugham casts over us, dependent on every component of its structure and the gravitas of sheer intent.

Meter-free melodies are all the time speeding up and slowing down, while the deliberately asymmetrical clustering of notes produces a flow of rhythmic irregularities, each requiring a keen vigilance and a steady, strong intent. At the same time, mugham melodies are not random. In the context of the flexible meter free condition, mugham melodies proceed in an orderly fashion. They follow staircase construction and the notes are grouped according to certain definite principle I call the algorithm of mugham. Another way to put it is that mugham resembles language in the sense that its free meter 'swing' has a syntax, a meaning that comes from the structure.

Unlike language, which means something, mugham is pure effect, so for mugham it's the effect that comes from the structure which resembles the syntax of language, or actually, the syntax of declamatory speech, the favored way of telling myths and legends in the ancient Caucasus Mountain areas.

Often it is asked, is mugham composed or improvised? Mugham is both 'composed' in the sense of there being a definite progression of notes on a particular scale of music - even though, strictly speaking, there was no composer per se – and yet highly improvised, or perhaps a better descriptor for that process would be 'personalize'. Someone familiar with the genre can recognize which mugham is being played from listening to the first few notes. A few more notes, and they may know who is playing it. There are various schools of mugham, with distinctive versions on how it is to be played, and there can be individualistic approaches as well.

Somewhat analogous to jazz's theme and variation, mugham offers the opportunity to experiment with the development of the melodic line. Not by radically altering the mode or scale but by being flexible with the tonality, by minutely varying the microtones and varying which microtone is emphasized, by varying the tempo of the progression of the melodic line, and by trying anew with the labyrinthine twists and turns that the melody can take. It's all for the sake of postponing the resolution of the melody for as long as possible, until the suspended yearning for closure has the desired effect on our consciousness.

One more feature of Azerbaijani mugham that should be mentioned is the high density of ornamentation. The grace notes, slides and trills are so frequent and ubiquitous throughout mugham that it appears to be an integral part of the music. The dense ornamentation is played in tightly clustered, discrete bursts. The extra energy of the ornaments is released at strategic moments during the development of the melody, serving to elevate even further the increasingly intensifying mental state of the listener, and as with every other element of mugham, they must be intended.

In order for mugham to have its effect on human consciousness, it must evoke in equal measure the two fundamental emotions of joy and sorrow. Like the anode and cathode of electricity, the power of mugham to elevate and transform the human consciousness from an earthly function to a divine quality issues from the flow of energy between these two polar opposite feelings. When the mugham musician can successfully balance these two primordial forces with his intent, the attentive listener takes off into a realm of pure magic, and when he returns to earth, he cannot believe where he has been.

LEARNING TO PLAY MUGHAM

The first thing that a western student of music must notice about learning mugham is that there are no written notes. Well, now there are, but originally, mugham was a classic music that was not notated. This forced the student to listen very carefully because what was just played might not be repeated, ever. The tradition known as aural learning makes a much greater demand on memory, and that has a definite effect on the quality of the music. This is not a music in which a dry skeleton is shown and then flesh, in the form of passionate feelings, comes much later after the skeleton structure is memorized. The feeling of mugham comes as an integral part of the first lesson in it.

Of course, not only did they write it down – what good it does anyone I don't know, the samples I saw showed more ink than there was white paper around the notes, the density of notation was so great – now we can record, listen again and again to the same passages without anywhere near the same commitment in energy using our memory exclusively to learn the elusive art of mugham.

The meter free condition of mugham, in which a written score with time signature would seem like it was printed on a sheet of rubber instead of paper, constantly contracting and expanding, gives the music a wave-like feeling to its substructure. Even more than the microtones, as elusive to nail precisely as they are, the timing of mugham is a study in exasperation when trying to learn it. But it is not just the timing that is elusive, it is knowing which note to play, not just when to play it, and that too is anything but straightforward.

It's as if the originators of this form of music took a competitive, almost misanthropic delight in coming up with the most unlearnable musical phraseology. Yet that doesn't really describe mugham or what it is like to learn it as a westerner, because it leaves out the sensibility of it, the logic in the way the melodies of mugham are composed. The odd asymmetries of note clustering and timing in mugham melodies are most definitely not arbitrary, just exercises in elusive melodic composition tactics. Mugham speaks a language, not of meaning but of effect. Once the student is hooked on learning mugham, he has little choice but to unravel the syntax of this language of pure musical effect.

It helps to be Azerbaijani, having listened to the sound of mugham from conception, mothers and grandmothers singing mugham-like lullabies from birth, and surrounded by the sense of awe that some Azerbaijani families feel about this national musical treasure. It sensitizes the young listener who feels called to play or sing mugham, prepares them from a very young age to comprehend the syntax of mugham.

Lacking that help, a western aspirant who wishes to play (or sing, but the melodic challenge is more than enough without having to learn to master an antiquated Azeri dialect) mugham must immerse themselves in the milieu, and thanks to recordings and now the Internet, we can do that, although nothing can completely replace the live, being-there-and-sharing-air experience with genuine mugham masters. My life circumstances did not permit me that luxury except on special occasions. More importantly, I think what helped me the most was the sense that mugham is a living tradition, with the same glow of antiquity that all ancient objects possess, plus the fact that

it is still growing. As impressive as it is to be a tourist and gaze upon ancient ruins and such, or to see the legacies of earlier versions of civilization, mugham has all that and more. Listening to mugham carries all the weight of being inside the Cathedral of Chartres, or the Western Wall of King Solomon's temple. It has the same patina as the exquisite workmanship in precious materials that once belonged to some powerful ruler. And it is alive today, in our hands, not behind glass or tourist rope.

If not for that sense, there would be no way I could have managed to get this far in comprehending mugham. Yet I have such a long way to go. Trying to track the process of learning mugham resembles one of those weird dreams in which the closer you move toward the object of desire, the further away it seems to be. Telescoping perspective.

What makes mugham so elusive to learn to play - not so much at conjuring the special atmosphere of mugham but in getting the details precisely - is a kind of formula, like an algorithm for computer code which is based on a mathematical system called fractals. Imagine a leaf with serrated edges, then look closely to see that the serrations have serrations, similar to the large serrations but on a smaller scale, and even those tiny serrations are serrated, and so on, and so on. The algorithm of mugham, its peculiar syntax, once learned, can be subjected to fractalization, and in this realm of minute detail of note clustering and timing the growth and personalization of mugham takes place. It's thanks to the fractalization of contours of the melodic lines in mugham that one gets the sensation of telescoping perspective in trying to learn it.

So that is when I am reminded that I learned to play mugham not in order to astonish with how fractalized the melodic line can be, but to impart the exquisite atmosphere of it, what attracted me to it - even in its most simplest manifestation - from the first time I heard it. What interests me is the power of mugham to cast a spell over the listener, and I don't mean the kind of spell that acrobats in the circus cast over the audience by appearing to do impossible things. There are musical traditions which give one the impression of being at a NASCAR event: the fastest fingers on the fingerboard, unleashing an avalanche of notes.

That may be thrilling in its own way, but it has nothing to do with what draws me to listen to and play mugham. There is a place in mugham for some rapid bursts of densely packed note-clusters that depend on a high degree of practiced facility, but only the hopeless show-offs will sustain such a cluster for a long time, exhausting the ear while pleasing the crowds who do not really understand real mugham. Such renderings I call anti-mugham, you know, like anti-matter. Although it can be effective showmanship, it works to undo the hypnotic power of the moments that are filled with space, when the listener feels suspended in time.

In learning to play mugham, much of the effort is directed at getting the microtonal inflection just right, but much more is directed at getting the timing just right. Without that steady beat, one can feel like a person in a dark room; it takes a serious attention to get familiar with what's inside it. Supporting that effort is the understanding that rhythm, or timing in music, is akin to melody making in the sense that musical tones are merely pulses of energy beating so rapidly that they have a feel of smooth continuity, except for the really low notes; then you can begin to

make out the sense of the sound being composed of discrete beats. Well, slow those beats down enough, and you have a rhythm.

So to play a composition with a time signature is tantamount to playing a melody with one note, and relying on some kind of intricate pattern of beats to generate the interest, like a jazz drummer doing a solo. In mugham, the phrasing is such that as the melody makes its way up and down the scale, the timing of the notes go up and down in speed, and the relation between the two movements is felt at a deep level of feeling, inducing a kind of hyper-attention in the listener. Not only is one being bathed in the rapture of musical intervals played in sequence, but the very timing itself of the tonalities is an integral part of the unified expression of music.

The magic sensation of transport from listening to staircase construction melodies, the haunting power of deliberate microtones, the high density of ornamentation, and the solemnity of the meter free cadences, all come together in mugham to offer a unique listening experience in the world of music.