CLIMBING MT. *MUGHAM*

A Westerner's View of Azerbaijan's Traditional Art Music

By Jeffrey Werbock

SPEAKING AS AN AMERICAN WHO LOVES AZERBAIJANI *MUGHAM*

I studied Azerbaijani *mugham* for 40 years, and from a variety of sources. They were carriers of the tradition, musicians from the region of Azerbaijan and Daghestan, who responded positively to my passion for this music from another land, and helped me to bridge a wide cultural gap so that I might understand their music.

In the beginning of my studies, satisfying the curiosity of friends evolved into making presentations a part of my path with *mugham.* Over the years, I have performed and spoken about my research into Azerbaijan and its art culture many times in some really wonderful places. In Azerbaijan there have been numerous performances with other Azerbaijani musicians and singers. However, most of my public performances are in the USA and Europe; mainly lecture demonstrations in academic settings.

Having to speak about Azerbaijani *mugham* and teach others to play led me to analyze this unique musical tradition in as much depth as I could muster. Much of that examination took place so I could develop pedagogical tools that would enable first time listeners of this music have a greater appreciation for it.

In organizing my thoughts about *mugham*, I undertook to identify its likely sources and trace the path of the synthesis of this remarkable tradition. So far, I have identified three different "eastern" regions with distinct cultures: Central Asia with its shamanistic lore and epic storytelling, Hindustan (India) with its treasure trove of techniques in striving for transcendental states of mind through meditation and music, and ancient Egypt, with its grandeur and advanced spiritual knowledge.

Even though Central Asia is geographically closest to Azerbaijan - Azerbaijanis speak a Turkic language originating in Central Asia - I believe Egypt is at least as significant in the synthesis of Azerbaijani *mugham*, if not more so. The chain of transmission from ancient Egypt to the surrounding regions took place over time and through multiple agents. Various related musical forms and styles of the region were influenced by the music of the ancient Egyptians, such as eastern Hebraic chant and the Islamic call to prayer. Both these liturgical traditions found their way into the Caucasus region where Azerbaijan and its *mugham* appeared and evolved into a world class art form.

The ancient Egyptians certainly knew more than how to build impressive, grandiose monuments and temples from stone. In the middle of the last century, two Austrian Egyptologists – a married couple named Rene and Isha Schwaller – made a compelling case for one particular accomplishment on the part of the ancient Egyptians possibly even more impressive than their tangible legacy: the ancient Egyptians built a language from the ground up, by cataloging the range of human vocal articulations – vowels and consonants – and assigning a cosmic significance to each one of them.

Their assignation of a universal meaning to each sound and the glyph meant to represent it was not arbitrary. It was deliberate and followed a principle that can be demonstrated more or less accurately by the pronunciation of the corresponding vowels and consonants found in many languages. They based that special meaning of a vocal sound on its sonic properties and what the vocalizer actually experiences

when pronouncing that letter. For example, the most open sound a human being can vocalize is represented by our letter "a" as it is pronounced in the word 'father'. And the most closed sound is represented by our letter "b". By putting these two sounds together, they form two words; one is 'ab' and it represents something important in our lives, now open, now closed, now open, now closed, in a continuous repetition: our hearts, both the physical and the metaphorical. In ancient Egypt, 'ab' meant heart. Reverse the order of the letters and we have 'ba' which indicated something that is enclosed within something else and at a certain moment is released: in Egyptian, it means the soul at the moment of death when it is released into the ultimate openness, infinity.

Not every human vocalization evokes by its sound universal principles such as opening, closing, or releasing. But many sounds do, and according to the Schwallers, the ancient Egyptians understood that and acted on this knowledge. From this point of view, we can appreciate that the humming sounds which we pronounce by the English (Latin) letters "M" and "N" and which represent in the ancient Egyptian language two different qualities of vibrations or oscillations – 'm' involves mouth vibrations while 'n' involves more nose vibrations - contain a rich vein of experiential meaning.

According to the Schwallers, the ancient Egyptians assembled their entire language from these basic elements, and the more letters a word incorporated, the more 'concretized' and specific the meaning. This is important to bear in mind as we listen to the melodies of musical traditions that are rooted in this ancient knowledge. This music is not just a product of human sentiment with some emotional appeal. It has a kind of esoteric knowledge as its base, and this makes it categorically different from other forms of music.

Certainly, the ancient Egyptians were aware of the power of music and its potential for inducing extraordinary states of mind, transcendent states in which a greater appreciation for reality as vibrating energy is within reach. The ancient Egyptians – who taught Pythagoras, the one generally credited for bringing the idea of scales and modes into western (ancient Greek) culture – codified the musical tones they played, assigning each note a particular – cosmic - significance. For musical purposes, the significance of any tone is a function of its relationship to another tone. In music, this relationship is known as an interval.

Musical intervals are more than just tonal relationships in some abstract, mathematical way. They have a real effect on how we feel when we listen to them, especially when we listen with an active attention. The best conditions for that are when the melody is simple enough so we can register our immediate response to each interval, yet is complex enough to keep our listening active. When we listen like that, we can register the unique feeling evoked by each interval. We don't have words to support our awareness of those feelings so it may take a special effort to discern exactly what we feel when listening to different intervals.

One characteristic difference between the various intervals is their degree of consonance, a quality which can be measured by how much energy from the originating two vibrations goes into the creation of a third vibration. The greater the energy that goes into that third note, the less consonance the interval has. Conversely,

the less energy that goes into the third note, the greater the consonance. The amplitude of the emergent note is the dissonance we feel. Every interval has its own degree of consonance / dissonance. We could even establish a scale of consonance / dissonance, beginning with the most consonant interval and listing the rest as their consonance decreases while their dissonance increases.

Consonance and dissonance are not in themselves cultural values; they describe characteristics from the physics of vibrations. Having a *preference* for consonance and an *aversion* to dissonance in music, or having a preference for dissonance, or a preference for mixing consonance with dissonance, can be culturally determined, but that does not reflect on the physics of consonance and dissonance. And all intervals have some degree of both qualities.

Except the octave, the one interval with no dissonance at all. The octave is the king of consonance; all the other intervals have some dissonance. The octave is unique among musical intervals because no third tone emerges from the interaction of the two tones composing the interval. It is also unique in that it is an interval made of two tones which are essentially the same yet at the same time different. The difference is not a mystery; it is merely the doubling or halving of the frequency of the 'first' tone. What is mysterious is why this should be. Why does the octave exist? What is this universe that the octave exists?

If we could dwell on this mystery, ponder its significance, perhaps we would feel that the octave is just about as profound as the mystery of existence itself, the mystery of Being, something that the ancient Egyptians appear to have been keenly aware of. Clearly they knew certain things that we no longer know, certain inner things, possibilities for what human consciousness is capable of in the way of perceiving reality. Certainly this was not limited to their interest in language. They regarded music as a form of communication that could possibly be even more effective than language in imparting the wisdom they coveted.

In the course of their search for the most effective means through music to convey knowledge regarding transcendent states of mind, they developed modes – consecutive series of select tones to produce a sequence of intervals – which, listened to attentively, could profoundly affect one's state. Ordinarily we are preoccupied by mundane concerns. Then, we experience something – in the present case the music of transcendence - and we find ourselves no longer immersed in the everyday. We become strangely silent within, and we fill up like a balloon with a peculiar sensation, an inflation, as if the life force within is bursting with energy.

The silence and the energy work together to impart a feeling that there is more to our lives than what we ordinarily care to think about. In this state of mind, it is much easier to perceive the world as vibrating energy. The ancient Egyptians left an abundance of evidence that they understood this, not in the dry, scientific way we do, but in a deeply intuitive way that is mostly unknown in our time.

As in their language, the tones and intervals of ancient Egyptian modal music present the listener with specific auditory perceptions that evoke responses with a cosmic dimension. In the case of intervals, this dimension is not assigned but is intrinsic, because it is based on numbers. All the tones are related to each other by the

frequency of their pitches, bringing intervals into the realm of objectivity. The ideal condition to experience this dimension in music is the simplicity of monophonic, modal scales. In the context of chords, the basis of harmony, or tripartite polyphony, there is too much going on to be able to isolate the specific feeling generated by any one interval.

Even when isolated, it may not be perfectly clear what we feel when we hear a certain interval. There may not be any way to test people for their responses to intervals since our language doesn't have specific terms regarding the kinds of feelings being referred to here when we experience different musical intervals. However, whether or not a researcher could establish some kind of consensus that crosses cultural boundaries on which intervals induce which feelings, it can be said that there is a commonality in the human responses to the effect of specific intervals much like there is a commonality to the human responses to other stimuli that is independent of the language and labels associated with those signals.

The effect of a given musical interval takes on a larger 'meaning' in the context of all the intervals belonging to a mode. In most cases, a mode consists of seven consecutive tones framed by an octave. The reason for this is as fascinating as the subject of music itself, but goes beyond the scope of this discussion. Staying with the development of the current thought, we can observe how the sounding of the sequence of seven tones belonging to the mode known as the major scale from the tonic to the octave, for example, evokes the feeling of having been taken somewhere.

It is a sublime mystery as to why people feel transported by the experience of hearing the tones of a mode played sequentially from the tonic to the octave. It feels like we are being taken 'up'. And the feeling induced by hearing the same mode in reverse, from the octave to the tonic, is the feeling of being taken back 'down'. How to explain this except to say that we ourselves are made of the same vibrating energy that music is made of, and that is what we are responding with: our own vibrations. Since we are also physical beings who travel around and move up and down, we interpret this mysterious feeling of being transported in physical terms. With the 'rise' in pitch we are taken 'up' the scale. With the 'descent', we are taken 'down'.

Even though the difference in pitch between the two tones of some interval is a matter of a difference in the frequencies of their vibration, still, our experience of being transported by hearing a sequence of tones of increasing frequency (pitch) is so pronounced that our language reflects it in the spatial words 'up' and 'down', 'ascent' and 'descent'. There is nothing inherently 'up' about faster frequencies or 'down' about slower frequencies, yet upon hearing a sequence of tones of decreasing frequencies, we feel something akin the a physical descent. Now, describing this universal sensation has become a habit of speech is so entrenched, whenever we have occasion to refer to a vibration on any spectrum of energy we say 'higher' and 'lower', rather than 'faster' or 'slower', which is what they really are.

However someone might characterize their experience of listening to the tones in a scale played in a sequence, there is this distinct sense of feeling somehow transported to some unknown, mysterious 'place'. It is not a physical place, of course; it is a mood, a specific mental state. The sense of having being brought into a mood is so

palpable that we feel we must resort to descriptors of this transformation in physical terms.

As with all the 'art' music of North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, *mugham* takes advantage of this peculiar phenomenon of feeling transported from hearing a sequence of tones of increasing and decreasing frequencies, so much so that much of *mugham* can often sound much like highly embellished exercise scales, and in truth, that is very close to what *mugham* is about, structurally. Of course if it were only that, *mugham* might not be nearly as interesting or as powerful as it is.

Listening to an 'ascending' scale, upon hearing the last note in the sequence - the octave tone - evokes the feeling of arrival. However, if the last note is delayed, we feel a wish to hear it lest we inexplicably suffer some strange discomfort. In all the years I have been giving lecture demonstrations for many hundreds of people this never once failed to happen to everyone in the room. Some people experience the yearning for closure so strongly that they have reported an almost unbearable anguish while waiting – even just a few seconds - for that last (octave) tone to be played. The same occurs when going back down the scale and delaying the sounding of the tonic, although for some inexplicable reason, the craving for closure is not quite as intense on the way down. And the same exercise using other scales, namely, the so-called minor scales, the effect is there but again, not quite as pronounced.

The octave is mysterious enough. In addition to that we have the mysterious feeling of being transported by a sequence of tones in a mode, and now we find we are unnerved by a delay in the sounding of the final tone in that sequence. These basic properties of music with their mysteries are used in all the musical traditions of the east, and in my view find their apogee in the version known as Azerbaijani *mugham.* The reasons for this are several and have to do with the convergence of several powerful musical traditions.

Before delving into the components of this unique confluence, we should explore a bit further how the ancient Egyptians created a musical tradition that was unprecedented in its capacity to explore and develop those aforementioned properties of music for their purposes of spiritual transcendence.

Primarily because both the sense of being transported by music and the drawing out of the anguished yearning for closure can be so potent, the potential for a mystical experience induced by such music looms large. It is mystical simply because we can't understand what it is we are being made to yearn for as it is happening. As we listen, we can't formulate to ourselves or picture with any precision in what sense we feel transported. This kind of music is inherently mystical because it brings us an intensely potent listening experience without our clear understanding of what it is we are responding to, or what it is in ourselves that is responding. However, right now we can analyze the structure of music to gain some insight into the mechanics of what it is in music that induces the sense of transport and the yearning for closure.

The desire for closure can be used as the basis for identifying the tones of a given modal scale by their proximity to the closure tone (tonic / octave), both in pitch and in degree of consonance. Each tone in a modal scale (Do, Re, Mi…) creates an interval with the tonic, and each of these intervals evokes in the listener a unique feeling.

When a series of tones are played, the feeling is of approaching or departing from the closure tone. In terms of consonance, the tone that is closest to the tonic / octave in evoking a sense of closure is Sol, which makes the interval called in music the perfect 5^{th}. This interval provides a sense of near closure owing to its high consonance / low dissonance.

In stark contrast, the tones closest in pitch to the tonic / octave - the minor 2^{nd} and the major 7^{th} - make for strongly dissonant intervals with the tonic / octave and the sounding of them induces an intense wish to hear the tonic / octave tone. So now we have two measures for the 'meaning' of an interval: how consonant is it, and where is it in the scale relative to the tonic, that is, is it closer or further in pitch from resolution.

Compare the high dissonance of the two aforementioned intervals so close in pitch to the resolution tones of the tonic and the octave, the minor 2^{nd} and the major 7^{th}, with the high dissonance of the tritone - the semitone between Fa and Sol - which is as far from the tonic and octave in pitch as any tone can be. All relatively dissonant intervals have the effect of intensifying the yearning for closure, but the tritone's dissonance is not derived from close proximity in pitch to the closure tones. Consequently, its effect on us listeners is distinct. Unlike the minor 2^{nd} and the major 7^{th}, the dissonance of the tritone leaves one feeling stuck in a dead end with no place to go except back to more consonant intervals, rather than the feeling of yearning for immediate closure, the effect that the minor 2^{nd} and major 7^{th} have. A transition from the tritone directly to the tonic / octave leaves one feeling that one jumped over important tones on the way back to resolution.

Owing to the relative simplicity of modal music, one can feel the range of feelings evoked by each interval, some with more consonance, some with more dissonance, some that move closer to melodic resolution, and some that move away. The interplay of contrasting intervals and their emotional effect, which, it must be made clear, affects everyone the same at a certain fundamental level regardless of culture, offers the listener not just a simple pleasure, but a direct, intuitive way to ponder the mysterious power of music. However, to access that level of intensity, one must listen carefully and in a sustained way to the exposition of the intervals of a mode, and for that the melody must have a magnetic draw. The yearning for closure needs to be prolonged as much as possible before the full effect can settle in.

There are certain techniques for increasing the intensity of the yearning for closure. One can prolong the playing out of the melodic line, postponing the moment of closure, yet keep the listeners' attention riveted with intriguing melodies. What makes for an intriguing melody? A clever, surprising way of sequencing the tones, something of a challenge given the limitations of modal music, especially 'staircase' modal music.

The melodies in all eastern traditions that are based on the system of ancient Egyptian modes have what is called a 'staircase' construction. The tones composing the melodies follow the sequence of pitches of the scale, or mode. Unlike modern western melodies and certain other far eastern music, *mugham* and its cousins throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia are based on the staircase construction of melodies, pitches played in sequence of adjacent tones on the scale.

The reason for this is found in the effect these kinds of melodies have, which is to evoke the most intense form of wishing for closure while at the same time prolonging the melody, protracting the yearning. In effect, the listener's consciousness is split in two; one part wants to hear the octave or tonic in order to feel the sense of completion, another part wants to go on with the melody precisely because it makes one yearn for something inexplicable and mysterious.

Perhaps the most powerful way to increase the yearning for closure is to vary the pitches of certain key tones by intentionally playing them flatter or sharper than the most harmonious tones. By deliberately playing a certain tone either flatter or sharper than normal (most harmonious), the effect of creating an atmosphere of mystery is greatly enhanced. Not only does the sounding of a sequence of tones in a mode generate the feeling of being transported, not only does delaying the sounding of the octave or tonic intensify one's longing for closure, we can increase the power of modal music by deliberately playing certain key tones in an 'off' pitch.

Something needs to be said about what is meant by 'on' and 'off' regarding the playing of a tone, pitch wise. Professional vocalists, or musicians who play instruments which can potentially play 'off' notes, like any fretless string instrument, or many wind instruments, must train for years to perfect their ability to sing or play the most harmonious version of a tone in a scale (mode). On the violin, for example, which has no frets to guide where the fingers should stop the strings to obtain the desired pitch, one can train ones fingers to unfailingly play the tones that are most harmonious.

Yet in the East, many thousands of musicians for thousands of years have trained themselves to deliberately play certain tones not at the interval of maximum harmony, but otherwise, that is, sharp or flat. The reason they do this is for the effect those modified tones have on our feelings. That effect, as mysterious as the other effects already mentioned, is like another dimension to music. Just as chords add something unique to the power of (polyphonic) music, deliberately flat and sharp pitches add something unique to the power of modes.

A musician can alter the pitch in such a way that intensifies the visceral response to the music. Since we westerners – and now many easterners - have been brought up in a culture dominated by the tuning of the piano, to our ears, playing tones made of pitches not on that scale - known as the tempered scale – will sound 'off' to us. For some, those 'off' tones may sound bad, even unhealthy.

On the other hand, even for those of us raised on a musical diet exclusively of tempered scale tonality, those other, more dissonant pitches can sound very exotic, even pleasurable, but it is an acquired taste. One would have to be inclined to enjoy the intensity of deliberate dissonance, and for that, the listener must be convinced that the musician really meant to play that 'off' tone. Here we introduce another concept to the potential power of music, which is intentionality.

Unless those 'off' pitches - known in musicology as 'microtones' - are played with a clear and strong intention, they will really sound 'off', that is, out of tune, a mistake in pitch. When the listener is convinced by the degree of authority with which the musician plays those strange pitches, they do not sound 'off' at all. They simply have

the effect that they are intended to have, which is to increase the mysterious intensity of yearning for closure.

Please bear in mind that this effect is only possible in the context of modal music, which is not based on chords and does not use chords. The introduction of microtones into chordal music will sound cacophonous, and although certain avant garde composers have incorporated microtones in their compositions to strange and eerie - even disturbing - effect, primarily it is in the context of modal music that microtones will have the effect described herein.

Again we need to pause for a moment, this time to ponder the significance of what can only be described as a profound mystery: depending on the intent of the musician, the listener will experience two diametrically opposite responses to the pitch of a tone.

Furthermore, the same degree of intentionality required for properly playing microtones is also required in order to play the meter free structure of the ancient music of the East. Meter free means there is no time signature, no beat, no repetitive rhythm indicating *when* a particular note is to be played. The tempo of this kind of music is very flexible, all the time speeding up and slowing down at will. An example of meter free music in western traditions is found in certain parts of opera.

A flexible tempo is difficult to learn and even more difficult to master. How does the musician know when to play the next note, if there is no regular beat? The timing, just like the microtones, must be intended, otherwise the effect will be weak. And indeed, *mugham* is all about an intensity born of intention, both in the pitch and the timing. The heavy intensity of *mugham* is in part derived from the declamatory syntax of epic storytelling from the steppes of Central Asia where the earliest horse culture evolved.

The meter free declamatory syntax of epic storytelling imparts a forceful, imperative ambiance to the feeling that one is being transported in an inner, mysterious manner. One is not just listening and responding to the mystery of octaves, intervals and microtones, one is also responding to the feeling of being told an ancient story about something utterly mysterious, and with an odd sense of urgency.

In the sense that *mugham* is an elaboration of scales, much like musical exercises on one's instrument, it has a primitive power to it. At the same time, the melodies of *mugham* and related musical traditions have a surprising sophistication in the subtle nuances of their syntactical structure, much like speech has, especially epic storytelling speech. That sophistication serves a real purpose, which is to keep the listener listening actively. Only active listening will avail one of the cumulative effects of listening to microtones and the deliberate way the flexible tempo is rendered. It will build up to a kind of climax of musical intensity, an intensity with the power to change one's state of consciousness from the ordinary everyday mind to an extraordinary state in which we begin to feel the beginnings of a more cosmic consciousness.

There are a few other features of *mugham* which contribute to its overall effect. One is the high density of ornamentation. Perhaps it is better to just listen to some *mugham* and experience what all that embellishment, the trills, slides and so forth do,

musically speaking. My only issue is with the word 'ornamentation', which shares meaning in furniture, the surface design, and this meaning doesn't give the right impression of what I believe takes place in *mugham.*

In *mugham,* the musician / singer is all the time weaving together the tonal effects of notes on the same scale. This is integral to the effect of *mugham* and it should not be considered 'ornamental'. It is too fundamental to be a mere ornament. The effect is rich owing to the weaving together of two or more tones which then make their own 'island' of tonality in the form of their intervals – independent from the tonic / octave. At those moments it is not possible to determine which note is the 'center' tone and which note is the ornament, until the melody resumes. The effect is mesmerizing which serves the same purpose as the melody itself, to keep the listening active.

Another frequently employed technique in *mugham* is the glissando, the slide. Of all the instruments, the *kamancha* - a bowed spike fiddle - may have the edge on that, thanks to the continuous motion of the bow upon the unfretted strings. The slide confirms in our feelings what we know in our heads, that reality is not just scaled; it is not limited to the framework of all music, notes on a scale. It is smoothly continuous across a band of vibrating energies, and the effect of that in music is very special, to say the least.

There is one more technique that I would like to draw special attention to, and it is the regulation of the frequency of what is called in music vibrato.

Much music both east and west employs vibrato, however the vibrato is usually of a fairly steady beat, and relatively rapid. In Azerbaijani *mugham* the vibrato is played with the same flexible tempo of the melodies, all the time speeding up and slowing down, sometimes so slowly it no longer is vibrato as much as it is a gentle swell, and to great effect. Again, the instrument of choice for this technique may be the *kamancha,* for the same reasons stated above, and thanks to its long sustain. It gives the *kamancha,* already very vocal in its timbre, a nearly human voice, one that expresses an exquisite balance between the joy and sorrow that is the mark of all great music.

Another aspect of Azerbaijani *mugham* shared by much ancient eastern traditional 'art' music is a degree of improvisation. In using this term associated with jazz, there is some risk in misleading the reader regarding this perhaps most elusive feature. *Mugham* is not jazz, of course, but they both express the composition of melodies by theme and variation, essential to both traditions.

Although I am a fan of jazz, I am not a jazz musician, so I cannot really say for sure what musical principle guides the delightfully meandering melodies which often go so far afield that one loses, momentarily, the sense of the theme. In *mugham*, the improvised melody stays within the framework of the mode, and the guiding principle is the same as the one employed to play microtones and the timing of the phrases: intention.

When a specialized field borrows a word from common parlance to designate some special idea related to that field, there is always a risk of creating more confusion than clarity. The same holds true for the word intention. In the broadest version of meaning, virtually everything we do – other than accidents – is considered intentional.

In music, when playing music that is not scored, not written down, either one plays something memorized by rote, or one must compose it – intentionally - on the spur of the moment.

In traditional art music of the East, there are rules that guide the spontaneous composition – improvisation – and the first rule is the mode, that is, the notes composing the mode. Unlike in jazz improvisation, *mugham* improvisation cannot play any note on any scale at any time. It is not nearly that free. The improvisational possibilities in *mugham* are restricted to the notes of the mode we are playing at that moment. It is not as restrictive as it may sound, however. There are virtually infinite possibilities within that constraint of the mode, and it has to do with timing and emphasis. It is this sense of intending a particular note or sequence of notes that gives *mugham* improvisations their compelling character.

Of course, improvisation is only really possible in very small ensembles, such as the traditional trio of singer, *tar* player (skin faced double chambered 'lute') and the *kamancha* (skin faced bowl shaped resonator bowed spike fiddle), or, solo instrumental renditions of *mugham*. My preference is for solo instrumental *mugham* because of the greater improvisational possibilities, in all the categories: ever more intricate and convoluted melodies, greater freedom to employ wicked microtones and dwell on them mercilessly, long dramatic pauses in which it seems like the very room we are sitting in seems to expand and fill with a luminous glow, and deliciously drawn out vibratos that slow down and taper off to an infinitesimal flourish, drawing the listener into an exquisite silence.

The third influence that made a contribution to the evolution of Azerbaijani *mugham* is the music from India, where meditation was practiced by millions and transcendental states of mind were highly coveted. This unique style of ancient music reached Azerbaijan from the pilgrimages of fire worshippers known as the Parsees. Azerbaijan was a destination point for fire worshippers from all Asian lands, a large community of which lived – and still does – in India. The distant multitudes were drawn to visit Azerbaijan owing to a peculiar natural phenomenon knows as Yanar Dagh (burning mountain). Really a hillside, it is an unusual geologic formation in which the gas deposits are close to the surface and also the bedrock is particularly porous so that natural gas continually percolates its way up where it ignited, most likely during prehistoric times, by either a lighting strike or the intervention of Paleolithic tribes.

Likely regarded as miraculous – witness the temples built there – the spectacle of flickering blue flames with the occasional orange eruption must have been mesmerizing, especially at night. To this day, tourists flock to this remarkable site, gazing with fascination at what was once a deep mystery. And the Parsee fire worshippers from India undoubtedly brought with them their ancient hypnotic *ragas* on strange and exotic looking instruments.

Thus, the three main sources of inspiration for Azerbaijani *mugham*, to wit, ancient Egyptian modes and microtones set to the flexible tempo of meter free melodies, the powerful syntax of declamatory storytelling from Central Asia, and the transcendental basis of Indian *raga*, all converged in the Land of Fires to forge a most powerful and entirely unique musical phenomenon.

The Central Asian influence brought more to *mugham* than just phrasing. In ancient Central Asia, the shaman dominated the spiritual life of the community, and the musicians would have been very close to the shaman in temperament. They both sought the trance state, perhaps with a different set of thoughts about it, but transcendence is transcendence, yes?

Then there was the power of Sufic mysticism. We might even gain a clearer feeling for real Sufism by listening to the music from that time when it was in full swing. The trance states of the Sufis in southern Central Asia, of the shamans in northern Central Asia, and of the Parsees from Hindustan were of a kind, and that is one of the most important roots of *mugham.*

The strong nature worship and horse culture of Central Asia entered the music in the form of bird trills, horse whinnying, brooks burbling. They enchant in their own special way. Blend that into the ancient Islamic call to prayer, the even more ancient Hebraic chant of eastern Jews, the court music of the Persian, Ottoman and Arabic empires, simmered a musical stew unparalleled in its capacity to mesmerize, hypnotize, enchant, and transcend.

On a more personal note, there is a question as to why I, a native born American, with no cultural or genetic ties to Azerbaijan, would impose upon myself the awesome challenge of learning to play *mugham.* I could have just listened to recordings and the occasional live performances by others. Why did I feel so compelled to learn to play *mugham*, on the *kamancha*, no less, a very difficult instrument? Playing the *kamancha* is much like the violin because of handling the bow and stopping the strings on a fretless fingerboard, demanding even greater precision than the guitar – the preferred instrument of my youth - with its frets.

My initial experience of hearing *mugham* - or rather, what turned out to be a greatly simplified, mostly self taught version of it - was so powerful that it seemed more akin to a mystical state like meditation, or shamanistic trances. My attention was so galvanized by the experience, there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted, needed, to learn to be a practitioner, and not a passive witness. I had no idea what I was getting myself into, and it's just as well. Had I heard the polished and exquisite intricacies of a real master of *mugham* on the *kamancha*, I might have been too intimidated to try to learn.

In any case, the version I heard, as simple as it was, was positively mesmerizing, like no other musical experience in my life. And I valued that unique experience, as if it were not just the music of entertainment and diversion, as if it were a call to prayer, or something vaguely holy. I am not religious at all, but I find myself forced to borrow some terms from the faithful. The language of faith expresses the fervor for what I felt.

Perhaps part of this extreme sense of devotion may have been the time and place, that is, California in 1972. Part of it may have been the naïve impression that my first teacher was alone in the world. After all, if something this great were out there in any public way, I would surely have heard of it before. So I had assumed he was a loner, perhaps the last of some long lineage going back to antiquity. I guess I had a lot to learn. My first teacher encouraged my sense of exclusivity, that I found a secret music that is so powerful and I was going to learn it and even try to popularize it.

In reality, there was no need for me in that regard. It turns out that there were a number of fine *kamancha* players in Azerbaijan, with a far wider grasp of *mugham* and a much richer repertoire of traditional songs. By the time I figured that out, it was too late, I was hooked on *mugham.* Not just to listen to, but to play it myself, as best as I could muster under the circumstances.

MY PATH TO *MUGHAM*

I grew up surrounded by music. My mother and cousin played piano, my father sang, and my older brothers played guitar. I took piano lessons when I was six, and began to teach myself to play guitar when I was ten. I loved the rich sound and having direct contact with the strings. I was moved by the depth of feeling in Andalucian Flamenco and some American folk music. Then rock and roll appeared and grabbed everyone's attention, including mine. Not all bands played simple power chords and easily learned melodies. Some included classically trained musicians: the visceral attraction to rock rhythms was enhanced by some serious musicality in a few outstanding artists.

Perhaps under that influence, I began to compose my own music, just following the patterns that my fingers made trying to find a certain sound and feeling. My compositions were made of melodies based on chord progressions, squarely in the western idiom, but at times they gravitated toward a moody character similar to the effect of modes and eastern music in general. I did not know it yet, but in me a search had begun. It turned out to be a search for the music which awakened a new sense of the world. By the time I first encountered the idea that music can be used to induce specific mental and emotional states, it made perfect sense to me.

In the summer of 1971, at the age of nineteen, I read a book written in 1927 called Meetings With Remarkable Men by G.I.Gurdjieff describing some of the people living in the regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia and their cultures that made a deep and lasting impression on me. Among other things, he introduced me to the name of the country called Azerbaijan, calling particular attention to the extraordinary power of its traditional music. About one year later, the Whirling Dervishes from Konya, Turkey, made their way across America, offering the marvelous spectacle of spinning monks and the haunting music sung and played on their exotic eastern instruments.

Still feeling the effects from that unprecedented and otherworldly experience, a few months after that event I had the great fortune to meet an elderly man originally from Daghestan named Zevulon Avshalomov. Known locally by a small group of followers as Mr. Z, he played a unique version of Azerbaijani *mugham* (mu-GHOM) on an ancient folk instrument called *kamancha*, a vertically held spike fiddle featuring a skin-faced spheroid resonator played with a horsehair bow. His rendition of *mugham* was simple yet very powerful, and it stirred something unspeakably deep within me. From the first moment of hearing his *mugham* I felt compelled to learn how to play it.

I am not even sure when he finished tuning and began to play, but his music forcefully affected some unknown place within and shocked my consciousness into a new state of awareness. As the energy of this ancient music penetrated into unknown parts of myself, it felt as if I was somehow being made immobile in my chair. The sheer potency of the music, the instrument and the man playing it were working some kind of magic in me. At the same time, the vaguely mournful quality of Mr. Z's rendition of *mugham* spoke to me on a very personal level, as if he were also telling me the story of his long and arduous life.

Mr. Avshalomov had spent only one year in Baku training with a master musician when he was still a teenager, nevertheless over the years he developed a very impressive and incredibly moving style of this ancient art music that was able to captivate audiences around the world. By the time we met, In Los Angeles, California, he had retired to the United States, and his career as a musician had come more or less to a halt.

I found some old recordings of instrumental *mugham* and I often pondered over the difference between what I heard on those recordings and what I was learning from Mr. Z. They were versions of *mugham* on orders of magnitude more complex and subtle. Even so, the intense feelings generated by Mr. Z's much simpler version of *mugham* took precedence for me, and in any case the challenge of learning his way of playing was formidable enough without the added complexity I detected in the recordings.

Early in my apprenticeship I had an opportunity to perform in public, at a student activities area in UCLA. That experience convinced me that I should try to promote the music I was devoted to. I also felt that Mr. Z might like to perform in public again. Sometimes he was interested in performing; often he would prefer to not be involved. When he was involved, he dominated the scene and I was only too happy to let him be the revered old man of the music while I played supporting acolyte. People often remarked that the father – son camaraderie, so natural to us, was an integral part of the whole experience for them.

We worked together like this until he died in 1987.

The following year I witnessed a professional master of *mugham* on *kamancha*, Mr. Adelat Vezirov, who briefly visited the United States as a member of an ensemble of singers, musicians and dancers from Azerbaijan. After 15 years of struggling to play *mugham* in the way that my first teacher taught me, hearing Mr. Vezirov play made me realize that *mugham* was a much bigger subject of study, with a greater range of possibilities than I ever imagined.

Although we lived on different continents, I felt compelled to take some action. For years I had been convinced that playing *mugham* was a part of my destiny. This conviction prompted me to write a letter to a certain government agency in Baku, and the next year I received an official invitation for my first visit to Azerbaijan.

Since then I have visited Azerbaijan numerous times, taking advantage of the opportunity to advance my understanding of *mugham*. During the same time, several performers of *mugham* had visited the United States during these years, and whenever possible I would take lessons from them. The capstone to this phase of learning was the work with a young Azerbaijani kamancha virtuoso, a graduate of the Conservatory in Baku. Classically trained in all the *mugham*s, Imamyar Hasanov was a musical tour de force. The control, precision, and speed he had at his command was intimidating. We worked together for 14 months from 2000 – 2001, once a week for over 60 lessons.

My lessons came to an abrupt and unexpected end when Imamyar moved to Virginia with his wife and child. Not that I wasn't ready to travel the three hour drive to see

him; for some reason he decided not to teach me any more. Luckily, we were at the last parts of *Mugham Segah*, the last mugham to learn. The most elusive of all the *mughams, Segah* required a subtlety that was unique in my experience of music.

The effort to get inside of *Mugham Segah* was unprecedented. It was the one *mugham* I refused to play in front of others, until an Azeri friend who lived in Philadelphia wouldn't take no for an answer, mercilessly egging me on to play *Segah*, until one day just to stop his nagging, I started to play it when it all came tumbling out. Something had cracked open, something that had been building for decades had just yielded, and I understood that from now on, *mugham* itself will teach my body how it needs to be played.

Now, after more than three decades of struggle to learn this complex, highly nuanced and difficult music, I believe that I have come to understand *mugham* like an Azerbaijani.

However, not all Azerbaijanis agree about what *mugham* is. I have been told by some Azerbaijanis that *mugham* is antiquated and irrelevant, and they ignore it. Of those who look more favorably upon it, some regard *mugham* in a patriotic way, emphasizing its provenance. Others, especially many professional musicians, seem to regard *mugham* primarily as a kind of classical music that needs to be mastered technically and presented as any other performance art, with a strong emphasis on virtuosity and technical prowess. Under the influence of this notion, finger speed, with highly intricate and convoluted melodic lines, becomes the measure of greatness.

And indeed, there is something truly great in the intricate syntax of *mugham*. It has a unique aesthetic which at first glance appears to be independent of *mugham's* power. For example, my first teacher's version of *mugham* was simplicity itself, yet his music rang forth with a palpable and penetrating force. Still, the beauty in the complexity of *mugham* is probably derived from the power of *mugham*, a power that is there even in its simplest manifestations.

And I know some Azerbaijanis who feel as I do, that m*ugham* is a spiritual force which can bring about a transformation of one's consciousness through evoking certain intense and unfathomably deep feelings. For us, *mugham* provides an uplifting experience, an exhilarating, euphoric rush of sound-induced ecstasy.

Mugham releases an extraordinary energy in the consciousness of the active listener. Azerbaijanis who love *mugham* accept this phenomenon as a normal thing, regarding that effect as an essential component of its value. For us westerners who have been fortunate 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 nothing less than 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? In Azerbaijan, there co-existed two very different ancient traditions of music. One is the Islamic call to prayer heard in all countries where the people practice Islam. Known as *azan*, the Islamic call to prayer is an eerie, otherworldly chant which makes use of strange melodies with long pauses that induce in the listener an awe inspired, impressive sense of the sacred. The other tradition is a local

indigenous folk music unique to Azerbaijan, a delightful and rousing form of bardic singing known as *Ashikh*, dating back perhaps thousands of years. High pitched, high volume, full throated mountain yodeling Caucasian style, rendered in the dramatic declamatory manner of epic storytelling, the tradition of *Ashikh* singing and playing (on *saz*) is an electrifying musical experience. When the chanting of the Islamic call to prayer, an esoteric form of music with a rhythm-free, speech-like cadence that seems to emerge from the world of invisible forces met with the vibrant folk tradition of the *Ashikh*, *mugham* was born.

The melodies of *mugham* are highly embellished modal scales composed of a series of tones that proceed up and down the chosen scale, sometimes following a clear and orderly path, and sometimes following a complex convoluted pattern that calls to mind the intricate looping geometry of Arabesque. They can be unpredictable in the direction they take, 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 order in the sequence of notes and the timing of their play still often surprises me and make me shake my head with a mixture of delight and disbelief.

Ultimately, *mugham* is the use of sonic energy in a musical format which is intended to have a profound effect on our state, to draw us away from the familiar world of ordinary human sentiment and toward something much more subtle, an energetic boost of consciousness in the direction of the cosmic dimension in life.

In principle, any monophonic music that is played long enough will change the listener's state, even if only into a mellow trance. The idea is to get someone to listen long enough and with the requisite dedication of attention for a profound change of state to take place. *Mugham* begins to exert its power at once. But to keep the listener riveted to the melody it must progress in a way that sustains keen interest. Only then can the full effect take place and be savored.

Mugham is the product of a long lineage of musicians, each one of whom served to carry this ancient intention up into the modern age. Because *mugham* is an ancient tradition that has been handed down over the centuries, even though it has evolved musically, the original intention is still intact, which is to transform the consciousness of the listener.

Transported to another realm by this ancient intention – immersed in the sound of *mugham* – we become transformed by it. For that brief interval in our lives, we no longer suffer the concerns that weigh us down and make us heavy. We are transformed into a vessel of pure joy, mixed with a deep nostalgia for something unknowable, something we have forgotten in our plunge into the peculiar and bizarre psychodrama of daily life in modern times.

Mugham aches. *Mugham* soothes. *Mugham* energizes and surprises. It is the medicine for the part of us that suffers being human and being aware. How fortunate we are, it is so easy, just to slip a CD into a player, and off we go.

PLAYING *MUGHAM*

One of the most interesting challenges of playing of *mugham* is the balancing act between fixed composition and improvisation. There is a core melody for each *mugham* which serves as a skeletal structure around which the improvisations and embellishments take place.

For any *mugham,* there is the certainty which consists of the scale, the mode, the overall construction and the specific atmosphere generated by that *mugham*. Then there is the uncertainty, which is in the details of how the melodic line unfolds each time it is played. Not only is there the tendency for each musician to play a unique version of a *mugham*, there is always the opportunity for the very same musician to play a *mugham* in a unique way each time it is played.

The starting phrase that launches the *mugham* is relatively simple. The second passage might include the first, with some extra layer of notes that advances the theme. The third passage embellishes upon the first and second, the continues as the developing melody builds toward a kind of climax, which then resolves with a satisfying ending on the tonic. By improvising on the core melody, one is prolonging and building up an emotional tension that is released at the concluding resolution of the phrase. This pattern is repeated as the *mugham* melody takes a winding path that works its way up the scale toward final resolution.

By emphasizing one note over the others in a given phrase, that note takes on a momentary prominence and becomes the 'center' note around which the other notes on that scale 'revolve'. Then, by shifting the emphasis to one of those other notes, the *mugham* melody makes its progression up the scale. During the progression, the musician / composer creates moments of ambiguity in which melodic bridges and segues between phrases erase the boundaries where one phrase ends and the next begins.

If the performer of *mugham* plays an instrument that allows for microtonal nuance, such as the fretless instruments kamancha (bowed) or the oud (plucked), the realm of improvisational possibilities increases dramatically. Of course there are signature notes and microtones to each *mugham* that are firmly planted in the scale of the mode, but in *mugham* one can alter the mood by ever so slightly shifting the emphasis of the microtone. Just a bit more sharp or flat, and the intensity of the specific mood established by that particular *mugham* becomes even stronger, and the musician can choose to modulate that to great effect, now easing off from that intensely dissonant microtone, now bearing down again.

Another important variable in composing the phrases of *mugham* is the flexible timing. The meter free condition of *mugham* makes it possible to play with and mold the phrasing in a way not possible with a steady, repeated rhythm.

The melodies of *mugham* move up and down the scale, never skipping and jumping around haphazardly for novelty or in pursuit of common sentiment, but following an ordered sequence that rises and falls like a wave. The melody progresses by playing a sequence of adjacent notes on the scale, or near adjacent. It sounds limiting, and in

one respect it is, but the possible combinations of tonal sequences, with their moving microtones, shifting emphases and fluid timing are virtually infinite.

To the question, "What about improvising outside the traditional patterns?" we must put the question, "What is the quality of the atmosphere invoked?" Compositions that allow the melodies, tonalities, timings and phrases that are from some other tradition, or from a modern concept of originality, do not evoke the same atmosphere, and measured by the intensity of the listening experience, it is invariably a weakening.

That may seem a reasonable price to pay for the sake of being unique, different, daring to break the mold, etc. But mainly, in the words of another non-Azeri *mugham* aficionado, an American journalist and award winning documentary filmmaker, who has written extensively on Azerbaijan and other Caucasus states, Thomas Goltz, "…they are taking *mugham* to places where it does not want to go."

Mugham evolved over many generations to gratify the collective wish for a specific effect, and the introduction of foreign musical ideas can only serve to weaken and distort that effect. This is the basis of the controversy surrounding the recent trend of adapting *mugham* to different genres. It is a controversy swirling around virtually every traditional art form. Some insist that without the introduction of new ideas, the art form gets rigid and old fashioned. Others believe that any foreign element can only dilute the potency of the original form.

Undoubtedly there are art forms that would be improved by experimentation with forms and styles. However, *mugham* does not appear to be one of them. The improvisational dimension to *mugham* is not in bold experimentation; it is confined to a tradition-bound determination in the realm of choices in pitch, emphasis, timing, ornamentation and phrasing. As such, *mugham* is an art that does not lend itself to wildly divergent ways of interpretation, yet at the same time has enough space that it is possible for a musician to evolve a signature style while remaining authentic to recognizably real, traditional *mugham.*

The best word I have heard to describe *mugham* is an invented word, a Russified confabulation of Greco-Latin roots: kosmo-bio-ritm-ology. This word was coined by the father of a young Azerbaijani friend of mine who lived and studied in the United States. That word, concocted in the spirit of Mary Poppins, represents the two contrasting aspects of *mugham*: the expansive, cosmic dimension of the scales and modes and melodies, and their mesmerizing effect upon us living beings.

The syllable 'ritm' seems ironic, even paradoxical, since *mugham* is meter free. Yet, there is a kind of rhythm to *mugham,* although it is not a repetitious, steady beat. Instead, it is a continuously speeding up and slowing down of the musical phrase, which can make for some intriguing compositions and challenges one's ability to follow and anticipate the labyrinthine twists and turns, all of which prolongs the joy of listening, until the passage finally resolves.

One question frequently heard during lecture demonstrations at schools is whether *mugham* has been committed to notation. Yes it has, but I can't see how that has advanced the cause of teaching and learning it. *Mugham* evolved in a culture that did not employ musical notation and the introduction of that distinctly western

convenience into the pedagogical practices of teaching and learning *mugham* may turn out to be the single biggest contributor to its petrifaction and eventual demise.

Musical notation, a mnemonic convenience for teaching western music, can neither convey the intricacy of meter-free timing, nor the precision of microtones, nor the incredible density of grace notes, slides and trills, nor the ever so subtle differences in emphasis that are at the heart of all *mugham*. It took me one year to teach one student of *mugham* on *kamancha*, as ardent and as attentive as he was, the correct pitch of one microtone. There is no way to notate that specific pitch, so, what purpose could be served by rendering *mugham* in western musical notation?

Possibly it was done for archival purposes, but more likely it was done in an attempt to legitimize the teaching of *mugham* in the setting of a music conservatory, where up until recently *mugham* was taught. Now in Baku most instruction in *mugham* takes place in specialized institutes outside of the main conservatory which is now almost exclusively devoted toward teaching western classical music.

The few times I glanced at these attempts to commit *mugham* to written score, the sheer density of notes and embellishments rendered it virtually unreadable; there was more black ink on the page than white paper space around it. The effort seems to join with the ambition of being the fastest fiddler or strummer.

In any case, and much more importantly, is the subject of *mugham* as performance art. On that subject, I have a confession to make. Early on in my attempts to render *mugham* for western audiences, my amateurish comprehension and playing skill was either ignored or not noticed, thanks to the power of the atmosphere that *mugham*, even in my early renditions, is capable of generating. Plus, the sheer novelty of the music was a distinct advantage. I invariably received enthusiastic applause, even some rousing standing ovations.

This calls to mind an article written for the New Yorker magazine called The Tyranny of the Standing Ovation, which was accompanied by a cartoon drawing of an audience as seen from some high balcony, showing the backs of everyone standing on their feet clapping at a stage far below, upon which was the custodian sweeping up after some performance had already finished.

Not only have many mediocre acts won the high prize of loud audience enthusiasm, but utterly horrendous speeches have been concluded by wild and enthusiastic, thunderous applause. After years of public performances I began to weary of concerts and soon lost my enjoyment of the unthinking, knee-jerk reflex of audience response. No, I don't want tomatoes. I want the delicious silence that hangs in the air at the conclusion of *mugham* to expand and deeply touch us, undisturbed by the noise of applause.

At first, I asked people to please not clap their hands until the very end of the program, but that seemed a bit off, as I had no right to assume they would want to clap. Then I tried a tactic by first explaining there are pauses between phrases – true enough – and a very long pause at the end, a strategy that helped the audience to hold the clapping. It also made the silence a bit awkward, since there was some

uncertainty as to whether the piece, heard for the first time by the vast majority, was in fact over.

The best results came when I said nothing about it at all, just played the *mughams* with the pauses between phrases, and kept still at the end. By the time people realized it was over, everyone had settled into a deep and shared silence, savoring the rarefied state as it slowly dissipated. During one concert in which I played three successive *mughams* on *kamancha,* by the time I had launched the third *mugham* in the series, the silence at the end of that third piece was so profound, it seemed thick and solid, almost three dimensional.

Once, after several minutes of our collective basking in the afterglow of *mugham,* I got up from my cross-legged seating position on some cushions, slipped my shoes back on, and in the middle of that bent over posture, the audience of about 300 people, almost entirely westerners, burst out into the thunderous applause that virtually all performers live to hear. My instinct was to hold up the *kamancha* as the symbol of Azerbaijan and *mugham,* the ones that really deserved the climax of approval.

That was the same occasion in which the man who came up to me during intermission was incensed that there seemed to be a world conspiracy contrived to prevent *mugham* from being heard publicly. "How is it possible I lived all these years and never once heard such transcendent music?" he demanded to know.

How, indeed.

ABOUT AZERBAIJAN AND ITS *MUGHAM*

Azerbaijan is a country in the South Caucasus Mountains region bordered by Georgia and Armenia to the west, the autonomous region of Russia called Daghestan to the north, and Iran to the south. Other autonomous regions of the North Caucasus not directly bordering Azerbaijan but near enough to be cultural influences are; Chechnya, Balkaria, Cherkessia, Ossetia, and Abkhazia. East of Azerbaijan is the Caspian Sea and the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan which borders on western China. West of the South Caucasus is Turkey.

Azerbaijan is part of the unique cultural entity local to the Caucasus Mountain ranges, but because Azerbaijan borders Iran it is geographically and culturally closer to Asia, whereas the western countries of the Caucasus Mountain ranges are geographically and culturally closer to Eastern Europe.

Azerbaijani culture as a whole is too diverse to relegate to any simple categories, but its heritage of traditional music can be said to belong to the East. One of the most important of its musical traditions is *mugham.* As with the other forms of traditional eastern music it is related to, such as Arabic *maqqam,* Turkish *taqsim,* Iranian *dastgah,* and other similar traditions played across North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, Azerbaijani *mugham* is monophonic, modal, microtonal, meter-free, semi-improvised and richly ornamented.

Monophonic means the music is composed of melodies that do not refer to chords and chord progressions. Monophonic melodies refer only to one tone, the ‘do’ or ‘tonic’ of the scale. And virtually all traditional monophonic music is modal music.

Normally composed of seven tones within an octave – although there can be as few as five or as many as nine – the tones of modal scales are relatively evenly distributed across the octave. Choosing from a possible 12 tones within an octave, the different combinations of tones derive a number of different modal scales. Musical modes are attributed to Pythagoras, originally from Egypt, where it is virtually certain that such knowledge was practiced for many centuries prior to the advent of the Greek modes upon which much traditional monophonic music of North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia is based.

A fuller appreciation of eastern music in general and Azerbaijani music in particular requires familiarity with the range of modes that are used to compose the scales and melodies of *mugham.* Some modes may sound more typically ‘oriental’ while other modes can sound almost ‘western’. Altogether, the modes of eastern music are more varied than most westerners commonly anticipate, and they can evoke a wide range of nuanced feelings in those who can take the time to listen carefully.

In certain traditions of modal music, there is a feature of tonality called microtones. Microtonal music takes advantage of the human being’s ability to discern the fine gradations of pitch, or frequency of vibration, found between the tones belonging to the scales familiar to westerners. The piano, which was specifically designed to be able to play chords, makes use of 12 divisions to an octave, even though we are able

to hear up to 84 divisions. Those 72 other tones – known in musicology as microtones - if used to make chords, would sound cacophonous, and the instrument playing them would sound out of tune.

But in monophonic modal music, there are no chords to 'spoil' with the extra dissonance of microtones. For a westerner who has only heard melodies composed and played on the piano and other instruments that are tuned like the piano, a truly microtonal melody can sound very exotic, very strange, even disturbing. However, when the musician plays the microtones with conviction, the listeners, regardless of prior experience, will almost certainly understand that those microtones were intended, and that is when the energy of extra dissonance can have its unique effect on the listener's inner state.

When we listen to modal music that includes the extra dissonance of microtones, we find they are not just tolerable, but they can be positively delightful. One can acquire a taste for microtones and enjoy them for their special effects. Microtones increase the subtle tension that pulls at our feelings when we listen to music. They intensify our desire for harmonious closure at the conclusion, or resolution of the melodic line. In combination with the intricate melodies that are typical of most traditional eastern high art music, the judicious inclusion of microtones, interspersed among the more familiar and more consonant tones of the Pythagorean modal scales, have a subtle yet powerful effect on human consciousness and feeling.

Another important feature of *mugham* that contributes to its overall effect is the meter-free condition of the melodies. Meter-free melodies have no time signature, which means there is no steady rhythm, or 'beat'. Meter-free melodies have a flexible tempo which speed up and slow down at will, and allow the musician a measure of freedom to create patterns that are irregular and asymmetrical. With no steady rhythm to inform the musician *when* to play a given note, the musician must rely on a specific, non-metered syntax to be able to play the notes in the right moment, be they micro-tonal or macro-tonal, and with a very clear intention perceptible to anyone paying attention.

The performance of both the microtones and the meter-free phrasing of *mugham* require a highly focused intent, which can be learned and practiced. The effect of playing music with such a highly focused intent can be felt by any listener who is willing to give their attention to it. I call this quality of attentiveness active listening, and it is very different from the kind of listening required by ordinary music that can be played and listened to without such intent. The transformative power of *mugham* is partly in the condition of active listening, and without it the wondrous effect of *mugham* would not take place.

Mugham is orderly, but it does not have to be a rigid structure that stifles creativity. Somewhat analogous to the theme and variation of jazz, *mugham* offers the opportunity to experiment with the development of the melodic line. Without altering the mode or scale, one can always search for and find a new path to take for the basic melody. One can play *mugham* with a quest, a search for a new path for the sequence of notes, by shifting the emphases on those notes asymmetrically and unpredictably, by varying the tempo of the progression of the melodic line, and experimenting with the path that the melody can take. But the purpose is not to experiment just for its

own sake; it is for the delight in repeating a phrase without being repetitious, and for postponing the resolution of the melody for as long as possible without losing the listener's attention. By extending the melodic line with an intriguing melodic development, the listener is drawn in to a state of hyper-listening in which the energy of the sound of *mugham* can penetrate into the depths of one's consciousness.

There are various schools that differ in how they express *mugham*, and within these schools there can be individualistic approaches. Someone familiar with the genre is able to recognize which *mugham* is being played from listening to the first few notes. A few more notes, and often they can identify who is playing.

One characteristic feature of *mugham* is playing sustained notes enriched with a vibrato so slow it sounds almost like a wail. As with the timing of the notes in a flexible tempo always speeding up and slowing down, the execution of vibrato in *mugham* is not fixed, but varies in speed in a wave like fashion. At times the vibrato is rapid, but it suddenly slows down to a barely perceptible rise and fall of pitch around the center tone. The effect is indescribable. The feeling calls to mind ocean swells, desert dunes, and other slow moving wave-like manifestations of nature.

Another important feature of Azerbaijani *mugham* is its ornamentation. *Mugham* is perhaps the most densely ornamented music I have ever heard. The grace notes and trills are so frequent and ubiquitous throughout all *mugham*s that it appears to be an integral part of the music. These bursts of densely ornamented notes, released at intervals during the development of the melody, serve to elevate even further the increasingly intensifying mental state of the listener, and as with every other aspect of *mugham*, must be intended.

During lecture demonstrations I sometimes hear a question about the wistful melancholy induced by the playing of minor scales, only magnified by the plaintive sound of the bow on the strings of the *kamancha*, and whether that is intended too. In order for *mugham* to have its effect on human consciousness, it must evoke in equal measure the two most fundamental emotional energies of joy and sorrow. Like the anode and cathode of electricity, the power of *mugham* to elevate the human consciousness from an earthly function to a sublime quality issues from the evocation of these two polar opposite feelings.

When the *mugham* musician balances and plays off each other these two primordial emotions, the attentive listener takes off into a realm of pure musical magic, and when he returns to earth, he cannot believe where he has been.

THE MYSTERY OF THE OCTAVE

While still a young child taking piano lessons, I noticed something about music that no one else around me at the time seemed to have much interest in, which is the phenomenon of the octave. Instead of practicing, I would play the two notes of some octave over and over, and just marvel at the mystery: the mere fact that such a thing as the octave exists was enough to make me pause and wonder what reality is, after all. An octave is a musical interval made of two notes which are at once the same and yet not the same. It seems impossible, yet it is an unalterable, ubiquitous and eternal truth.

When I took up the guitar a few years later at the age of ten, I got the chance to explore an effect of music not possible on the piano: 'bending' notes. Using the fingers on my left hand, I could raise the pitch of a plucked string by pulling it across the fingerboard, in effect stretching it. When I did this technique, played with another string that was tuned to the same note or an octave apart, I noticed that a third vibration would emerge, a kind of soft rhythmic beating. The more I stretched the first string, the faster that vibration would beat, until the discrete beats would blend into a smooth sounding tone just like the original two tones.

Perhaps it doesn't sound like much in the telling, but I felt something significant in this phenomenon. The significance is in the way the phenomenon seems to reveal something fundamental about reality, and in a way that makes it unnecessary to require some kind of explanation why that should be so. It was both a hidden mystery and a self evident truth, plain as day, and there for anyone who came close enough to notice it and marvel at it.

Years later when I first heard the Azerbaijani *kamancha* - a bowed instrument with four strings – one of the first things I noticed was its unusual tuning. Unlike the strings on a violin which are tuned to a series of intervals called perfect 5^{th}'s, the *kamancha*'s first and third strings are tuned to one octave, and the second and fourth strings are tuned to another octave that can be either a 4^{th} interval or a 5^{th} interval apart from the 1^{st} and 3^{rd} strings, depending on which *mugham* is being played. There are a few other, more exotic tunings, but they always include and emphasize the primacy of the octave.

The octave reigns supreme in all traditional eastern music. It is as if the people who brought this music into the world had understood something fundamental about reality and represented that truth in the tuning of their instruments and the creation of their melodies. One is tempted to think that Pythagoras, who is credited with bringing to the world the concept of musical scales, knew that the mystery of the octave is central to the mystery of existence.

The importance of the octave in eastern music is often overlooked in the literature, which mostly dwells on the modes and their structure. Since all modes are framed by the octave, it seems reasonable to dwell on the phenomenon of the octave, and make a serious attempt to comprehend its significance in both music and in all energetic exchanges in our universe. Of course, the most important thing to emphasize is the experiential dimension of eastern music, what it actually feels like to listen deeply and attentively to the power of the modes and the octaves that frame them.

Active listening to *mugham* releases a powerful energy in the listener's mind, but what happens with that energy can vary from person to person. That energy often stimulates what we might characterize as inexplicably powerful emotions associated with common, everyday strong feelings, such as sadness or melancholy. Or, the listener may feel something more fundamental and compelling, what we might characterize as transcendence.

The power of the octave and the modal music framed by it is in their capacity to affect human consciousness, originally a tool of survival, and to transform it temporarily into an organ of perception of impressions of energy. This is possible because human consciousness is itself a form of energy, and like all energy, it vibrates, and it can be affected by other, in this case musical, vibrations. Octave-based music has the power to change the frequency of the vibrations of human consciousness, and the human consciousness experiences a definite 'lift' which is more than just exhilaration. The effect of this music is to redirect the energy of concern, the basis of animal consciousness, and when this takes place, a kind of internal space is created in which consciousness can have entirely new impressions, impressions of energy.

"Impressions of energy." It sounds rather simple, and not all that elevated. Another way to say it is to call it an impression of infinity / eternity because energy is both infinite and eternal and to receive an impression of energy has no equal, no parallel, and no precedent.

THE SYNTAX OF *MUGHAM*

The word syntax comes from Greek, to arrange together; today its common parlance meaning is the set of rules that govern how words are put together to form phrases and sentences. Grammar is part of syntax, meaning is not. *Mugham* is in one important way like spoken language; it is meter-free, a similarity of structure that invites us to use the word syntax to refer to the 'rules' that govern how the tones composing *mugham* melodies are arranged.

The basis of all *mugham*s is the diatonic scale. Without the syntax of *mugham,* the melodies would sound like highly embellished exercise scales, merely running up and down the scales in either a step ladder fashion, that is, one note on the scale after another going both up and down the scale, or in a leap frog fashion, skipping one over another on its way up and down the scale.

The many scales of *mugham,* some of them unknown in western composition, invariably include some microtones, which lend an element of the exotic to the rendering of the otherwise simple scale. But when the peculiar syntax of *mugham* is employed, the scale morphs into a design most transfixing.

The scale serves as a skeletal structure upon which the syntax of *mugham* is to be played out. One feature of *mugham* that deserves examining is how intentional the music must be played to have its ideal effect. The two primary fields in which the musician's intention is played out is in the microtones and the meter-free syntax. Without the requisite intention, a given microtone will just sound like the note played was out of tune. This phenomenon is really worthy of contemplating. One and the same musical tone, played in relation to another, will either sound out of tune, or will sound powerfully effective, musically speaking.

It may seem unreasonable to say that one and the same note, with the same pitch, the same frequency of vibration, will have two diametrically opposite effects on the listener, depending only on the intent of the player. Yet it is so. This doesn't mean we don't understand physics or wave function, or even the biology of hearing. It means we may not have perfectly understood what human intent is, and how it can so profoundly affect other human beings. The same thing applies to the syntax of *mugham.* Without the steady beat of some rhythm instrument, what guides the musician in choosing the 'when' of a given note, in relation to the other notes? It is human intent. But it is not a personal intent, such as, I intend to write this story, or I intend to eat some grapefruit, or I intend to run for office, or save my soul, or go to a show.

It is the accumulated, collective intent of generations of musicians intending to have a certain specific effect on human consciousness, and that intention is what guides and informs the syntax of *mugham.*

Mugham derives some of its syntax from the tradition of the Ashikh (or Ashokh, Ashug) which is the name used in the languages of the peoples of the Caucasus Mountains (Kavkaz) and surrounding areas for a bard or minstrel who tells epic stories, legends, myths, etc. Known among the people of the Caucasus for their unusual singing style which includes an electrifying mountain 'yodel' unlike anything

we have heard in the western yodelling traditions, the Kavkaz Ashikh paces his phrasing according to a form of verbal expression called declamatory speech. Declaiming the epic stories - both with and without singing - the Kavkaz Ashikh embodies the syntax of his storytelling. When the roots of *mugham*, both Arabic M*aqqam* and the Islamic call to prayer, the *Azan*, arrived in Kavkaz, the Ashikh had been singing, playing and storytelling for many centuries.

The fusion of the three syntaxes, Arabic *maqqam*, *Azan* and Kavkaz Ashikh, gave birth to Azerbaijani *mugham.*

Declamatory speech has a kind of pushy forcefulness. The syntax behind the pulsations, patterns and order of the tones is insistent, almost demanding that the listener pay attention, that the message is inherently important. Set to the mystical, exotic microtonal scales of *mugham*, the declamatory syntax which is overt in the Ashikh tradition becomes covert in the *mugham* tradition.

A way to describe that syntax, or rather, the effect it seems to have, is a sense of intentionality. And this makes perfect sense when you think about it. Meter-free syntax can only be played intentionally; there is no other way. Otherwise it would sound like random flailing around the notes of a scale. It even appears that this quality of intentionality that is at the heart of the syntax of Ashikh and *mugham* music determines the very contours of their melodic lines. It may not be possible at this stage of *mugham's* evolution to determine with certainty which came first, the complex inner structure of *mugham* melodies that convey the sense of declamatory speech, or the intentionality behind declamatory speech that shapes the melodies.

Either way, *mugham* is distinguished by the force of its intentionality, both in the emphasis of microtones, in the meter free syntax unique to *mugham,* and the intricate filigrees traced by the melody.

But most impressive of all, and filled to the brim with intention, are the silences. During a pause between bursts, the feeling that emerges is as if space itself is expanding around and through one. It is hard to account for this effect. I think the best I can do for the reader on this subject is to ask you to listen to some instrumental *mugham*, paying particular attention to the feeling, euphoric, exhilarating, and serene that comes emanating from the silences sprinkled liberally throughout all *mugham.*

MUGHAM AS AN ARTIFACT OF ANTIQUITY

Perhaps the most striking first impression of *mugham* to a westerner is that it has its roots planted firmly in great antiquity, perhaps even pre-history. *Mugham* and its musical cousins express a vision of the world and what is considered artistically beautiful and meaningful originating in some remote past era when human consciousness likely would have been somewhat different from what it is today.

There is the distinct possibility that we may not have evolved in feeling to the same degree which we seem to have evolved in rationality. Instead, we seem to have actually lost something vital that is nevertheless still capable of being aroused among those who may already feel a bit closer to that original quality of mind.

We tend to forget just how much our minds are molded by the circumstances of modern life, and that who we are as a people is in certain aspects very different in our thinking and feeling from who we were during past epochs, based on the durable legacy of our historic and prehistoric past. This crucial difference can be characterized by both the modern vs. ancient and the east vs. west paradigms.

However one wishes to characterize or categorize these two fundamentally different paradigms of mentality and world view, one feature seems to stand out, which is that we modern (western or westernized) people operate under a rationality that leads us to regard these awesome objects of antiquity through a layer of misperceptions.

As impressed as we are with the ancient monuments around the world and the ancient objects that fill our museums, we unwittingly impose an unnecessary layer of interpretation that puts a barrier between us and the feeling aroused by these amazing remnants from a time gone by, a time when humanity appears to have had a different quality of consciousness. We don't have to engage in a dialogue, internal or shared, that refers to the object of our regard, be it a giant pyramid or a tiny but exquisite and impossibly well crafted art object from past centuries. It should be sufficient to quietly regard the object of our interest without discussing with ourselves or our friends about what it is and what it 'means'.

Stonehenge, for example, if we can be quiet enough, will fill us with an energy that does not need any explanation or discussion. Normally, the awe and admiration we feel for the cleverness and industry of our ancestors triggers speculation on what utility it may have had for them. No interpretation, be it scholarly or New Age, can begin to compare with the sheer force of energy that enters our being and shocks our consciousness upon witnessing the silent grandeur of these great legacies from our remote past.

As with all the art objects of great antiquity, the ancient music of the near and far East has the potential to leave deep impressions on our consciousness and remind us of our origins in a society that revered energy, not for its ability to move materials around, but for its ability to transform our consciousness, and to enable us to momentarily transcend ourselves as animals, exalting us into a realm of boundless joy tinged with sorrow. Music was and in some places still is just such a vital force in life.

WHEN WESTERNERS HEAR *MUGHAM*

Many Azerbaijani friends and acquaintances have asked me why I play *mugham* for non-Azerbaijani people, and want to know what I think they experience from hearing *mugham.* Usually, the question is followed by another, such as, "Do they really understand our *mugham*?

It is perfectly understandable that an Azerbaijani, especially one who feels strongly about *mugham,* would be curious about this. The idea that a foreigner bothered to learn how to play *mugham* is for them strange enough, but for whole audiences of westerners to respond with overwhelming positivity, does call for an explanation.

It would be naïve to expect or even hope that a non-native will at first hearing 'understand' *mugham.* Still, there are some westerners who are not just interested in a performance of *mugham;* they are positively galvanized by the experience. They feel something powerful, even important, in *mugham.* For those who are intrigued by eastern art in general, *mugham* is indeed an important artistic expression that in a very real way belongs to all of humanity, or rather, it should.

The ethnic group responsible for the evolution of this great art form happens to be Azerbaijani, but that does not mean others cannot enjoy and appreciate it. In fact, I know quite a few westerners who love *mugham* more, much more than those Azerbaijanis who listen only to everything western and modern.

One measure of the depth of their interest is the questions they ask at lecture demonstrations. They range from the prosaic to the esoteric. But mostly, they express a mixture of being surprised by its power, impressed by its depth and beauty and wondering where this astonishing music has been hiding all these years.

And really, how is it possible that such a high art form has gone largely unnoticed in the world?

It seems that the unique high art culture of Azerbaijan is one of the last great sociologic frontiers to be discovered by the western world, and by the world in general. There is no one cause for the inexplicable phenomenon I call the 'smothering blanket of obscurity' that has kept the culture of Azerbaijan from making its presence felt upon the world's stage.

Azerbaijan has a very rich culture and an ancient history that is nearly biblical in import, yet for some reason remains in obscurity when considered by most educated people everywhere. Those few who have even heard of Azerbaijan know almost nothing about its art culture, let alone *mugham.*

To further illustrate this strange situation, it is not an exaggeration to state that most households in the world that would be considered wealthy have at least one antique oriental carpet that was made by an Azerbaijani, who lived either in the land now called the Republic of Azerbaijan, or in the land now called Iran.

Variously referred to as "Caucasian" or "Persian" carpets for centuries by carpet dealers, an unfortunate practice copied by the auction houses and scholars who

unwittingly follow this erroneous practice of misattribution of provenance, Azerbaijani people have been weaving some of the most astonishingly beautiful and intriguing carpets in the world. The Azerbaijani weavers living in the Caucasus had - and still have - a strong preference for abstract geometry and vibrant energetic patterns over floral designs and realistic depictions. It seems that the goal was to try to capture the energetic essence of a form and convey that essence in an abstract design motif woven into the carpet.

Azerbaijan has been and still is a fountain of artistic creativity, and their peculiar version of artistry is surprisingly abstract and sophisticated for a folk art form.

So, what does a westerner think and feel upon hearing *mugham*, especially for the first time? After listening to the responses of western audiences for more than three decades of presentations of *mugham*, the one example I wish to cite took place at a concert in San Francisco in 2006. The program began with a demonstration of several *mughams* played on the *kamancha*. At intermission, I went to the lobby to get some refreshments and to mingle with the people. Among those who approached me and who wanted to share their response with me was one man who practically demanded from me an explanation of why he had lived his whole life yet never once had the opportunity to hear this music before, perhaps implying a deliberate effort to hide some great secret that was only now being revealed.

In that one remark this man encapsulated the central mystery, which is that *mugham* is a wonderful example of human creativity and musical artistry, and there is no rational reason for its obscurity. In addition, implicit in his remark is that this western, modern man really 'got it' on his first listening to *mugham.*

In October of 2006, at the national music school in Baku, Azerbaijan where *mugham* is taught, I was asked to give a short speech to a roomful of masters of *mugham*, both singers and instrumentalists. I thanked them profusely for their love of their great tradition; especially since many if not most of their Azerbaijani countrymen had turned their attentions elsewhere for musical entertainment. Then I boldly offered the instrumentalists some unsolicited advice.

I suggested that when playing for western audiences, they play in a way that does not make extensive use of high speed acrobatics, something that professional musicians of all traditions are tempted to do, but rather, to slow down and do what only *mugham* can do, which is to transport the audience to the magical realm that I have been trying to reach in my playing, and describe in my writing.

Given the highly competitive atmosphere among professional musicians, especially the instrumentalists who have to make a living playing *mugham*, it is perfectly understandable that they might practice the music to death and arrive at a stage of technical perfection.

But those among us westerners who are inclined to love *mugham* do not really care about that aspect very much. We are tired of violinists who burn up the fingerboard in chasing yet another rendition of the 'Flight of the Bumblebee', or who dream of being called the next Paganini, etc. Somehow, it seems OK for a Flamenco guitarist from Andalusia to play melodic lines so rapidly that his fingers are a blur and the

avalanche of notes coming out of the sound box overwhelms us. But for an Azerbaijani *tar* or *kamancha* player to work his instrument thusly is a loss for both *mugham* and for us westerners who are yearning for transcendence, not circus thrills.

I don't mean to be critical of those who play *mugham* professionally. You can't imagine how grateful I am that they all exist. I know too many who have already passed away and can no longer share their magic with us. However, I am not the only one who feels concerned about the way certain Azerbaijani musicians render *mugham.* While in Azerbaijan I have many times heard local *mugham* aficionados use the word 'gymnastika' accompanied by hand motions that looks like playing 'air tar' and even eyes rolling in exasperation, when referring to some musician.

The rapid bowing and plucking of strings is the part of performance we call crowd pleasing. *Mugham* is to please an elite class of cognoscenti, not to please crowds. Perhaps an argument can be made for crowd pleasing finger and voice gymnastics in Azerbaijan, and I would not argue against that. But what pleases crowds in Azerbaijan may not please those in the West who seek out exotic forms of Eastern music like *mugham.*

Then there are the convoluted twists and turns of the melodic line that have become so hard to follow one forgets all about the magic of *mugham* and is caught in the thrall of tricky musical phraseology. I too get lost in their amazing innovations, but the inner being yearns for something they all know how to do perfectly well, which is to slow down and do what only *mugham* can do.

The tradition of *mugham* took many centuries for a unique blend of cultural forces to coalesce and evolve into one of the most spectacular art forms in history, and hopefully it will exist long after we are gone. It is more than enough to serve as one small link in this chain, and to be ready in case someone should wish to hear this music, feel the atmosphere it conjures, and connect that feeling with their lives.

One of my students who is learning to play the Azerbaijani *tar* once articulated the feeling that we westerners who love *mugham* feel. He had been a musician performing on *biwa* in the Japanese National Orchestra, a large ensemble of traditionalists. My student was struggling with learning the technique of playing *mugham* on *tar,* and I asked him bluntly why he was doing this, tolerating the acute discomfort of being a beginner after having already mastered an instrument and its repertoire. He told me that *mugham* takes him flying. I asked him, doesn't the beautiful traditional music of Japan do that for him, and he said no, with that music all he does is float, and he really wants to fly.

THE ANCIENT TRADITION OF THE *ASHIKH*

Many centuries before the arrival of the Islamic call to prayer in the area(s) now called Azerbaijan, a musical tradition thrived known as *Ashikh*. Somewhat equivalent to the European minstrel, or bard, the Azerbaijani *Ashikh* is responsible for memorizing and relating to others in song the epic legends and stories of local and historical importance.

The melodies of the *Ashikh* are relatively uncomplicated. Unlike *mugham*, which can be highly unpredictable in the sequence of notes and the phrasing of the melody, the melodies of the *Ashikh* can mostly be anticipated. The primary instrument of the *Ashikh* is the *saz*, a stringed instrument with a body shaped somewhat like the old style, pear shaped mandolin but with a long fretted neck, and strummed with a soft thin plectrum made from cherry tree bark. Because the *saz* has strings (three sets of three) that are made of thin metal and sound very delicate and sweet, it is possible to listen to this music for hours and not feel tired when the music ends. On the contrary, one feels light and energized.

Then there is the singing style, strong and vibrant, in the range of a tenor, not booming from one's diaphragm like an opera singer but focused in the upper chest, throat and head producing an 'eastern' timbre, with liberal use of intense glottal ululations. Perhaps the reader might wish to listen to some Ashikh singing and then come back to my written attempt to make a credible case for the connection between Azerbaijani *mugham* and the music of the *Ashikh.*

Even though these two antiquated art forms – *Ashikh* and *mugham* - differ in most respects, especially their age, as *Ashikh* music is far more ancient, they both come from the south Caucasus. What they have in common is a declamatory style of phrasing and the transporting power of storytelling, delivered with an almost pushy, insistent impulse that has a cadence not found in the musical traditions of nearby regions.

Azerbaijani *mugham* is musically related to the 'art' music from nearby regions including *shashmaqam* from Central Asia, *dastgah* from the part of the world now called Iran, *taqsim* from the old court music of the Ottoman Empire, all of which are based on the music of the Arabic Middle East called *maqqam,* each with its own flavor and intensity of feeling. But *mugham* is unique among all these related musical styles owing to the incredible, extraordinary music of the *Ashikhs* who were in the Caucasus many centuries before the arrival of *maqqam,* and that imbued Azerbaijani *mugham* with its unparalled power and beauty.

THE ORIGINS OF *MAQQAM*

We may never be able to determine with certainty who the ancient Egyptians were, where they came from, and how their civilization rose to such heights, so long ago in the history and pre-history of humanity. But there is plenty of evidence left behind for us to contemplate what they were interested in and what they obsessed over, which was the fearsome prospect of death and the tantalizing prospect of immortality.

We can debate forever the significance of ancient Egypt and whether they were truly onto something, or whether they were just as self-deluded about the nature of reality as any ordinary religious cult, chasing after the chimera of an afterlife. Either way, it need not bear on how we now regard their achievements in the construction of monuments, temples of worship, and an amazingly sophisticated language of sacred philosophy.

However one interprets the significance of these achievements, by any measure the ancient Egyptians had every right to be immensely proud of their civilization, and today we can acknowledge the greatness of the legacy of their civilization in our world. Neither 'eastern' nor 'western', Egypt was the source of much of what launched both the 'western' Greek civilization and the 'eastern' Mesopotamian civilization, which formed the basis of the Arabic civilization, whose great cultural and scientific achievements are only just beginning to be properly acknowledged today.

Long before Arabic civilization had risen to its heights, the entire region had been permeated by the presence of ancient Egypt. That presence would surely include its art culture, which was likely to have been on a par with its other, more visible and lasting achievements. Of course, there is no way to know for sure what the music of ancient Egypt sounded like, but if all the other aspects of their civilization that still exist for us to ponder are any indication, it is likely that their music must have been extraordinary.

It seems unlikely that the ancient Egyptians performed complex compositions in the classical fashion of post renaissance Europe. All surviving depictions show individual musicians holding rather simple harp-like instruments, and so we infer that their music must have been relatively primitive.

People play music for ceremonies, for entertainment and for altering the mental state of the listener. What makes for greatness in one category of music may not in another and each has its own rules. Great state changing music does not require enormous musical complexity, variety of instrumentation and virtuosity of performance. But it does require something which for lack of a better word could be called inner intensity.

Part seriousness of purpose, part depth of inward penetration into the meditative dimension in life, inner intensity is a quality that is more associated with past epochs than it is with contemporary modern civilization.

The ancient Egyptian obsession with death and immortality imparted a tone of seriousness and a gravitas to all aspects of their lives, which found expression in their high art culture, including music. And it is the sheer gravity of the notion of death

and the immensity of its putative defeat in the form of immortality which must have informed the music of ancient Egypt, along with everything else in the culture of their great civilization.

Under the intense pressure of the fear of an unknown afterlife and the parallel desire to live forever, the artistic expressions of ancient Egypt took on an intensity that was overpowering, and that intensity led them to create powerful state changing music. They left us a legacy of musical inner intensity that lives even until our day.

It is not difficult to imagine the probable line of transmission from the inner temples of ancient Egypt to the Islamic call to prayer known as *azan*, to the artistic music known as *maqqam.* Born in the cult of immortality of ancient Egypt, *maqqam* has been uplifting, inspiring and entertaining the peoples of the Middle East, North Africa, the Caucasus and Central Asia for centuries, and now we westerners can also reap the benefit of this long lasting lineage of an ancient and unique form of eastern art.

A PERSONAL JOURNEY UP MT. *MUGHAM*

Since I was 14 years old, I enjoyed exploring, composing and playing what I thought were intriguing melodies and chord progressions on the guitar and piano. Certain tonal combinations elicited a mysterious response, prompting me to play them again and again. The search for novel and even more intense versions of that feeling of mystery pushed the known into the unknown. The phrases strung themselves together, creating a progression of motifs and transitions. I particularly enjoyed the practice of arpeggio, the composing of melodies that were basically chords, but with the notes played sequentially rather than simultaneously. So-called open chords had a particular appeal, imbuing an atmosphere of expansiveness. Music making soon became a central feature of my life.

I left my home in the suburbs of Philadelphia at the age of 19 and headed out for southern California where I hoped to meet fellow musicians and an audience for my compositions. After learning the 'lay of the land' so to speak, I found myself living in a mountainous and forested suburb of Los Angeles called Topanga Canyon. This unusual neighborhood was home to many a musician, most with aspirations, like myself, and a few who found a measure of success. It was in these conditions that one day an acquaintance who had heard me perform my compositions came to my house along with a friend and asked if I would mind playing for them, and of course I happily complied.

After hearing me play, his friend told me about a certain old man from a far away country and urged me to hear his music. I don't know why I was given this odd advice with such an imperative tone of urgency. Perhaps it was the fact that my compositions, although squarely in the 'western' style, had a strain of modal music running through it, and perhaps a line or two of melodies that were 'eastern' in their sound. If so, it was unintentional on my part.

It might have been the unusual mood I was after in my own compositions which perhaps reminded my guest of the old man and his strange, exotic music. In any case, she insisted I try to find him. Unfortunately she could not remember the old man's name nor exactly where he lived, only that the folks around him called him Mr. Z, and that he lived somewhere in a part of Los Angeles where many immigrants from the Middle East settled. There was no other way for me to solve this mystery but to go search for him.

Walking up and down the part of Fairfax Avenue well known for its immigrant community, I asked everyone who seemed like a foreigner if they knew about the old man who played some special unknown music, and eventually I found someone who was able to give me his full name, Zevulon Avshalomov. I drove home, looked up his name in the phone directory and called the number and someone who spoke very poor English answered the phone. I struggled to understand him and managed to learn that I should call later when someone who spoke English could talk with me.

I did that and discovered that Mr. Z had a son who lived with him and who spoke English. I explained the nature of my call and gratefully accepted the invitation to come for a visit. They shared a small studio apartment with a bathroom down the hall used by the other tenants on that floor. Mr. Z was a small, compact, wiry, dark

complexioned and wizened old man with a sharp featured, large and craggy face, handsome in an 'old man' way, a prominent nose and large, deep set dark, kind eyes. He spoke in a deep, resonant voice. Most importantly, he exuded an atmosphere that was incredibly old world and exotic to me.

They offered me tea, and as we sat around a small table, the old man asked his son questions in some foreign language to translate for me. Although I grew up in the culturally isolated suburbs of Northeast Philadelphia, this was not my first encounter with foreigners. My own grandparents were immigrants from Eastern Europe, which might account for why I felt so comfortable in the presence of Mr. Z and his son.

After some time had passed in this fashion, I asked the son if his father would be willing to demonstrate the music that I had only heard about and came out of my way to hear. The younger Avshalomov, apparently sympathetic to my cause, cautioned me to be careful since his father often did not react well to straightforward requests to play. Later in our relationship, I had learned that Mr. Z felt used and abused by some people who said they were folklorists, recorded him, then didn't bother to credit him for his contribution to some anthology they published.

After a bit of discussion between the two in a language that I later learned was Hebrew – they were oriental Jews and had lived for years in Israel – Mr. Z rose from his chair, seemingly a bit reluctant, or perhaps resigned, and slowly walked to the closet. Shoulders slightly hunched and with a measured determination that galvanized my attention which had been primed for this moment by all that had preceded, he reached in and pulled out an oddly shaped brown leather sac about the size of a violin case, unzipped it and carefully removed an unusual looking stringed instrument.

From the first moment I saw the *kamancha* it was not just beautiful, it somehow seemed familiar, and the violin, so familiar to me, had suddenly become the strange alien instrument. There was no accounting for the joy I felt upon seeing a *kamancha* for the first time. The fingerboard was a lathe-turned rod about eighteen inches in length and a bit over an inch in diameter that tapered slightly, wider at the top where four tuning pegs jutted out, two on each side and staggered to clear each other, narrower at the lower end which was cut at an angle to perfectly fit against the side of a lathe-turned hollow wooden bowl shaped like the dome of a mosque turned on its side, and the face of the bowl was covered by a semi-transparent membrane the color of dark amber, made from the skin of a catfish, I later learned. The instrument gleamed softly and radiated a warmth that was indescribable.

Both the fingerboard and the resonator bowl were decorated with mother of pearl, lending a touch of opulence that seemed out of place with the humbleness of the owner's modest living conditions. But the impression that most struck me, as I watched Mr. Z attach the small brass support rod, held vertically with a tiny rotating 'foot' resting on his thigh, was the instrument's strong resemblance to the small spike fiddle played by one of the Dervishes from Konya, Turkey that I had witnessed only two months before.

The thought crossed my mind that perhaps Mr. Z was an old Dervish in hiding, and the intense atmosphere, saturated in old world vibes, only contributed to my sense of being in the presence of an ancient eastern sacred tradition. Then Mr. Z began to tune

his *kamancha* and for the first time I heard the haunting, penetrating, compelling sounds of the instrument that was to become one of the most important influences in my life.

The intensity of my listening escalated as I felt a kind of crescendo of unknown emotion possessing my whole being. Hardly was he finished when I asked his son if his father would agree to teach me how to play the *kamancha.* Apparently, my request was met with some resistance, and that ended our first session together.

I returned in a few days, and this time he was not at all reluctant to play his enchanting old music for me. On the contrary he seemed eager to play. I was a respectful and appreciative audience and perhaps he missed that, having lived in the western hemisphere for about three years. But still, he refused to teach me. I later learned that there were others before me who felt some excitement from his playing and had tried their hand at it, only to give up.

He felt that his music was sacred, inscrutable, belonged to the orient, and was not for westerners to try to imitate. He also needed to supplement his income, so after offering to pay him well for lessons – I too was strapped for cash, but never mind – he finally agreed to sell me a student-grade *kamancha* and so we began our journey together as student and teacher, disciple and master.

Having played the guitar for some years, I was familiar with stringed instruments. The idea of changing pitch by changing positions of the fingers was well ingrained, and tuning a stringed instrument was a familiar practice. However, it was strange for me to play with a bow, plus there were no frets to guide my fingers. It wasn't long before I picked up on the nuance of microtones, notes that were intentionally played noticeably flat or sharp. However, the rhythms were perplexing, especially the peculiar syncopated 6/8 found only in that region. But that was only a foretaste of the much greater challenge of learning the rules and the complexities of the unmetered phrases of *mugham.*

The idea and practice of playing without a steady beat was a realm of music as exotic as microtones, and at least as demanding, if not more so. Another challenge was the technique of using the kind of bow that is used to play the *kamancha*. Unlike the violin bow, the bundle of horsehairs is rather slack, held with the palm facing up, and has to be tightened by tensing the fingers while the hand holds the bow, steadying it as it draws it across the strings.

After almost one year of lessons, sharing meals and taking him on various trips and errands, our relationship evolved and we bonded in a traditional eastern student-and-teacher way even though we barely spoke each others languages. Then one day he suddenly announced that he was leaving California for Brooklyn, NY, to be near his three other children and several grandchildren. I was devastated by this news. How was it possible, with such a portentous beginning replete with the alluring sense of destiny, I was to lose this precious connection to my newly found purpose in life?

He left. After three months of living, working and practicing daily my recently acquired repertoire but without the guidance and inimitable presence of Mr. Z, I called to ask him if I could visit. He agreed. Mr. Z spoke several languages;

including Azeri, Turkish, Persian and Russian, but Hebrew became our lingua franca because I had ready translators in the neighborhood, and I had learned to read Hebrew when I was a youngster, training for my bar Mitzvah.

So, off I went to Brooklyn, *kamancha* in hand, leaving sunny southern California and a comfortable life, to stay in miserable snow bound Brooklyn, in a cheap apartment directly over a Meal Mart where they fried chicken and other smelly foods.

I stayed with him for three years, a kind of Phase II of our relationship, which was to share living quarters in the old style of master and disciple. We prepared our meals together, and he introduced me to the Eurasian style of cooking and eating. One aspect of our communal dining which was a bit of an ordeal for me was his fondness for drinking vodka and a penchant for making numerous toasts that could not be ignored, often to the health or memory of my family members, living and otherwise. By the time we got around to playing music, I was rather lit up.

I never did get used to this, but perhaps it served a good purpose, that is, by the time we got around to playing music, my western, logical linear mind had been so reduced in force that my consciousness was occupied exclusively with the deep and exotic feelings engendered by the music. Since he often changed subtly the melodic progression of the *mugham,* rather than trying to memorize a specific, repeatable sequence of notes, I was forced to feel my way through the music, and it was that feeling that I worked to recreate when I practiced alone, and sober.

I will never know for sure whether Mr. Z just wanted a drinking partner, or he was employing a tactic to get past my linear, literal, western mind-set by anesthetizing the neural circuits that governed it. Whatever he had in mind, our ritual toasts seems to have only helped me in understanding his music. Gradually I understood that I was never really interested in mastering a sequence of notes, however unusual or exotic they may have been. It was the special atmosphere they generated that captured my real interest.

Mr. Z, among his many self taught skills, was a professional tailor, and so off we went in search of materials so he could make us the traditional outfits, including the flat top karakul lamb hats, billowing pantaloons, soft soled leather dancing boots, collarless shirts with trimmings, and the traditional Caucasian overcoats, stuffed with faux powder charges across the chest, and a replica short sword hung off a thin belt around the waist. Although it made it more difficult to play, it was a lot of fun performing in costume, and one of our percussionists, an American drummer, was able to render some of the traditional dance moves, taught to him by Mr. Z.

I had also taken on the task of teaching myself how to play the Azerbaijani *tar* in order to complete the traditional three-man ensemble – we worked with various percussionists who played a tambourine-like drum called *gaval* – for concerts. Mr. Z taught me how to sing a few folk songs, so we often included duets in our repertoire.

At a certain point in the evolution of our relationship, I decided it was time to move to Manhattan to be near my place of work and to continue to visit Mr. Z as often as possible, usually on the weekends. Establishing a new rhythm to our relationship, we continued in this fashion for another eight years, when his emphysema forced him to

return to the dry desert air of a town in the south of Israel. Two years later he finally succumbed and died at the age of 77.

The year was 1987, and I felt a despondency from this loss much more severe than after the death of my father four years earlier. My father and I got along fine, but my relationship with Mr. Z, who became a kind of surrogate father figure for me in that he seemed to really understand me, went beyond the father and son thing. It was my fate that my teacher became even more significant in my adult life than my own father, an engineer and a good man but who apparently never understood what motivated me to embark on this strange journey.

That year was a long and dark time for me. I continued to make public appearances at various venues in and around New York City, such as the World Music Institute, museums, schools, universities, Merkin Hall at Lincoln Center, and so on. An Azeri man from Iran who had attended some of my public performances in New York City approached me after one concert, and we became friends. Then one day in 1988 I got a phone call from him. He was very excited, telling me that two singers and an ensemble of musicians and dancers from Azerbaijan were giving a performance in New York that evening, right near my place of work.

The program began with a *mugham* solo performed on the *tar*, an 11-stringed fretted instrument with a skin-faced resonator body that resembled a small guitar in the way it was double-chambered. I remember to this day how overwhelmed I was, finally confronting the real thing, live. Mr. Z had often told me that he was the last of a long line of musicians who played *mugham,* and I had gone along with his notion of a dying art.

So, it came as both a shock and something of a relief to hear real *mugham* rendered by real Azerbaijani professional musicians. It was a shock because I had for so long been told it no longer existed, and a relief because I no longer had to imagine that the great legacy would live or die on my watch. Perhaps our shared belief in his notion of the end of a lineage served an important purpose in my apprenticeship. It had added a sense of great urgency to my learning this very unusual and difficult tradition. After all, it was not just my own personal journey that was at stake, it was the heritage of centuries.

To be sure, *mugham* is an endangered species of old world oriental culture, but there are numerous practitioners alive today, including young ones who are enormously talented. Still, Mr. Z's version was definitely unique, and he may very well have been the last carrier of that particular version of *mugham*. Or maybe the only carrier!

After my Iranian Azeri friend introduced me to the musicians at the end of the concert he persuaded two of the more adventuresome of the eleven man ensemble to be our guests the next day. We took them to my apartment where they were most surprised to see my extensive collection of Azerbaijani musical instruments and carpets.

They saw with their own eyes and heard with their own ears what they were hard pressed to believe from my friend's description that their new American friend really did know how to play their instruments and some of their music, albeit as an amateur.

Most importantly, they could see that my heart was in it and that mattered more to them than my lack of proper schooling in their repertoire.

Hoping to continue my musical journey with them, I asked them how I might get an invitation to Azerbaijan and one musician gave me the name of the person who was the head of the governmental agency that organized their tour in America. I did not want to go as a tourist because that would sharply limit my time in Azerbaijan and force me to travel in a group, and visit other places not relevant to the advancement of my interest and knowledge of *mugham*.

My Iranian friend was able to write Azerbaijani in Persian script, not in Cyrillic, which the people of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan used exclusively. Eventually I found someone who could translate my letter into Cyrillic Azeri. Not having an address, only a name, the letter had to wait until another group from Azerbaijan came to New York, and eventually it made its way to Baku where it was passed on to the head of the Friendship Society, a governmental agency whose mission was to invite and host visiting foreigners.

By the time my invitation arrived, exactly one year had passed since the Azerbaijani ensemble made their American debut, and by coincidence had returned for a second tour. I went to the airport to help bring them to Manhattan, and I offered to house three of the musicians at my apartment. In spite of my work obligations, we managed to spend quite a bit of time together, and they invited me to come to their rehearsals.

At one point, one of the musicians suggested that it would be interesting if I could join them on stage for a short segment, and the lead singer agreed to sing a duet of a song I happened to know, which was at the time regarded as the unofficial Azerbaijani national anthem. They had me take turns playing both *kamancha* and *tar* for this presentation, and it was video-recorded along with the rest of the tour. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2x8L1wddlyI

When they returned to Azerbaijan, the editor of one of their most popular television programs reviewed the footage and discovered the segment that included the American who could sing and play Azerbaijani folk tunes. He decided to broadcast that clip, which reached millions of viewers. The net result of these circumstances was that by the time I arrived in Azerbaijan, although I had no way to know it yet, I was widely recognized. You can imagine my astonishment by the extra friendly treatment I received. Perfect strangers would greet me like an old friend, and Mediterranean style hugs and kisses were common.

Such hospitality and open hearted friendliness could only serve to increase my positive disposition toward the Azerbaijani people and their culture. It also helped to open doors that would contribute to my growing knowledge and understanding of who these people are, and to a fuller appreciation for their history, way of life, and the creativity of their imagination.

One very positive and practical result to emerge from all this was that whenever any of their *mugham* musicians would visit the United States, no introductions were needed, and we could get right to work on lessons. Likewise for my future brief but intense and jam packed visits to Azerbaijan. I felt it was an honor to learn from them

and apparently they felt glad to help me out by giving me little boosts of knowledge about their ancient art.

This happy trend continued for some years. Eventually, my climb up Mt. *Mugham* was given a serious boost by the lucky circumstances of a young *kamancha* virtuoso who immigrated to America and temporarily settled in Brooklyn, where I went to see him every week over a period of more than one year, to take lessons in *mugham.*

After having taught me the instrumental *mugham* repertoire on *kamancha*, my young teacher moved to another state and so this phase of my climb came to an end. From there, I had to work my way up alone, which turned out to be a good thing as it forced me to use all the forms I had been taught over the many years to synthesize a style of playing that is unique and yet very much within the traditional framework of all I was taught.

I hope my climb up this mountain will never end so long as I can play. A friend once asked me, "Has anyone reached the top?" and although there certainly are musicians who have achieved mastery of *mugham*, it is not for me to say that anyone has reached the pinnacle and there is no more mountain for them to climb. So, from that point of view, all of us lovers and players of *mugham* are on a lifetime adventure, and we all are somewhere on the endless slope. The only thing that counts, then, is that our sights are set on what is above us, and that we continue to move in that direction.

THE COSMOPOLITAN WORLD VIEW OF KAVKAZ AZERBAIJANIS

For simplicity's sake, I will borrow the practice of some Azerbaijani historians who prefer to use the word 'Azerbaijani' to designate a citizen of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and 'Azeri' to designate the ethnicity of those who belong to that nationality regardless of what country they live in. The word 'Azeri' is also used to name their language, although many also say 'Azerbaijani' or Azerbaijani language.

For many centuries the lands now called Azerbaijan were part of what is known as the Persian Empire, because the rulers of this area during much of the last millennium were Azeri Safavids and Gajars who also spoke Persian, in addition to their native Turko-Azeri language. When the Caucasus was conquered by the Russian Empire in the mid nineteenth century, the northern part of Azerbaijan began to leave the sphere of influence of the culture associated with the Persian language and enter the sphere of Russian speaking peoples. Soon, virtually all the ethnic groups of the Caucasus spoke the Russian language, which had a strong impact on the life of people in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

The vast majority of ethnic Azeris live in Iran and while almost all of them speak Persian, not all speak Azeri and almost none speak Russian. The next largest grouping is found in the Republic of Azerbaijan, an oil-rich post-Soviet republic making its way out from under centuries of imperialism, dictatorship and authoritarianism. Most speak Russian and nearly all speak Azeri, but few speak Persian. One to two million Azeris live in other post-Soviet cities like Tbilisi, Kiev, and Moscow where the vast majority of Diaspora Azeris live and work. I have not seen reliable counts of Azeris living in Turkey. Some demographers regard many of the people who live in far eastern Turkey around the border regions with the Caucasus and Iran as Azeri because they speak Azeri, a language which has the same basis as modern Turkish spoken in Ankara and Istanbul.

Then there are the Azeris living abroad, consisting of those who tend to maintain something of their traditional cultural ways and those who assimilate. All together, the total count of Azeris in the world approaches thirty to fifty million, depending on who is counting.

Both Persian and Russian speaking Azeris have often spoken to me of the palpable difference they feel between them. They both attribute that difference to the cultural influence of the colonial power that controls or controlled much of life in those areas, Russian in the Caucasus and Persian in Iran.

Iranian Azeris generally attribute the difference between themselves and their northern cousins as the result of Russian influence in the Caucasus. They hear them speak the Russian language and make the connection with Russia. There is no doubt that language has the power to mold and reinforce certain distinct cultural traits, but in reality it is not easy to find an Azeri from Azerbaijan who has really, in his or her heart, fully assimilated into Russian culture. The difference they perceive has much more to do with the indigenous cultures of all the peoples of the Caucasus (Kavkaz), rather than an overtly Russian cultural influence.

In contrast, the Iranian Azeris, at least the many hundreds who I got to know living abroad, have thoroughly absorbed what is called Persian culture, and for an untrained observer, they might easily be mistaken for a Persian. Furthermore, not every Iranian Azeri even knows, or would accept it if told, that they are Azeri. But among those Iranians that do know they are Azeri, there is a range of responses from, "…so I am Azeri. First and foremost, I am Iranian," to a refusal to speak Persian, and identifying themselves exclusively as Azeri. It must be very difficult for those Iranian Azeris who identify strongly with Azerbaijan and its language based culture because they feel themselves to be outsiders in Iran, a predominantly Persian culture, and again they are outsiders in Azerbaijan where virtually all Azerbaijanis speak Russian, and most do not know any Persian at all.

One of the most intriguing social characteristics of Kavkaz Azeris is their attitude toward other nationalities. I am not talking about hospitality, a highly evolved social instinct among all groups in this part of the world. I am talking about real feeling for others not like themselves. Excepting for those who have betrayed them with treachery, Kavkaz Azeris exhibit a degree of cosmopolitan grace toward others that I believe may be unmatched in the world.

It is possible that Kavkaz culture in general may be a reason for this, given the near impossibility of inter-village travel during winter, and the joy of receiving a guest with fresh news of the outside world that is easily worth sacrificing another sheep for. In any case, it is unlikely that the Russian culture brought this feature of society to Azerbaijan. In general, Russians are not nearly as pleased by others as Kavkaz Azeris are.

One anecdote not meant to prove anything, but illustrative of the cosmopolitan world view and solidarity with outsiders demonstrated by Kavkaz Azeris, comes to mind:

During one of my visits to Baku, a friend invited about two dozen of his Azeri friends to dinner at an open air restaurant within the ancient fortress walls of the old city. There were two long tables in the central courtyard, one occupied by our group, the other by a gathering of expatriate oil workers, mostly from the British Isles. At one point, my host and his friends insisted that I play music for them, and this put me in a difficult position, owing to the raucous behavior of the expatriates who, unlike Azerbaijanis, do get noisy and drunk when they drink a lot of alcohol.

Somewhat reluctantly, I took the microphone and spoke in English, patiently explaining to the loud folks at the other table that I was being pressed into service by my Azerbaijani friends, a duty that cannot be refused without permanent damage to my relations there.

Believe me, dearest reader, my desire to perform under these conditions could only be measured using negative numbers; nonetheless too much was at stake, socially speaking, so I implored my fellow English speakers to please refrain from talking for ten minutes while I attempted to render in these anything but ideal conditions what I consider sacred music.

Amazingly, they actually stopped talking, and some even turned to listen to the music. Of course, it only takes one person to break the spell and restart the jabberwocky, and

sure enough eventually the conversation bubbles started floating up the sound space again, but I have to hand it to those ruddy revellers so far from home, they did keep it down, for the most part, during this mild ordeal for all of us.

After the performance, an enormous Scot, as inebriated as one can be and still remain vertical, lumbered over to our table, pulled up a chair next to mine, leaned into my breathing zone and delivered himself of a speech that was intended to express his admiration for my nerve in doing what I did. Evidently concerned that I not misconstrue his motives, he larded his conversation with enough macho aggression that a vaporous aura of the threat of real violence erupting was ever present, and was as ominous and as menacing as his physical bearing.

After an interminable interval of his monopolizing my time, much of it inches from my nose, my Azerbaijani friends got tired of waiting for him to return to his fold, and one of them asked him what his nationality is. He stood up and practically shouted, "I am Scot!" at which point everyone at our table, to a man, raised his fist and shouted in unison, "William Wallace!"

In the beat of a heart, this oversized and emotionally overly-exercised man melted into a fuzzy cuddly teddy bear, eyes moist, and clearly incapable of managing his raging emotions at that point, which he attempted to resolve by wandering off in the general direction of his compatriots, most of whom had already left the scene, which totally confused our Scotsman.

Well, never mind this Scot, an intrepid underwater welder who claimed to have 'dispatched' an unknown number of 'foreigners' while serving military duty in one or another conflagration in our sad world. Instead, think about the instinctive behavior of our equally intrepid Kavkaz Azeris, who not only masterfully managed an unpleasant social situation, they also vigorously demonstrated an instant and unanimous knowledge of the proud history of a people so far from their own.

And they did it with such gusto. As I said before, this story proves nothing, except perhaps that Azeris go to the cinema, but it is typical of so many Azeris from Azerbaijan and it does illustrate something about them: they are world wise, cosmopolitan, and highly motivated to show their grasp of the outside world and the cultures of others.

One curious feature of Kavkaz Azeris that really sets them apart is their positive regard for Jewish people. Not only do they not have any anti-Semitic feeling in them, they look down with contempt upon any people who do.

For the Kavkaz Azeri, a Jew represents something of an ideal, especially the European Jew. There are many indigenous Kavkazi Jews who look and act nearly identical to Kavkaz Azeris, who speak fluent Azeri, and who participate fully in every aspect of Azerbaijani culture. They are regarded as equals. But the European Jew is a breed apart, and for some reason deeply buried in the collective psyche of Kavkaz Azeri society, held in high esteem.

During the 11th or 12th century – historians, please pinpoint this issue once and for all – there was a Jewish dynasty called the Khuzars, or Khazars, that ruled over the

Caucasus for more than one hundred years. I suppose that could have something to do with this peculiar phenomenon, or it could be attributed to the fact that in the early years of Soviet domination, their capital city Baku was only 30% Azeri and 70% other nationalities like Russians, Armenians, various Europeans, other Asians, and Jews, both European and Oriental.

The demographics have changed radically over the years and now Baku is at least 90% Azeri, but their cosmopolitan outlook and tolerance for others has not changed.

Azerbaijanis have a kind of weary, world wise attitude toward life, always hurt when injustice happens, never much surprised by any of it when it does.

When you get the chance, look into the eyes of an Azerbaijani. Except for older persons and children, you have to be the same gender or all sorts of misunderstandings will crop up. But if you do, you will see a light, a flickering fire of consciousness that is entirely independent of learning or training. It is an inherited glow, and you can see it easily in children who have yet to learn to hide anything.

Azerbaijanis are the mystic poets and musicians of the Kavkazi peoples. Azerbaijani children have been handed the torch of that history and culture passed onto them by their parents and grandparents. The old argument of nature vs. nurture as the prime determinant for an individual's character and abilities has to be examined in the light of this phenomenon. I don't think a Kavkaz Azeri child will manifest the same cultural genius if raised in another country, nor will a non-Azeri raised in Azerbaijan be able to reach such heights of artistic sophistication.

Am I singing praises too loudly? Please go to You Tube and view this clip http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XYIwMzplLkI or the website www.mugham.org and watch the video clips of untrained Azerbaijani villager children who were expelled from their homelands and forced to live in refugee camps owing to a civil war with ethnic Armenians living in western Azerbaijan. One clip in particular stands out because the boy singer spontaneously composes his own poetry while rendering perfectly one of their most complex and sophisticated *mughams, Segah*. He tells of his longing for his lost homeland, and even though he knows there is nothing left but ashes, his heart still yearns for those ashes.

Toward the end of his inspired outburst of patriotic poetry, he swallows a sob, but one tear escapes, and as he wipes it from his eye, he informs us in song that the reason he is crying is because he was made a stranger in his own land.

Let's take a breath and step back from all the social and political ramifications manifested in this example which you will see and hear for yourself, hopefully, and focus exclusively on the artistic genius of this boy – perhaps fourteen years old - who is nothing more or less than a good example of his culture.

Mugham, from my perspective, is spectacular. Played or sung by a child, it is impossible. That means this boy and his song is a miracle, and as far as miracles go, this one is far enough for me. But the miracle is not confined to one child or one village. It is across the land. Why then, we can ask, are there not more examples of Azerbaijanis who have made world class status, artistically?

Well, Mtislav Rostropovich was born and raised in Baku, and many regard him as one of the greatest cello players and orchestra conductors in the world. But he was born a Russian Jew, not an Azeri, so it may not be accurate to include him in this. Gary Kasparov, the grand chess master, comes to mind. He too was not an ethnic Azeri, but he was a great talent from Azerbaijan. So were the Azerbaijani jazz pianists Vagif Mustafazade and his daughter Aziza. Both are well known in jazz circles. But these examples of great talent, especially in the arts, do not speak of the eastern side of Azerbaijani society, although Vagif had said his jazz is informed and inspired by *mugham*.

Azerbaijan and its indigenous culture has been and remains a mystery to the rest of the world, so it is most unlikely that anyone other than those few Azerbaijanis who have made their mark in western idioms will emerge from obscurity to take their rightful place on the world stage anytime soon.

The greatness in traditional Azerbaijani art culture is virtually unknown to the world, and this irony is not lost on the people of Azerbaijan. It is part of their sociology, this quiet acceptance that what is great for them is ignored by the rest of humanity. Perhaps I have detected an undercurrent of, '…if they only knew, but that is not our fate…' So, when some outsider does take note, as happens from time to time; they have a great appreciation for that person. And that capacity for appreciating the outsider who does take notice of the greatness of some aspect of their culture is an integral part of the Azerbaijani way of being.

I have attempted to redefine the distinct culture of Kavkaz Azerbaijan from a Russian influence to a Caucasian influence. The presence of Russians in the Caucasus has contributed something to the unique cultures found in all the regions there including Azerbaijan, but the much larger influence is the peoples of the Caucasus themselves. And there are so many, such diversity, yet there is something they all have in common. To illustrate what that something is, let me describe what could be the aspirations of different cultures and compare them to Kavkaz.

In America, to be respected, you have to be accomplished. Of course it matters how you achieved your success, and it is always better to have played by society's rules, but first and foremost, it is that you have accomplished something, and for that you deserve respect.

In old Europe, there is something even more important than accomplishment, and that is knowledge. Those who are known as world-wise receive more respect in Europe, and that is partly why older people get more respect in Europe than in America.

In old India, it matters little what you have done or how much you know. What is important is how detached you are from the things of this world. This is changing fast, but it was not long ago that a common sight was a near naked man on a mat, besieged by a line of well wishers bringing gifts and asking for blessings. No one got more respect than an old, otherworldly, detached and holy man.

In Persia, respect went to those who could rhapsodize and wax poetic in all circumstances of life, even of only offering or asking for a cup of tea.

In the Caucasus, no one cares what you did, how much you knew, nor how lovely your speech was, and being detached would have earned you a nickname, not respect. What counts in Kavkaz is your self possession. This is such an odd concept for us that I feel compelled to explain. Self possession means you don't get excited over every little thing in life. You are quiet inside. You don't manifest yourself in a way that crowds out the presence of others. And you carry yourself with a dignified sense of your own presence that is not put on for the sake of others, but is a natural attribute of your general state.

When a person in the Caucasus who is self possessed walks into the room, everyone instinctively rises to their feet, gently places their right hand over their heart, nods their head just a bit, and sends a silent or quietly uttered greeting of welcome and respect, tinged with a bit of awe. It doesn't matter what the gender is, all that matters is the degree of self possession. And it is not just a matter of advanced age, although that is enough to set the stage for the high value placed on that person who is also palpably in possession of themselves. But it is not a personal affair. It is their culture, pure and concentrated in a particular individual.

This reverence for the quality of self possession permeates all aspects of the cultures found in the Caucasus. At the same time, there is a heavy streak of romanticism in the peoples of the Caucasus. The dynamic tension between these two polar opposite human tendencies brings an intensity to life that is remarkable. In Azerbaijan, the land of fires, this intensity finds expression in music and song like nowhere else on earth.

THAT OTHER WORLD

The human desire for transcendence is ancient, and must certainly trace its origins thousands of years before history began. We can only infer from historical and contemporary forms of transcendence what our remote ancestors were able to achieve in the way of being transported to another reality.

The desire for transcendence is a force that has always been a part of the shaping of human society. Today we still build temples and monuments to the pursuit of transcendence. Detecting the word 'trance' in transcend, we have some notion that transcendence entails the radical transformation of consciousness into a version that is virtually useless for its original purpose, which is the maintenance of a survival oriented attentive vigilance.

A trance should be a radical departure from the anxiety-ridden mental state that is the norm for prehistoric society, and which to some extent still rules the inner lives of many people today. But transcendence is not only a break from anxiety, a bit of relief from the tense worries of normal life. It is an alternate mode of perception - no less real than the familiar one - that can bring to us impressions of the world of energy.

There are many tried and true ways to bring about this transformation, and music, in its broadest definition, has always been an important part of that. Surely the early means of achieving transcendence were primitive and gradually over time became more and more sophisticated.

The origins of *mugham* also have such beginnings. One can discern the echoes of transcendental music embedded in the sophisticated melodies of contemporary *mugham*, especially in the spacious silence following a burst of densely packed notes. These pauses, both the brief and the sustained, permeate the melodic field, taking the listener to a new place, a place that transcends the ordinary.

There are many ancient traditions and rituals with spiritually powerful music that will surprise and delight anyone who is willing to listen carefully and respectfully, but from the point of view of musical sophistication, I feel that they are not as mature and developed as *mugham.* And there are other ancient and beautiful traditions of music that may be as sophisticated, but they do not have the microtones of *mugham*, and as a result they lack the aching depths found only in *mugham.*

After the initial shock of the first few notes, there is the first pause, a pool of silence that stands in sharp contrast to the penetrating sounds that immediately preceded the pause. It serves as a moment of recovery from the shock of the opening notes, and a chance to get ready for the next round of intensity we know is coming any moment. Then the *mugham* melody reappears, even stronger, with more insistent power of lift. Then comes another pause in which we can catch our breath, then the next phrase, and so on.

Before we know it, we are now deeply immersed in the unfolding of the *mugham* melody, its general direction and the fine details, the heavy dissonance of the microtones, the exquisite sweetness of the harmonious resolutions, the dense ornamentation, the repetition of the drone tone, the convoluted and unexpected turns

the developing melody takes, and the pauses filled with a silence that keeps expanding on each occurrence.

The end of the piece is both a relief from the attention gripping intensity, as well as a disappointment that it is over.

Mugham needs to be exempted from the form of musical performances in which the instant the performance concludes, the audience immediately starts to vigorously slap their palms together in a primitive and unthinking gesture of appreciation. Where and when did this weird habit begin? *Mugham* is too special to be subjected to that rude intrusion into the delicate mind-space it creates in the listener.

Not only does it instantly spoil the transcendent experience, applauding also shifts the emphasis from the beauty of the form of *mugham* which has no individual owner, onto the performers and how well they played or sang. No one would dare clap at the end of a meditation session, or a religious or spiritual experience, which is more what *mugham* is, in essence, than it is a performance.

Mugham is first and foremost a transcendent experience, not a performance in search of audience approval. At least, that is its origins. But in practice, it is probably impossible to restore *mugham* to its original elevated status as a means of transportation to that other world. Perhaps someday this will be better understood and appreciated.

Transcendence means a transformation of consciousness. The transformation is from consciousness as a natural tool of bodily survival to a mode of perception that reveals the essence of reality. They are diametrically opposite perceptual modalities, and there are numerous stages along the way from one end of this spectrum to the other.

As one's consciousness moves from survival mode toward perception of reality as energy, the memory of how one feels when in survival mode does not disappear altogether. It is a gradual abatement of that tense and anxious feeling, and the further away one gets from that unpleasant feeling, the more relaxed and pleasurable one feels. The pleasantness of transcendent experience can become very intense and help to motivate one to seek out such states rather frequently, even to hope to establish it as the permanent mental status quo.

The maintenance of such euphoric bliss can only be had at the expense of surviving and navigating a hostile and dangerous environment, so only those who are able to find or create a really safe environment have a chance at enjoying such a luxury in life. For most of us who are squarely planted in the helter skelter of modern life, a realm of relative safety but with plenty of anxiety nevertheless, we need to find methods and modalities that allow for some intermittent euphoric bliss while we continue with the general effort of surviving and coping with the stress in our daily lives.

Toward that aim, there are quite a few venues to choose from, a veritable cornucopia of transcendent practices, to aid and assist the search for moments of bliss in life. This is the context in which the ancient art of *mugham* should be understood. It is a venue of temporary transcendence that does not have a high cost in health like drugs

have, or a high cost in life experience like monkism has. It is more like meditation and Tai Chi in that one can indulge in the blissful practice without having to sacrifice all that much in the way of health or life experiences. In fact, all these aforementioned practices are probably good for us, in body and spirit.

Mugham is a way of transcendence that is made of sonic vibrations which have an effect on our consciousness. Both music and consciousness are electromagnetic phenomena, both dependent on a physical infrastructure, but ultimately both are energetic events. The mystery is in how the mechanical vibrations emanating from the non-living materials of a musical instrument and the air that connects it to someone's listening ear can so directly influence the state of the living body and its captive audience, the human mind.

MYSTICISM IN THE HISTORY OF AZERBAIJAN

There is a place in Azerbaijan called Gobustan which features an unusual geologic formation that has traces of Palaeolithic society. Cave paintings and carvings similar to the famous ones in Lascaux, France adorn the walls of these strange formations. Some people believe that there is some kind of energy emanating from the rocks and hills that one can feel when sitting down upon them and keeping still.

It is possible that self suggestion accounts for this phenomenon, but more importantly, the fact that this belief exists in Azerbaijan tells something about Azerbaijani society. I was brought to Gobustan by a businessman whom no reasonable person would ever associate with mysticism, but there we were, sitting on the slope of a hill overlooking the sea, when he asked me if I could feel the energy rising up from my seat and spreading throughout my body.

His question startled me because he asked it after a certain period of quiet contemplation, and just before he asked, I was marvelling at the effects of sitting there in this unusual place. It seemed as if the geological forces that formed this place were still active, like a gentle pressure or warmth that one can feel, but only when one's mind is sufficiently quiet.

In addition to the cave paintings and the strange energetic vibrations emanating from the small mountainside, there were some boulders that produced clear ringing tones when struck, as if they were made from hollow metal instead of solid rock. There was no accounting for this phenomenon, although there certainly must be some reality based physics involved that would explain it well enough.

Scientific explanations aside, what is of primary interest for me is how such a highly educated people can also sustain this vein of mysticism running through society. I knew one person who was a tenured professor of physics at a local university who clearly believed in supernatural forces and respected them, understanding that science cannot explain everything. I have met many highly educated people in Azerbaijan who hold mystical beliefs, even in the sciences. This is not a criticism on Azeri society, in fact it is the opposite. There is something almost noble in a society sustaining a poetic vein in life even as they revere education and knowledge.

Thousands of years ago, something ignited the natural gas percolating up from underground deposits, and to this day there is a small part of a mountainside that is on fire, mostly small blue gas flames sputtering across the ground with an occasional orange jet shooting up in the air from a sudden increase in pressure. Ancient pre-Azerbaijani fire worshippers built temples around these phenomena which attracted pilgrims from as far away as India.

Evolving into a rather complex ideology, fire worship was the precursor to a religion known as Zoroastrianism. Attributed to a prophet-like figure named Zardosht – the "a" is pronounced like the "a" in "cat" - his religion worshipped heat and light as representing the forces of good in the world and cold and dark as evil. Their god was called Ahura Mazda, and they celebrated the coming of the days of more light and less dark, the vernal equinox, with bonfires.

To this day millions of young Azeris, mainly boys, thrill to the challenge of jumping over a pile of burning materials gathered from the surroundings, a few occasionally getting injured. It is quite a sight to be driving around Baku on the nights before Novruz, their New Year celebration, where bonfires send flames up into the air, right on busy metropolitan streets, on the sidewalks close to buildings, and no fire engines anywhere. Wherever one turns, the fires are burning on every block.

The overall impression is as if one had suddenly left the modern age and was taken back in time to a period of great antiquity when life was precarious and conquerors with invading armies were the norm, when whole societies appeared and disappeared along with their antiquated beliefs. Yet there we were, in a car driving through a relatively modern city surrounding an ancient core. One doesn't often get to use the word 'surreal' in life and really mean it.

Waves of various belief systems passed through this area over the centuries, and all of them were rooted in deep mysteries including the major religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Sufis and dervishes were well established in the southern Caucasus, and the ancient fire worshipping Zoroastrians were in retreat. Around this time the mystic teacher of the famous Jalaluddin Rumi, Shams Tabrizi, taught the practice of whirling for transformation of consciousness. Another century or two saw the arrival of another mystic figure who took center stage in Azerbaijan, Nasimi, a name which means fresh breeze.

Persecuted as a heretic and charged with apostasy against Islam, Nasimi preached the doctrine of 'I AM'. His message, in a nutshell, was: unless I feel I exist, it doesn't matter what I believe or practice. This was the quintessential existential philosophy grounded in the mystical experience of the physical self. I AM. Not the thought I AM, which is the commonest thought of all, but the sensation I AM, the rarest of rare sensations.

Close to 'I AM THAT I AM' the ancient Hebrew formula for the name of their god, Yahweh, which centuries later morphed into the Christian Jehovah, the doctrine of I AM became a call to spiritual arms against all formal religious ideology. Nasimi was skinned alive for promoting this practice, turning himself in to the authorities in order to save another, a devoted follower who was willing to play an impostor and sacrifice himself for his master's safety.

For millennia the land now called Azerbaijan was saturated in mysticism, ecstatic visions and transcendent practices. Music was always part of that milieu and still is today, even though most of it has drifted from its original transformative powers toward a more 'musical' concept. In *mugham* we can still feel the power of this legacy of mysticism, which continues to exert a certain gravitational pull on the socio-psychology of Azerbaijani people.

At first glance it appears that most Azerbaijanis are preoccupied with practical issues such as material wealth, politics and local history. But underneath all that is a current of deeper longings. Scratch the surface of any Azerbaijani and you will find at least a philosopher if not an outright mystic who views the world as an inexplicable, unknowable and unpredictable event that is ruled by fate and invisible forces.

It may not be possible to prove that this beneath-the-surface mysticism of Azerbaijanis is owing to their long lasting traditions which include the state transforming music of *mugham,* but the connection seems obvious to me. And since most Azerbaijanis are by and large secular people, it can't be attributed to some prevailing religious ideology.

The irony of such a modern educated class of secular people also having deep convictions in a world view that includes invisible forces acting upon people and directing their lives can only be properly understood when seen in the light of their long held traditions of mystical practices and beliefs. The spectacle of a physics professor burning herbs and reciting incantations to ward off evil spirits is a sight to behold. It is unclear the role that *mugham* plays in such a paradoxical world view, if any, but it is probably not just cold coincidence that this is a common phenomenon in Azerbaijan, both land of fires and birthplace of *mugham.*

Even more intriguing than the maintenance of folkloric superstitions among a highly educated and cosmopolitan population is the phenomenon of living with inner intensity. Azerbaijanis have a fire inside that burns brighter than the pyres scattered around the countryside that gives Azerbaijan its name, Land of Fires. It is the people themselves that are on fire, and you can see it in their eyes. But it is a fire that does not burn. It warms everything inside.

A waiter says to his patron, "Nush-e-jan", a phrase that can hardly be translated into English because we don't have such a feeling in our limited repertoire of emotions for others. It means that not only may you enjoy the tasty food, but may it nourish your soul. It is said with the same feeling of a mother feeding a child. The word hospitality is a poor label for this generosity of spirit.

It is a phrase not to be delivered with a casual attitude. It is said with an inner intensity that will be hard to find elsewhere, if it can be found at all. Where does this inner intensity come from? And who besides Azerbaijanis know about it? Over the years that I have come into contact with various expatriates living in Azerbaijan, there are those who have fallen in love with the country and its people, and of course there are those who come to work and live and then leave when the contract expires and hardly notice where they have been, which is in the center of a hearth of human warmth.

And it is a center of inner intensity. This is why *mugham* is significant. It is the sound of inner intensity. An amalgam of two distinct ancient traditions, *mugham* provides nourishment for the soul and medicine for anyone whose heart has been wounded by life, which should pretty much cover just about everybody.

Mugham, anyone? Nush-e-jan.

AZERBAIJANI SOCIETY TODAY

The older generation of people living in the villages emanate a unique feeling which I identify as the essence of the spirit and culture of old Kavkaz Azerbaijan. In sharp contrast, the younger generation and most of the people in the big cities, especially the capital, Baku, reflect modern western sensibilities more and more. Even so, there are still a few young Azerbaijanis participating in the high art culture, especially the traditional music, and are able to express the old culture well.

But there is something about the hardship of village life which imparts a quality, in combination with their unique culture that brings a kind of clear, sharp sense of Kavkaz Azerbaijan which is very much alive even in this modern epoch. It is really a matter of degree more than in kind. The people in the cities are still distinctly of Kavkaz Azeri society even though they are no longer villagers who have kept that version of society pure and concentrated.

The arts always have a role to play in defining any society and Azerbaijan is no exception. The music of Azerbaijan is enjoyed widely, even though many are now listening to Azeri pop or the odd combination of folk tunes played on modern instruments set to a pounding back beat. Since I only share their enthusiasm for genuine folk music played on authentic native instruments and have an aversion to the more modern sounds one can hear on the radio these days, it is a bit difficult for me to take up their broad tastes and eclecticism.

All the same, the way they conduct their inter-relations is definitely rooted in their traditional societal rules, and one does not have to be a villager to be a real Azeri from Kavkaz Azerbaijan. I have not conducted any formal surveys to learn about the statistical probabilities of being a traditional Azeri in society and what kind of music they listen to, although it would be interesting to try. Meanwhile, one only has to attend a wedding in Baku or another city in Azerbaijan to appreciate what has remained of their traditions and what has begun to give way to modern sensibilities.

The larger point is the idea that much of the social interaction is based on the tacit or explicit understanding that their high art and folk art traditions form the basis of their society, and if an Azeri who feels connected to that current of tradition must relate socially with another who does not, there is a gap that cannot be bridged with all the politeness that even an Azeri can muster. They are dealing with an Azeri who has become thoroughly modern and no longer shares the same values.

The values we are talking about are not easy to describe because they are unique to Kavkaz Azerbaijan and therefore would need some analogue in our culture to properly identify it. Of course, it certainly is possible that someone else can more easily describe these values in terms of values we westerns can recognize, but since the burden of description is upon this author, at least for now, we will have to suffer my descriptive deficiencies as best as we can.

Earlier in this article, we read about the notion that Kavkaz Azerbaijan is a society with an unusual degree of tolerance for outsiders, so much so that they will allow a foreigner to get away with things that would be sharply criticized in one of their own. Sometimes I can’t help but wonder if there is not some element of pity for the

outsider, who may never be able to give and receive the exceptional warmth of a Kavkaz Azerbaijani, manifested in the simplest of greetings. It is not the ritualized exchange famous in the Islamic world, although at first glance, if that is your prior experience, you could be excused for jumping to that conclusion.

Kavkaz Azerbaijanis, with a few exceptions in some isolated areas, are not oriented in life by Islamic scripture. The basis for their extraordinary hospitality and social grace is folkloric, not scriptural. It makes for a very informal and pleasant exchange between people of differing social strata. An amusing clip comes to mind in which a little old Azeri lady from some village had the gumption to confront the president of the Republic and dare to speak to him in that typical way that elder Kavkaz Azeris do that can be hysterically funny. And the president was absolutely tickled by the old lady and her jokey jibes, in spite of the vast gulf between them. I should mention that there is a certain form for this, a recognizable syntax to the delivery that is rooted in ancient traditions. Perhaps the power of the surprising discourse is in the formalism of it exposition. Spoken differently, it likely would not have been well received.

Basically, the old lady beseeched the young president to provide her with a husband, preferably a rich one. Of course, if someone younger were to attempt that, there would likely be repercussions, but because in Azerbaijan the superior age of a person is held in high regard, regardless of one's position in society, she got away with it. The extreme difference in social position between the president and an old woman villager was momentarily trumped by her advanced age, and all the president could do, surrounded by his bodyguards and a mix of local officials and villagers, was to laugh heartily at her well timed remarks. As she went on in that particular patter, the laughter increased and the amusement spread around until there was a kind of humorous climax, a paroxysm of delight in the amusing exchange.

But the essential ingredient is the tone of voice when the taxi driver says to the policeman, or the Member of Parliament says to the construction worker, "Ay, gardash" "Hey, brother." There is none of the sarcastic sourness or sharp bitterness or the macho competitiveness you may find in some other cultures that use similar greetings. It is soft and sweet, a communal sharing of the feeling that high or low in society, in the end we are all in the same mortal boat, we are all Azeris and this is how we greet each other.

Even more extraordinary is when the same greeting is offered to an outsider. Maybe I shouldn't be broadcasting these things. Maybe I should keep them to myself. After all, what will you do about it, anyway? Will you go there and see for yourself if I am telling the truth or will you go there and prove to your own satisfaction that I have pixie dust in my eyes about Azerbaijan?

One taxi driver who refused payment from me was particularly difficult to pay and I asked him if he had any kids, and he said two kids, so I said this money was for them, would he really refuse it? I shoved the money into his shirt pocket and without any pause for thinking, he grabbed his carved bone prayer beads and put them into my hand as I was hustling myself out the door. The memento is next to me as I write this.

Genuine hospitality can be found elsewhere of course, but in my travels it happened mainly among relatively simple, uneducated folk. Azerbaijanis are highly educated,

with a national literacy rate of 99% (NY Times). So it's the combination of an intellectually advanced society with the ancient code of hospitality associated with old tribal societies that makes this place unique.

Unfortunately, every day Azerbaijan loses a tiny bit more of its original soul. To feel what it has and what it is losing, one must go to the villages, meet the old folks, drink their tea and listen to their stories, see their dances and hear their music, breathe in their ancient essence and take in an impression that is not just rare, but very refined. And so easily lost.

A WINDOW INTO THE ‘SOUL’ OF A PEOPLE

I feel confident as I write this that I am not alone in believing that the song and dance of any given group of human beings is exemplary of an important feature of their mindscape. One can ‘read’ something essential about a society by listening to their music and observing their traditional dances. By this word ‘observe’ I mean to feel with one’s own body the sense that their music and dances endow, in particular on the dancer, not just of belonging to a particular group, which must be very comforting at some deep level, but the specific feeling that arises on account of it.

The traditional dances of Azerbaijan engender a feeling akin to being airborne, and the arms held aloft feel like wings, as this peculiar joy-of-life sensation wells up from the belly, through the chest and into the head. There is a gentle version and a vigorous version, a scale of yin-yang in movement. It is almost impossible not to smile, but not grin, and to nearly close ones eyes, nearing a trance-like state during the gentle phase, and feeling that develop as the movements segue from yin to yang, until there is the fast and energetic exercising of one’s disciplined vigor, a crescendo of exuberance sustained and maintained.

All the Caucasian countries have this traditional dance, and the Azeris have their versions too. The Azeri folk dance routine may be the last living vestige of traditional Azerbaijani culture that is shared by virtually every member of their society. No matter how young or modern in dress and disposition, when Azeris dance their native dances, it feels pure, real, authentic. And it is intoxicating to watch. The suppleness of posture, foot motion and hand gestures, be they the manly version exhibited by the males or the feminine version exhibited by the females, Azeri folk dance is a mesmerizing spectacle that one can watch entranced for hours. And virtually everyone can do it. Of course they have professional dancers who execute the vigorous, acrobatic dance moves of fast dance, and the languid, fluid movements of slow dance, all costumed and choreographed, and it is delightful. But there’s nothing like an Azeri girl or boy, man or woman, never touching, always circulating, seemingly floating off the dance floor. If you get to Baku, try to crash a wedding just to watch them dance their native folk dances. Don’t forget to bring your earplugs.

Plus, the Azeris have their enchanting folk tunes, and their transcendent *mugham*. If a people’s music and dance is a window into their ‘soul’ then the soul of Azerbaijan must be aloft, soaring, like the flight of an eagle. One of the great carpet production centers of Azerbaijan is in the district called Guba, specifically Zeywa, in which the image of an eagle is depicted in a semi abstract outline, feathers, claws, and an energetic center that imparts the sense of a bird in flight.

The colors vibrate and the serrations do too, each on their own frequencies, a chorus of humming warmth and beauty. Whoever wove these fine depictions of real life, abstracted in naturally dyed wool, must certainly have had that inner warmth and beauty, and the only question is which came first, the carpets and their lovely, enchanting, intriguing designs, or the music they hummed while they wove them.

Either way, together they form a window to peer into the unique world of the folkloric fountainhead of Azerbaijani artistic creativity. And what a world it is. Attuned to something in the human spirit that may very well be exactly that force in human life

that Karl Jung referred to as the collective unconscious, the abstract energetic forms of the carpets and the delicate tracery of the embellished melodic expositions of mugham are manifestations of one mind, one gestalt of folkloric artistic creativity.

But these forms did not appear overnight, and they did not appear in one individual and then copied by others. They evolved over time in a tribal society, expressed by individual members of that society, but belonging to the society as a whole. This notion of communal attribution of artistic creativity is strange to us westerners who are accustomed to artists signing their works and laying claim to the idea that begat such an artistic expression.

Our sense of individualism, especially as it applies to the arts, is almost useless for grasping the depth and meaning of the communal artistry originating with a particular ethnic group. Even this group creativity exists in a larger context of many neighboring groups. The artistic creativity of Azerbaijani artists cannot be isolated from the artistic creativity of their Turkish, Turkic and Persian neighbors, each with their own signature form of artistic creativity in both musical and woven expressions.

THE FUTURE OF *MUGHAM*

Similar to people who are concerned with the loss of species, there are people east and west who are concerned with the loss of traditional human cultures all over the world. It took many centuries, if not millennia, for so many of these traditional cultures to evolve so that it would truly be a serious loss for humanity if they were washed away in the passage of time and the spread of pop culture driven by globalization.

From that perspective, culture - especially high art culture - is one of the forces in society that saves us from the worst of ourselves, the animal aspect of being human. Not that animals are bad, per se, on the contrary, but when a human's behavior becomes more animal-like, it is not good for society. And that makes culture a high priority when considering what is important and what needs our attention.

It may have taken literally thousands of years for the unique cultures found only in the Caucasus to evolve and become what we know them to be. Once you have become sensitized to the uniqueness of Caucasus cultures, you cannot help but find their influence in other places, even though it may never be credited as such.

The care of old cultures is not just for the local historical preservation society. Anyone who cares about it can still feel the presence of old culture in our everyday modern lives. Every year, millions of tourists go milling about the old villages on hilltops, valleys and seasides throughout Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas, seeking a sense of connectedness, of history and humanity in sensing the remnants of old culture.

One can't help but wonder how people managed to bear the hardships during those times when the prospect of invading armies kept the barricaded villages in a state of near constant alarm. That exquisite old world charm which serves as a magnet for tourists everywhere is built upon a platform of real fear and daily hardship, the kind of which is unimaginable to us modern westerners today.

Considering the many centuries of hardship and fear for so many people, our life in modern times can seem almost unreal by comparison. And it is this sense that life was more real when life was really hard and really dangerous - as it still is for some people in many parts of the world – that makes us wonder if we have gone too far into a suburban or urban daydream and lost touch with something essential in life. It's no wonder so many seek out the comfort of old world charm; the attraction is based on our hunger for authenticity.

The word 'authenticity' needs a bit of explication, especially since our main topic is 'authentic' traditional Azerbaijani *mugham.* How does something acquire the quality of authenticity? The word seems to have little meaning outside the context of modern life when so many of our daily experiences are contrived. I suppose we could argue that even hundreds of years ago, people had to bite a coin to determine whether it was real gold or silver, that is, authentic.

In the context of traditional music, authenticity means that it is a naturally evolved artistic creation of a local society that cannot be attributed to any one author. Authenticity speaks of a purity that is not easy to define or pin down to any specific

formal elements, but it should be understood that the authenticity of a given traditional art form is discernable and when modern ideas have been injected into some form of art, that too is discernable. Authentic, traditional music can never be an amalgam of traditional musical motifs and contrived, modern ideas.

The future of *mugham*, as well as all the other versions of authentic art music of the east are at risk, because those who must make their living at music have to compete with the popularity of a wide variety of New Age mish-mash, and are sorely tempted to go electric, add the ubiquitous, thudding, deafening bass line, and all kinds of mixed instrumentation both traditional and modern.

This is not about western musicians who are trying to make a niche for themselves in the burgeoning world of alternative music by experimenting with including authentic traditional music and or instruments in what are essentially western idioms of musical composition. It is the native musician of an authentic tradition who amplifies and distorts his tradition in the name of commercial viability who is the bigger threat to the survival of his art. Yet one can hardly blame such musicians, because those who do not do so do not live as well.

Whether or not anything can be done about this lamentable situation is not really the point here. Perhaps some governments can pass laws, as in Japan, designating certain individuals who continue to practice authentic folk traditions as 'living national treasures', and materially support them.

What is important to remember is that authenticity has its own intrinsic value mainly because it is perpetually eroding and is being replaced by inauthentic, counterfeit versions of culture, happily consumed by non-discriminating masses. Now, that may sound elitist, but it cannot be helped; it is in the nature of human society that there will always be a minority of appreciators of high art culture which will be threatened by the tastes and values of mass consumption. However, it is not for the few to dictate to the many what they should value and enjoy, even if it means the possible loss of the high art culture.

Perhaps high art culture is like a phoenix rising from its own ashes, in which case perhaps real *mugham* has to be folded into new forms until it disappears, only to rise again in some new, even more powerful form.

But to me, that is unimaginable.

Meanwhile, it appears that *mugham* is enjoying something of a renaissance these days. A quick visit to YouTube gives the whole world access to numerous video clips of varying quality, both technical and artistic. For so many years, I have struggled to make known the lamentable situation in which *mugham* is virtually unknown and quality examples hard to come by. That is no longer the case, at least as far as availability is concerned, even though its reputation as a great art form has yet to really take its rightful place on the world stage.

The government of Azerbaijan has gone to some expense to promote *mugham* both at home and abroad, and for that they should be warmly thanked. It is personally very gratifying to bear witness to this relatively recent burgeoning of interest in *mugham*,

and I hope to live long enough to see my dream come true of *mugham* becoming popular among those all over the world who, if they only knew, would love *mugham* as I do.

The greatest source of hope for the future of *mugham* is with the children of Azerbaijan who are able, incredibly enough, to sing and play the native instruments with skill, grace and power. I don't think it is possible to overstate the case regarding youngsters capable of correctly rendering this terrifically complex and arcane art. When adults sing and play *mugham* authentically and properly, it is spectacular. When children do it, it is impossible.

Yet they can do it and they do it so well it almost hurts. How this is even possible is beyond me. It is not the usual phenomenon of an individual child prodigy. It is more a classic example of the true nature of traditional Azerbaijan art culture, its incredible power, that the spirit of *mugham* can come to a child and enable that child to do things that would have to be considered virtually impossible.

So long as this tradition lives, the future of *mugham* is secured.

QUESTIONS FROM WESTERN AUDIENCES

Most of the questions that audience members have asked me over the three and a half decades of presentations have been relatively prosaic, some as simple as what kind of wood are the sound bowl resonators made from, what kind of strings, why is the bridge on the bowed instrument cocked at such a sharp angle, how I got interested in this music, and so on. Every once in a while, someone would posit a question that would make me pause and ponder. Below are some samples of questions that really stood out from the others. Questions are in italic, answers are in normal font:

The music made me feel what I would best describe as an intensity, as though I were more present, without the usual thinking about the past events of the week or my plans for the rest of the day or other wanderings of my mind. The closest experience I have had to it was listening to late John Coltrane recordings, but those seem to be more forceful but with less subtlety. Do you think that the subtlety and effect of mugham is dependent on the tonalities and idioms used in that music, or if it might be something that could be found and applied in western tonalities as well?

That's a really good question. As you may remember from the talk, the extra dissonance in microtones serves the purpose of intensifying the desire for closure, and that intensity is an important part of what enables *mugham* to lift one's consciousness, ordinarily just a tool for survival, into the realm of the transcendent mind, which you experienced as being more present and less preoccupied with the details of everyday life. Since *mugham* has a much richer repertoire of microtones than any western music and even richer than most eastern music, its potential for transcendence is greater.

The meter free condition of *mugham* lends itself well to that intensity, and although a great jazz musician should be able to play freely around a beat, the beat is still there, grounding the mind that wants to take flight. So I would conclude that the kind of otherworldly transcendence that one experiences from the intensity of the microtonal and meter free *mugham* is unique and can only be approximated in other forms of music that do not have these features or do not have them as much.

The way you present the music, it almost seems like it is your religion. You seem to be expressing your faith through this music.

That is a good observation. For me *mugham* is beyond entertainment. It is closer to a form of sacred practice, like meditation, or some form of contemplative discipline. What is at stake is nothing less than my consciousness being transformed by the power of the music. If you were to ask me what I believed in, I would say I believe in the octave. The octave rules all of existence. It is the same everywhere and it never can change. It governs everything in existence and exerts its power everywhere and on every level without exception. It is not a deity one can pray to, but it is a fundamental cosmic principle that one can always rely on.

When I play for others, I am aware of my responsibility to not only play correctly, authentically and with the force of conviction, but also that the members of the audience have entrusted to my care the state of their consciousness. The promise of

the music is to offer the members of the audience a way to transcend their ordinary everyday consciousness, and my duty is to meet if not exceed their expectations. You could regard this way of presentation as a kind of mission on my part. So, you are right in your observation that I express a kind of missionary zeal, or at least a sense of unbridled enthusiasm for the art and its effect on those who can listen with the right attitude, the right intensity.

What is going on in your consciousness when you are playing like this in front of others?

In fact, I notice two distinct consciousnesses operating in tandem, in parallel. One is focused on which *mugham* is being presented and where in the *mugham* we are so as not to get lost and play something outside of that *mugham*, especially since I don't really practice very much so it never becomes automatic but is always a bit of a struggle, or some kind of effort to maintain the music properly. The other consciousness is pretty much the same as yours, that is, I am listening and enjoying being taken to that other world we talked about, just luxuriating in that wonderful feeling that comes from listening to *mugham.*

What about people who believe in some ideology, do you think they can appreciate this music and the feeling it brings to the fullest possible extent?

Well, certainly many people with all sorts of ideologies listen and enjoy *mugham* and truly appreciate the feeling you are talking about that *mugham* brings to the listener, but whether they can appreciate that to the fullest extent, as you put it, probably not, and the reason I say this is because ideology, like anything else in life, takes energy to sustain, and so the fullest appreciation of anything most likely will take place in a person who isn't all the time feeding their life force into some set of ideas in their minds and so therefore will have a full consciousness with which to listen and appreciate, and become filled with that wonderful feeling that comes when the person's powers of listening are at their highest. I must admit I find this question truly fascinating.

SOME PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Already attracted to Mr. Gurdjieff's teaching, his idea that music, like other art forms, can be subjective and objective guided me and charged me with a certain zeal when first confronting eastern traditional music.

Mr. Gurdjieff often appropriated certain key words by imbuing them with a specialized meaning that dovetailed with the tenents of his teaching. My understanding of his meaning of objective is that the art was a result of a deliberate and conscious effort to create an impression in the perceiver that the human being possesses a potential for interior growth that is rarely realized, if even recognized. He even had a unique 'take' on the idea of interior growth, one that had overtones of alchemy and undertones of the ancient Egyptian cult of immortality.

Mr. Gurdjieff as a person seemed to be a perfect storm of rare and exotic human traits, a convergence of overwhelming charisma, a driving sense of mission, a lifelong commitment to exploring and synthesizing a wide variety of spiritual and philosophical esoterica, and a pragmatism that enabled him to cope with the rougher side of life on earth with apparently great deftness.

I had the good fortune to spend several years in close proximity to one of Mr. Gurdjieff's trusted followers, an enigmatic and in his own unique way rather charismatic man of astounding intelligence, wit and feeling. It was through him and some elderly peers of his that I was able to connect with the energy and expansiveness of Mr. Gurdjieff's person.

My search for objective music in the eastern traditional sphere was both energized and informed by my being plugged into this extraordinary, somewhat hidden current in life. My quest, not yet formulated, was to discover and learn to play music that had the power to change the listener's emotional state, to empower our consciousness to include perceptions of a greatly expanded scale of being than what we are accustomed to, and to play a role in its presentation to an audience in search of such perceptions.

In the very early years of contact with the followers of Mr. Gurdjieff, my path crossed the path of an elderly man of the east who played a strange and uniquely powerful music. It was in this atmosphere of intensity and discovery that the first notes of what turned out to be a grassroots simplified version of Azerbaijani *mugham* was heard by me. Taking advantage of the Gurdjieffian technique of sitting absolutely still, while deeply relaxed and alert, and allowing my limited attention to stay close to the overall sensation of my body, the ancient and mournful sounds of his bowed fiddle, the Azerbaijani *kamancha* penetrated deeply and fully into the foundation of my perceptual being.

This was more than being deeply moved by some beautiful music. This appeared as a challenge on at least two levels, one personal and one impersonal, driven by a sense of urgency, a cultural conservationism dedicated to helping maintain the continuity of a great and ancient tradition. It felt as if there was a strong wish to deploy Mr. Gurdjieff's mission of bringing his eastern wisdom to the west, but outside the context of his immediate legacy, the various foundations and study groups dedicated to his teaching.

I had no sense of conscious imitation, rather, it was sort of a self imposed extension, small scale as it was, of that vast sense of mission that so impressed us enthusiasts. I think I envisioned the endeavor as a kind of public interface, between a general audience of consumers of foreign culture, and a teaching that drew deeply from the well of eastern wisdom. It was never my intent to recruit anyone to anything, other than perhaps some students of the music, nevertheless a few hardy souls who made their presence felt at some public display of the music gravitated toward the same source that had prompted me to take this ancient tradition of eastern music so seriously.

Fortunately, I was also very fond of the humor in Mr. Gurdjieff's writings and the endless anecdotes about his zany character, and I thought I saw real parallels between that aspect of Mr. Gurdjieff and my dear old teacher, also from the Caucasus, Mr. Avshalomov. Thanks to this funny bone of mine, our staged presentations did not suffer from the heaviness of the putative mission. On the contrary, levity was always an important ingredient, enjoyed for its own sake, yet having the added benefit of rescuing us from a preponderance of seriousness.

Mostly.

We were also rescued from excessive heaviness by the costumes we wore, thanks to Mr. Avshalomov's talents as a tailor, and his striving to make as authentic a presentation as possible. Trussed up in the traditional musician's outfit of the Caucasus, we American students were definitely enjoying ourselves on stage, thrilling museum goers, college students, and others who happened to find their way to one of our shows, and in general, performing in an atmosphere best described as, "The kids are having fun."

After Mr. Avshalomov passed away, the costumes got mothballed. I went on a search for his replacement, which of course never happens, but I did meet several people with astounding capabilities in this realm of music. After about ten years of playing in small ensembles that included other musicians from Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, I left New York City for the New Jersey suburbs of Philadelphia, specifically a quiet shopping and ethnic restaurant haven, Cherry Hill, home of the world's first covered shopping mall.

The distance from New York and the demands of family, homeownership and work conspired to greatly reduce my time in the big city to the north, where my musician colleagues lived. This led me to begin to evolve a solo program that combined musical performance with talks on traditional Azerbaijani art culture in general and music in particular.

It was a program well suited to the classroom, which often had a blackboard I could write on, putting the name Azerbaijan in front of students and professors, along with the names of the typical string instruments to be demonstrated, *tar, kamancha* and *oud,* and enumerating the salient characteristics of *mugham.*

I soon learned to encourage questions from the audience, noticing that everyone's attention would be galvanized by the exchange, further cementing the positive

impression in peoples' minds that I sought to impart. It is one thing to attend a performance in which someone plays some interesting, exotic music and another thing altogether when the performer engages the audience in a dialogue about the experience. The latter tends to make a deeper impression which lasts much longer.

In any case, I began to explore new venues for demonstrating the art of *mugham*, and soon I began to get invitations to give the program at local schools, most notably Temple University, Penn State, and University of Pennsylvania. Around this time, my dear friend Thomas Goltz, a self described 'gonzo' journalist turned war correspondent and onetime Thespian, got invited to teach at the Geography Dept. in the University of Montana. There, in his capacity in assisting in the organization of a series of conferences on the Caucasus and Central Asia, offered me repeated invitations to attend and perform.

Another interesting connection was made with the Foreign Service Training Center in Arlington Virginia, where all the Foreign Service workers and diplomats are trained for their overseas assignments. Operating under the principle that the best diplomacy can emerge from representatives of countries enjoying the local culture, my specific task has been to share my enthusiasm for oriental culture in general and Caucasus culture in particular as one of the most western outposts of that unique and vast cultural entity known as Asia.

Along with demonstrations of *mugham* on *tar*, *kamancha*, and *oud*, there would be considerable discussions, filling a three hour lecture for the enjoyment and enlightenment of those assigned to the eight former Soviet republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia. In this context, the questions were often much broader than in say, a world music class, which tends to focus exclusively on the music. In the FSTC the ideas under discussion would encompass a wider spectrum of interests, as you can imagine.

In the year 2000, only two years after moving out of NYC to suburbia, BP invited me to participate in an ongoing new tradition, the yearly Children's Mugham Festival (CMF). I was asked to be a jurist. Uncomfortable with the responsibility and even perhaps the inappropriateness of myself, an outsider, judging native Azeri singers, even though they were youngsters ranging from 10 years old to 16, I consulted a friend of mine, another free lance journalist named Louis Werner, about my reluctance to participate.

Louis, in addition to his writing career, made a few folkloric documentaries, and thought that this was a good opportunity for me to video document the incredible and unique cultural phenomenon of Azeri children capable of singing one of the world's most complex and sophisticated forms of music.

Having learned long ago that *mugham* originated in a region of Azerbaijan called Garabakh, I mentioned to Louis that there may be many talented children singers living in the refugee camps, having been forcibly displaced from their homes and homeland by an insurgence in that region. Louis's enthusiasm for Azeri musical culture, which he had written about in a series of articles for several magazines, had deeply touched me, and I felt drawn into his zeal for someone to make a documentary about some aspect of it. Fascinated by the idea of making a documentary about

talented Azeri children who could sing *mugham*, I agreed to undertake this, even though I had absolutely no prior experience with this medium.

Under the inspiration of Louis' idea to make a film, I then negotiated with a representative of BP in Baku who I knew well from previous visits to extend the mission of the CMF to include refugee children, even though they had no access to the grand masters of *mugham* who all lived in Baku, the capital.

He also agreed to let me direct the video cameraman, to take the original tapes back with me to USA, and he also arranged for a small grant to cover the expenses of converting the tapes to the western system, digitize, edit and burn in English subtitles. I began to produce and distribute the edited 18 minute VHS tape, and then later in DVD format, to various learning institutes, museums and private individuals. It was shown at the Harriman Institute which is part of Columbia University, at the University of Monmouth, New Jersey, at the University of Montana, Missoula, at the FSTC in Arlington VA, and is now part of the archives of Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, the Smithsonian Institute, and so on.

Dr. Theodore Levin, an ethnomusicologist, published author of books about Central Asian music and Professor at Dartmouth College, had reviewed our short film and rightly commented on its lack of context, all the while questioning how much context was really needed for a folkloric documentary recording a specialized local art form indigenous to a small region of the world.

It was content in search of a context, and that thought would vex for several years. Talking about it with Louis one day, I wondered out loud what the young singers we encountered in the refugee camps were now doing. So he wrote a script, or a treatment, that would feature a second expedition, a return to the countryside of Azerbaijan in search of more children singers of *mugham* and if we were lucky, one or more of the original singers from the first expedition.

Eventually we found a sponsor for our second expedition, this time including two cameramen, a sound engineer and a lighting technician, plus two gaffers, a driver, a director and his production assistant and translator.

It was the Zoroastrian New Year celebration known locally as Novruz, which takes place every year on March 20th, the vernal equinox, and which is celebrated all the way from eastern Turkey to Tajikistan, including Azerbaijan, Iran and Afghanistan. In Baku, the preceding nights are filled with bonfires in the streets and alleyways, and children jumping over them, sometimes with unfortunate results, but that is the ancient tradition that even the local fire departments respect and leave undisturbed.

We started shooting footage, which was a test shoot, not the full expedition as yet, which was to take place in June. Thomas Goltz reluctantly agreed to join us and be my travelling companion in my search for the young singers, some now grown. Louis Werner was unavailable during this time, unfortunately, and without him, the film began to experience some mission creep, morphing into something that Louis and I would begin to resist.

Some responsibility for this emerging situation is mine for two reasons, firstly, the idea to go on an expedition to the refugee camps was mine, and secondly, I took a particular interest in one young teenager who sang in *mugham Segah* what appeared to be his own spontaneous lyrics, which happened to be a poignant lament about his lost homeland. I later learned that in fact he had memorized the music and words, but what had convinced me otherwise was a tear that he tried to fight back and then discretely as possible wiped away while reciting the line in Azeri, "I am crying because I have been made a stranger in my own land."

That line is reminiscent of some language in the New Testament, and the thought that a 14 year old could spontaneously compose such high level literature on the spot while maneuvering his way through a most complex and nuanced *mugham* deeply impressed me. Had I known it was not spontaneous lyrical composition, I might not have pursued this particular child, now a grown man, with such single minded sense of purpose.

The idea of spontaneous lyrical composition is ingrained in the Azerbaijani musical psyche. Hundreds of years before rap music was ever made in the west, Azeri singers of the style *meyxana* (pronounced may-khan-Ah) have been enjoying the group challenge of spontaneous lyrical composition set to a fast paced rhythm with only the barest hint of something vaguely melodic going on.

The minstrel / bards of Kavkaz Azerbaijan known as *Ashikhlar* had been refining this tradition of improvising the text to songs for many, many centuries, long before Islam came and introduced the peoples of the Caucasus to the eerie, otherworldly, transfixing meter free microtonality of the Muslim's call to prayer. Once the two began to blend into the unique synthesis now known as *mugham,* the idea of spontaneous lyrical composition was an integral part of this new form of art music.

I had personally witnessed this phenomenon on numerous occasions, but they were always adult *mugham* singers, never children. There are few aesthetic experiences quite as riveting as being in the presence of a *mugham ustad (*master) who suddenly segues into spontaneous lyrical composition, so you can imagine my surprise and delight when I witnessed this, or thought I had, in a young teenager in a refugee camp, filled with families that had once lived for generations on the land where *mugham* was born.

So, off I went to the hinterlands, accompanied by over a dozen people, at someone's considerable expense, to find this young man, now 22, who had so deeply impressed me with his heartfelt rendition of a *mugham* about his wistful nostalgia and burning passion for his lost homeland. Little did I suspect the powerful emotions this theme was to stir in the hearts of others, not so focused on the music as I was, but more in tune with the outrageous suffering and injustice that befell the hapless people of Garabakh Azerbaijan.

Back home, the process of pursuing opportunities to present *mugham* to western audiences took priority over the making of the film, which had been taken over by others who had an entirely different goal than the one that Louis and I had shared and worked on over the years. Perhaps it is for the best, who knows, and the process is

still ongoing; meanwhile I have agreed to be the subject of another documentary that focuses more exclusively on the music and its presentation to the west.

Update: One video clip of choice moments in various programs at five different academic venues is now viewable on YouTube:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRS38BJ6ngg

In London, England, The Buta Arts Festival, Jan, 2010
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chYyHM-FBBk

Several more video documentaries are under construction at this time, and should be available to view later this year (2012).

SORTING ITSELF OUT

Apparently after playing something enough times, it just begins to sort itself out. This may be especially true for music that is improvised based on theme with variation, and the theme is a modal scale. Especially so for melodies that are composed in 'staircase' construction, in which each note follows the ascending and descending tones as if it were a strange elaboration of an exercise in some scale. This is the basic skeletal structure for 'eastern' traditional music. And given the syntax of meter free music following a flexible rhythm, the possibilities for melodies begins to unfold in ever surprising ways.

The principle in mathematics called fractals seems to take over. A fractal is best described by the contour of a leaf with serrations in which the serrations have serrations, and so on and on down to the atom. When a meter free melody becomes subject to becoming 'fractalized' there is no end to the possibilities of improvised composition. The only stricture is that no matter what, it always must feel like it belongs to that traditional genre of music, in other words, experimenting with the melodic line may not violate the common consensus of what is traditional and what is not.

Sticking to tradition isn't, at least in this particular case, arbitrary conservatism. It's a matter of musical power. Violating the feel of the tradition deflates the impact of the music. The impact is the sense of being transported to another realm of being. The sense of transport is an effect of the spiritual radiance in the music, transmitted from master to disciple over centuries of attentive concentration and devotion.

In the swing of the meter free melodies, there appear distinct cadences that one can learn to follow with great precision. The meter free rhythm becomes a substrate for improvisational creativity, which in turn lends itself to the emerging of exquisite asymmetries. In tradition modal music, the goal is to end on the note of resolution, the tonic of the scale. So the improvised asymmetries must be arranged to correspond to the stretch of the melody in time so that the melody ends exactly when the asymmetries are balanced. And the challenge is just like a jet airline pilot: a smooth landing is critical.

BOUNDARIES OF AUTHENTICITY IN TRADITIONAL IMPROVISED MUSIC

Having studied Azerbaijani mugham with several different exponents teaching greatly divergent playing styles, my perspective on what is permissible and what is not in the realm of (traditional) improvisations has undergone considerable scrutiny. From the earliest phases of my lifelong study, the issue of authenticity has always been a high priority, especially given my status as a non-member of the community.

Authenticity in musical traditions has been a source of concern for ethnomusicologists from the inception of their profession. People used to bite coins to test their authenticity. How do we test the authenticity of an ethnically distinct musical tradition? We have to ask a member of that community whether the sample of music belongs to their cultural milieu. If the response is an immediate and unequivocal yes, we must assume this member ascribes the quality of authenticity to that sample of music. When enough members arrive at a consensus, we can safely declare the music "authentic."

In the case of mugham and its various styles of playing, there is classical mugham played on native indigenous instruments taught in the national music conservatories and music schools, and there is modern wedding mugham which is played on western instruments; saxophone, clarinet, electric guitar, electric violin, synthesizer, and accordion or the Azeri adaptation, the garmon. Musicians playing on western instruments for the Azeri wedding ceremony play highly improvised, almost jazz-like versions of mugham. There are so many versions of mugham - especially instrumental mugham - that one cannot insist on any one version of it. Mugham has enough flexibility for that. That doesn't mean mugham has no boundaries; every genre has boundaries by definition. Mugham contains a wide variety of styles, from simple versions that are nevertheless emotionally powerful, to the most elusively nuanced, complex and intricate versions redolent of musical virtuosity and nearly impenetrable to learn. In other words, you can play anything you want, so long as it feels like mugham to a member of that community.

Improvising in the manner of theme and variation in traditional music is one thing; blending foreign musical styles veers from tradition in the strictest sense of the word. Everyone has a right to play or sing music however they wish. However, it seems reasonable to want experimentalists to explain what they are doing to those who may not know the difference between the traditional version and an experimental or fusion version. In Azerbaijan, there are fans of experimental blends of mugham with other genres and there are critics. I haven't conducted any formal surveys, but anecdotally I would say there are at least two critics for every fan, maybe three, in the capital Baku, and the ratio goes up the further from the city one goes. The question is, has the blend veered from tradition sufficiently for the members of the community to question its authenticity.

The essential elements of mugham lend themselves to improvisatory melodic experimentation, within certain strict limits. One of those elements, meter free composition, is particularly open to interpretation. Because mugham is meter free, there is no overt 'beat' to indicate when a certain note is to be played. Therefore one must learn the 'syntax' of mugham just like one learned the syntax of one's first language, by exposure to it. The cadence of the phrases in meter free mugham

improvisations resembles the cadence and feel of declamatory speech used in the telling of epic legends. Indeed, the feeling of how mugham rolls forth is similar or analogous to the unfolding of a story of great antiquity.

Mugham can be said to have a distinct, recognizable syntax when referring to the phraseology of mugham: by what ‘rules’ a practitioner knows how to group a cluster of notes together to make a phrase that sounds authentically within the genre of mugham. Once learned, the syntax of mugham lends itself to a practitioner evolving their own unique version of that style and still be authentically within the genre.

In stark contrast to improvising in the traditional syntax of mugham, mixing mugham with other genres - jazz, blues, rock, classical and pop –shows how they can be enhanced by borrowing elements of mugham, but mugham itself cannot be enhanced by the introduction of these other genres, it can only be diluted and weakened. That raises the issue of 'living' traditions vs. calcified traditions. To what extent is a tradition dependent on experimentation and improvisation to be a living tradition and not calcified, and when is that experimentation only spoiling the beauty and attenuating the power of a tradition?

Within the context of a given cultural milieu, there are elements of variety on common themes that define the category. Azerbaijani mugham, for example, is a category of music making that by general consensus among the members of the group who identify themselves as Azerbaijani, they call mugham. If any singer or musician alters the specifics of mugham to suit their own musical needs, then they run the risk of their art being regarded by a significant sector of community members as not authentic. Authenticity, in this context, could be interchanged with the word 'pure' in the sense that the musical tradition itself - not the confluence of cultural milieus which gave birth to the tradition - can be rendered authentically, that is, not infiltrated by other musical sensibilities which are identifiably foreign to the tradition.

The word ‘pure’ is being used here in a way similar to metallurgic purity or impurity. One can say that any mix of metals is potentially an alloy; therefore the concept of impurity is invalid. But when a group of chemists or solid state physicists regard a certain alloy as, by definition, a mix with specific properties, i.e. stainless steel, then any mix of metals that does not strictly conform to the recipe of metals that constitute that alloy would be considered an 'impure' mixture, and therefore not really stainless steel.

We have international standards for what can and cannot be in the mix of some alloy. With music, that is not so easy to establish. Yet members of a community deem the experimentalism of a singer as 'impure' when he incorporates musical elements and sensibilities that are foreign to the genre, regardless of the putative musical merit, compositionally speaking. It would be regarded as mixing into a traditional musical recipe foreign (impure) elements and therefore it is no longer pure traditional. A purist holds purity of tradition as a very high priority, if not the highest priority. This doesn't mean that the so-called 'pure' traditional form of the music is not itself evolved from a mix of derived and even foreign cultural elements. But once that mix has been established and generally accepted as a valid category, it goes forward in time possessing the quality of integrity. It becomes true to itself as a form of art analogous to a metal alloy that is widely used, and any significant alteration to

the recipe constitutes the injection of impurities and in the world of traditional music, that constitutes a distortion rather than an improvement of the genre.

In metallurgy and in music, injections of impurities have often produced a new material with arguably superior - or at least unique – metallurgic qualities, or a new musical genre with notable artistic merit. We have vivid examples of African music evolving into blues, jazz and rock. Many if not all musical traditions have similarly mixed origins. But once it is an established tradition, it can be rendered pure or impure. Injections of foreign musical elements push the new version past the boundary line of 'authentic'. That is the meaning and sense of my use of the word ‘pure’ in this context. It is not meant to imply that mugham or any other traditional music has no antecedents derived from other genres.

We all know that the music we now regard as authentic did not sound this way from the dawn of civilization, so it may seem reasonable that it could be still evolving. That question - sincere enough sounding in the asking - allows us to believe that modern day innovators are 'improving' the tradition right before our ears, when mostly we can feel how they are diluting something of great beauty and perfection, something which perhaps can no longer be improved, strengthened, evolved, etc. Is it hubris that causes us to imagine the version we call authentic is unimprovable? Is this not what people of past epochs may have felt about their authentic traditions at that time?

One colleague suggested that the best measure for whether a given genre has been weakened or strengthened is in the realm of what he calls spiritual radiance. For traditional musical genres, it appears to be a natural process at work that enriched and empowered the increase in spiritual radiance in the music as it evolved. This perspective pits the traditionalist view against the innovational view. Ultimately, it is up to the community to determine by consensus and practice what form will prevail to become the new authentic version.

MUSIC AS A MEDIUM FOR SPIRITUAL RADIANCE

Of the many uses for music in the life of humanity, one in particular stands out for its power to transform the state of the listener from the ordinary everyday frame of mind into a state we could call transcendent. In feeling the effect of listening to certain musical traditions with origins in ancient times, we sense that music can be used for a purpose which goes beyond entertainment. Perhaps we could even call this category of music sacred, because it can have a profound effect independent of words or other contextual associations which moves the listener toward a transcendent state of mind.

Music that offers a listener the feeling of transcendence acts as an agent of psycho-spiritual change of state. We may not fully understand or appreciate what it is about this kind of music that gives it such a mysterious power. Perhaps we could try to take a moment to examine that. To begin with, one distinction needs to be made. Music has two aspects: one, as a medium for composition; two, as a structure that represents something fundamental about reality. The structure of music is a function of the way vibrations relate to each other, whereas music as a medium of composition is what people do with that structure, a function of what people like and don't like in music.

The structure of music is identical to the structure of reality. Both are based on the fact that everything is in oscillation, and when two oscillations interact, a third oscillation emerges. The only exception to this hard rule is the relationship between two oscillations known in music as the octave. By doubling or halving the frequency of an oscillation, one obtains the interval of an octave. This interval is the one and only among an infinitude of intervals, which does not produce a third oscillation.

Another word for oscillation is vibration. Everything vibrates. Every vibration has a frequency and an amplitude. In music, frequency is the pitch of a note, and amplitude is the strength of the signal. The octave interval – a numerically tidy doubling (or halving) the frequency – is unique as it is the only interval which combines all the energy from the two pitches that constitute that octave interval into doubling the amplitude only, whereas all the other intervals put some of their energy into producing a third vibration, a pitch with a frequency different from its parents.

In music the octave is the interval that frames all the scales. Scales are composed of a range or series of pitches between the two pitches that constitute the octave. Every note in a given scale makes its own interval with the first pitch, or note, of that octave. There are virtually endless combinations of pitches and intervals that constitute the scales composed of notes framed by the octave interval. Of all the many pitches and their intervals, there are a limited number that are relatively consonant; in these cases the energy that goes into the third vibration is relatively low compared to the amount of energy produced by dissonant intervals.

Our human response to these pitches and their intervals is a visceral one which consists of a sensation that is more like an abstract feeling. Each interval evokes a unique, signature feeling / sensation. These intervals and their corresponding feeling / sensations can be sequenced in such a way as to change our state of mind in which we can apprehend at a deep level that we ourselves are a conglomeration of vibrations that can be set into motion by the energy of the music entering us. We ourselves are made of the same electromagnetic energies that the vibrating string, reed and vocal

chords, etc are made of and that set into motion the molecules in our atmosphere. We hear those atmospheric vibrations and react to them because we ourselves are made of the same thing.

How can music help us become more aware of that? Is there a music composed with the purpose of bringing us to a state of mind that can appreciate what we are made of at that level? Most music is meant to move us in familiar ways and do not have much of an aura of mystery surrounding the sound. Music meant to foster our awareness of ourselves as energy, vibrating with the mysterious force of life, would be very special. That special music possesses the quality we can call spiritual radiance.

Spiritual radiance is the feeling that emerges when listening to music composed with the intention of transporting the listener to other realms of being. We are perceivers limited to a common mode of perception on account of our fears, anxieties, concerns and ambitions, yet we can obtain a measure of relief from those fears and ambitions by listening intently to this special music which serves as a conduit for spiritual radiance.

The quality of spiritual radiance is partly due to the way certain music is structured and partly by the musician's intention to take the listener on a voyage into the heart of the mystery of being human. Structure alone without intent is akin to the shell of an egg. The nutrition is inside but it won't last long without the shell. So, as important as structure is to sacred, transcendent music, what really counts is the intent that music was composed for conveying, and that is the intent to transcend our everyday state of mind via the feeling I am calling spiritual radiance.

Music that is specifically composed to convey that special quality would require a high degree of intentionality to render, with a ponderous, weighty deliberateness. There are two areas in which intentionality can be exercised. One is the pitch, and the other is the timing. Intoning melodies with pitches outside the limited scale we are familiar with - the keys on the piano known as the tempered scale – calls for a high degree of intentionality. The 12 pitches on the piano framed by an octave can be combined to compose numerous scales but their relative consonance renders their potential to intend them rather weak, because it is too easy to play consonant intervals. Dissonant intervals are much more difficult to play because the energy they produce is intense and can be disturbing. One has to intend them with great deliberateness and sense of purpose or they will sound badly. In contrast, consonant intervals are sweet and therefore easy to play. The 12 tones on the piano are relatively sweet in comparison to all the pitches in between the 12 tones, and that makes them easy to play, not demanding much intention, just an attraction to the sound of the note.

There are versions of music that have existed from ancient times which have a much wider range of pitches to choose from than the 12 tone scale, and the only requirement is that the listener be convinced that those pitches are intended lest they sound out of tune. In the intending of the pitches not on the tempered scale, especially those pitches distinctly sharp and flat of the pitches on this most familiar scale, a special effect takes place. That effect moves the listener toward transcendence.

The second arena for intentionality in music is the timing of the notes in the melody. That requires the music be composed without the constraints of a beat. Without the overt rhythm of a beat, the musician must intend the moment of playing a given note with great deliberateness, eliciting a profound effect on the listener, pulling one deeply into the sound. Together with the intentionality required to play pitches not on the familiar 12 tone scale, intended timing fosters a degree of transcendence that is unprecedented in musical genres. The power of intention is felt by the listener at a level of intensity that triggers the feeling of mystical transport to another realm, in other words, transcendence. That is spiritual radiance; the sense of having been transported to another realm, another mode of perceiving.

Spiritual radiance can be measured in terms of transcendence, the degree to which one feels transported to another realm, a more cosmic realm of perception and feeling. If this sounds strange, it may be because the notion of transcendence is commonly regarded as belonging to a field in life other than music. Listening to music with spiritual radiance, we experience something that is clearly an effective means to transcendence.

Several ancient eastern traditions come to mind. The music with the greatest potential for engendering a sense of mystical transport is the genre known as eastern music which can be found among indigenous tribes of North Africa, Middle East, Caucasus, and Central Asia. One ancient musical tradition that is pervasive across these lands is the Islamic call to prayer. This music is both microtonal and meter free, that is, the pitches of this music do not belong to the scales of harmonious intervals familiar in western music, and the music is utterly devoid of any sense of beat whatsoever.

The Islamic call to prayer has a remarkable, mysterious power to induce a sense of otherworldliness in the mind of the listener who is willing to stay focused on the sound and not allow any thoughts to block its effect. One doesn't need to have sympathy or antipathy for the religion of Islam – or any religious ideology, for that matter - to be affected by the peculiar singing which is its call to prayer. The Islamic call to prayer is an extraordinary example of the power of music to transport the listener to a more cosmic mode of perceiving and feeling.

All the musical traditions that are related to or share a common root with this otherworldly sound act like a summons to that other world. It is a world in which we remember we are just energy. The music helps us remember that world and what it feels like to be a living being in that world, a kind of nostalgia for being human while feeling one's being as a more primordial, energetic presence. The kind of music that is able to usher us into that mode of consciousness can be said to possess spiritual radiance.

SIMPLICITY VS COMPLEXITY IN MUSIC WITH SPIRITUAL RADIANCE

In the traditions of ancient eastern music, the melodies can range from very simple to quite complex. Some of the simple musical traditions offer an abundance of spiritual radiance, informing us that radiance and complexity are not necessarily interdependent qualities. Complexity for complexity's sake is not a good basis for radiance, but there are some musical traditions which allow for great complexity while offering considerable spiritual radiance. In this case, the complexity is a consequence of the melodic line undergoing a process we can call fractalizing.

In a way analogous to a serrated leaf in which the serrations are serrated and so on into infinitesimal dimensions, the melodic line of certain modal musical traditions can be fractalized to the point of inscrutability. It is not necessary to push the melodic line so deeply into fractalization in order for the music to radiate the special quality that evokes a transcendent state of mind in the listener.

It is normal and traditional in ancient eastern music to intone melodies with very convoluted structure, and that is partly owing to the modal nature of the melodies. This requires something of a technical explanation. For some reason that so far no one seems to have been able to say why, staircase composed melodies have the power to induce a mysterious sense of transport in the listener. Going up and down the scale in a staircase manner – as opposed to jumping around from note to note in pursuit of a clever or catchy tune – mysteriously induces a profound sense of being taken somewhere. Obviously music doesn't move us physically, only spiritually, but with staircase composed modal music, we have this unaccountable and overwhelming sense of having been displaced from one zone to another. Changing pitches has that effect, and changing pitches in an orderly sequence of one by one going up and down a given scale has that effect in profound measure.

Staircase composed modal melodies can be highly repetitive and thus musically boring to ears accustomed to hearing catchy, clever tunes for melodies. The sheer repetitiveness of staircase composed modal melodies begs for the development of the melodic line, and one direction that can take is fractalization. When the contours of a melody develop micro-contours to add an element of complexity for the sake of being captivating, the spiritual radiance can be easily lost. To maintain that sense of radiance, the musician needs to impart a feeling of great deliberateness to the phraseology of the fractalized melodic line.

This is best implemented when the music is meter free. In the absence of an overt beat, the rhythms become both fractalized and asymmetrical, and the phraseology – the way the notes are grouped in phrases - evokes the feeling that a story is being told. It is another mysterious feeling, to feel that wordless melodies are telling a story.

For that effect, there has to be a template, a formula for how the notes in the melody are grouped to achieve a phraseology that is recognizable and consistent throughout the composed / improvised melody. The template for some traditions in ancient eastern music is remarkably similar to certain patterns of speech. The 'swing' of the phraseology of the melodic line sounds like declamatory speech, in which not only a story is being related, but it is being related with a dramatic flourish in the telling that calls to mind traditions that are rooted in epic legends.

The declamatory style of speech associated with the telling of epic legends adds to the ponderous deliberateness of the meter free construction of certain musical traditions of ancient eastern cultures. And the tendency is for the fractalization of the melodies, a natural part of the maturation process over long periods of time, to increase until the melodies are utterly inscrutable and nearly unlearnable. The fractalization can become so extreme that no one can follow or anticipate the direction of the melody, and that works against the music serving as a conduit for spiritual radiance.

Eastern traditions tend toward the meditative and plaintive. Those qualities thrive and flourish in music that allows the listeners to be steeped in the sound, but weaken considerably when the musician sounds like he or she is in a race to cram as many notes as possible into the melody. The notes per second rate can go as high as the human hand is able to reverse the motion of a bow or plectrum, and when the music making falls victim to the ambition of having the fastest phraseology, everyone loses. For transcendence to occur the melody must drag, it must languish, and induce a kind of delicious anguish at the development of the mode. Of course there are phrases that are expressed in bursts, but they must be relatively brief or the effect will be one of a lack of warmth and spiritual radiance.

Spiritual radiance is an elusive quality that can only appear when the music can be absorbed in a calm and meditative state. High speed phrases are antithetical to that rarified mental state, as is the overly convoluted, fractalized melodic line. The ancient musical traditions of the east should more resemble a call to prayer than a prelude to a horse race or the flight of a bumble bee. Yet the trend is toward a frantic competition for high speed performance. This trend will only serve to dim the radiance that is the reason for being of this type of music.

ORAL TRADITION IN THE TRANSMISSION OF ANCIENT MUSIC

In eras gone by, teachers did much more than just impart information. They awakened in their pupils the motive to dig deeply into what was being taught. They passed on their reverence for the subject matter using an energy that is rapidly dissipating from humanity. It wasn't the noisy zeal of ego driven emotion, it was something we now call presence, the embodiment of one's knowledge. And the method for transmitting that knowledge is now known as the oral tradition.

There is much more to the oral tradition than just explaining things verbally. The teacher transmits a certain vital energy along with the information. A common and familiar example of this way of transmitting energy is: two identical tuning forks; strike one and then hold it near the other without actually touching and the second one begins to vibrate. This phenomenon is called harmonic resonance.

In a way, human beings are like very complex tuning forks. By sheer proximity, the living vibrations of one being can trigger corresponding vibrations in another. Similarly, the proximity of a teacher and pupil both transmits knowledge and the energy needed to understand it.

The phenomenon of passing energy by harmonic resonance is crucial to the transmission of ancient musical knowledge, where the intended effect of the music was – is - to achieve transcendental states of mind. The teacher, steeped in the experience of transcendence, transmits to the pupil, along with technique, the very states of mind generated by the tradition being passed on.

The music of ancient traditions by itself has some intrinsic power, but by itself it is not enough to induce the fullest transcendental experience. It is like an airplane speeding along the runway. It travels a certain distance, but it never takes off. For liftoff to take place, the musician must have learned from a master about transcendent states, and that only can occur by oral tradition.

What is transcendence? It is the transformation of the ordinary mental state with its daily, mundane concerns, into an expansive, more cosmic mind in which the sense of infinity and eternity begin to replace the preoccupation with worldly circumstances.

Transcendence occurs in degrees. The fullest degree is the complete immersion of awareness in the eternal and infinite Being. There are various methods for achieving this degree of transcendence, and all of them depend on the oral tradition to learn.

One such method is found in a form we now call ancient eastern sacred music. The intent of the master is to inculcate in the pupil not just the technique of an instrument and the repertoire of traditional melodies, but the very state of mind that the music is there to bring; a transformation from the mundane to the miraculous.

The power of the teacher to elevate the state of mind of the pupil is partly dependent on lineage, but it also depends on other factors. The hardships voluntarily undertaken for the sake of learning have a significant influence on how the learning goes. In order for the music to blossom into its most potent form, the musician must have

undergone trials and tribulations, for the sake of their beloved music, both in the learning and the perfecting phases.

Foremost in importance is the intent of the musician. Only a musician whose intent is transcendence can achieve it, and a talented, practiced professional musician, without that intent, can only play the outer form beautifully. Like the airplane forever taxiing back and forth on some runway, it will never ascend to the heights.

Perhaps it is ironic to be writing - or reading - an article about the oral tradition, as if by written words alone this most difficult of principles could be passed on.

We have all been exposed to some charismatic enthusiast for ideas about how we can be more, better, higher in consciousness than we currently are. And whether or not such an enthusiast is really qualified to transmit accurately the essence of a real teaching is almost beside the point. Anyone with a vivid sense of mission exudes a palpable force, an energy that almost by itself seems to make us swell with hope that we too could become as elevated as the charismatic person seems to be.

Human beings can be very sensitive to an energy that some people seem to possess in greater degree than others, and who can transmit that energy at will, so it seems. And this is an important concept, because it forms the basis for the oral tradition in the transmission of ancient teachings, be the subject a musical tradition, dance or craft.

In music, however, there is a real need for the oral method of teaching, especially among the ancient eastern musical traditions, in order for a master to successfully pass on knowledge of the art and craft of the tradition. Sacred music is based on the desire to achieve transcendental states of mind. The various forms of sacred music surviving today evolved in a culture that was steeped in and saturated with inward, contemplative, ecstatic states of mind. The origins of this kind of music are multiform. The three major centers are the Indian subcontinent, famous for transcendental meditation and other related contemplative traditions, Central Asia with its ancient shamanistic teachings and nature worship, and ancient Egypt, where the cult of immortality reached unprecedented heights.

The idea that we exist in an invisible world that is concurrent with the visible, sensorially palpable world is pervasive throughout all cultures and civilizations. Of course, the universe is just what the word used to describe it means: one world, one ‘verse’ or one Being. Yet we carry this deep conviction that there is much more to existence than meets the eye, or any other of our physical senses. There is something utterly mysterious about the whole idea of Being that we find ourselves beholden to the wish to experience this invisible world, the noumenal world, directly.

And the literature on this subject, described as metaphysical, mystical or occult, abounds. Much of that literature describes the noumenal world in terms of visual effects. However, physical eyes cannot apprehend the noumenal world any more than the nose or fingertips. But that doesn’t mean the noumenal is imperceptible to the human being who truly wishes to perceive it.

We have a kind of sense organ that is apparently virtually unknown generally, which can be deployed to perceive the noumenal world; it is the human body as a whole.

Like some great cosmic eardrum, the whole human body is a sensory organ that can perceive the noumenal world directly, and it is not a visual thing. The noumenal world is a vibration, and if there were any ordinary human sensory modality that could be rightly used to metaphorically represent that perception, it wouldn't be vision, it would be hearing.

The world is a world of vibrations, and the human hearing apparatus, beginning with the ear, is the closest thing in our familiar world to the unfamiliar phenomenon of our whole body as a perceiver of the noumenal world, the world as vibrating energy. In order for our consciousness to consciously participate in that perception, it needs to focus on the unique sensation of the entire physical body where all the real transactions of life take place.

After a lifetime of focusing on mental images and the emotions they trigger, it is not so easy for a consciousness to sudden find the sensation of the whole body and perceive the real world of vibrating energies. A certain preparation is necessary, and that is where transcendental states of mind come in, and with them, all the artful methods that humanity has devised over the ages to reach that rarified state of mind. Ancient music from the Eastern world that gave us meditation and other mindful practices is one such artful modality, and it is wholly dependent on the oral tradition to learn the form as well as the content.

For music to serve as a vehicle for transmitting the effects of transcendental states of mind, the form must correspond to the content, which is the intent of the musician to experience and transmit the energy that brings us the transcendent state. Every form of music corresponds to the intent of the composer, be it for entertainment, for military marching bands, for political and social commentary, for funeral processions, for romance, and for transcendence. Perhaps some forms will combine various fractions of various intents, but in general, the form must correspond.

Focusing on music that is intended to transform the ordinary consciousness to a more cosmic consciousness, we can look at the form of certain ancient eastern traditional music that has been transmitted down the ages by the oral (aural) tradition, directly from master to pupil, by means of demonstrations, along with the harmonic resonance of passing on that special energy. There are several features that ancient eastern sacred music uses to that effect. The first and foremost is the employment of a property of music that cannot be accounted by ordinary scientific explanation: listening to musical scales induces in us human beings the effect of being transported.

Even the simplest rendering of any seven toned scale, that is, a series of seven relatively harmonious tones between any two tones that constitute an octave (modal music), will unfailingly leave the listener with the distinct impression of having been taken from one 'place' to another, but not spatially, of course. Something inexplicable takes place in human beings when they attentively listen to a series of tones in a scale that begins on the tonic and proceeds to the octave above, or the octave below.

There is a difference between the sensations that occurs from listening to an ascending scale than from a descending scale, and that is the second property of music that the ancient traditions rely on for their unique effects, the sense of transport up,

and down. We are being taken up and down the scale of vibrations, and we instinctively feel the underlying reality, that existence is a scale of vibrations.

Another inexplicable phenomenon occurs from delaying the last tone in that series. How is it possible that the playing of seven tones in a scale, then pausing before playing the last tone - the octave above the tonic - unfailingly induces in virtually every one of us the wish for completion? What is this world that music exists and has such a profound effect upon us human beings? Even the simplest rendition of a musical scale, with that hesitation before the sounding of the octave, has the power to make us want to hear that final tone, that closure to the sensation of having been transported.

What is that sense? It cannot be explained, nor can it be described in words; it can only be demonstrated experientially. Furthermore, by artfully altering the specific tonalities in a given scale, radically different effects on states of human consciousness are obtained. In addition to the numerous minor scales – and the unique major scale – there is a world of possibilities for transcendence in the technique of playing melodies that incorporate microtones, deliberate deviations from the commonly heard harmonious intervals favored by ordinary musical forms.

The phenomenon of the microtone is particularly interesting. Here is a tone that when played unintentionally merely sounds out of tune. Yet the very same tone, the same frequency of vibrations, when played intentionally, has the opposite effect. It takes on an aura of power. It feels like one has been instantly transported to an unknown world. It is the world of dissonance, and it greatly amplifies the listener's yearning for closure. This intense yearning for something as mysterious as closure has the power to awaken the sensation of being in the noumenal world, the world of vibrating energies, the world of the infinite and eternal.

It is possible to resist this effect. In fact, the effect is wholly dependent on a state I like to call active listening. It is a state of mind that all oral and aural traditions depend on. Without active listening, the effect may not be felt. Transcendent states of mind must be actively pursued. The immediate effect of special music that harks from an era when human beings coveted transcendental states of mind is to beckon, but it cannot forcibly drag anyone into a state of transcendence who isn't ready and willing to be transformed by the intent that is at the core of this music.

Another feature of the sacred music of the ancient eastern world that is crucial to its intended effect is the meter free melodies. This concept may be the most 'alien' of them all; it is certainly the most difficult to master. Meter free means the melody has no overt rhythm to guide the music, no repetitive beat to inform the musician when to play the next note. Learning to play music with a flexible tempo requires a special quality of listening. And just as with microtones, which must be played with great deliberateness, the moment of playing the tones in meter free music must be similarly intended.

There is no other way to learn the special syntax of meter free music than the oral tradition, where the intent of the music must be delivered along with the technique. And the syntax cannot be arbitrary. It has to match the intent of the music, which, as we explained above, is to be transported, so to speak. The peculiar syntax of ancient

eastern meter free music seems to resemble the syntax of epic storytelling, as if we are being guided on our trip inward, to the ‘place’ where transcendence is possible.

Another important feature of ancient eastern music is the convoluted melodic line, resembling the twists and turns, the under / over complexity of arabesque. This impression is further strengthened by the sense that the melody is not a fixed composition but is being rendered in a fresh and new way in the present moment. There is the original composition which took centuries to evolve, and there is the demand for a fresh expression of that traditional composition. The word ‘improvisation’ comes to mind, a word most commonly associated with jazz, and ancient eastern sacred music is not jazz, certainly, but it may be the only way we can describe this feature of the traditional music of the ancient east.

Not only would written score undermine the improvisational aspect of this music, it also circumvents the student’s struggle to ‘find’ the melody inside so that the expression of it through the instrument or voice requires the element of intention.

Ancient eastern sacred music embodies a legacy of knowledge which can put us in touch with a current of energy that originated during an epoch when the transmission of wisdom was passed on exclusively in the oral tradition, with no coded symbols to intervene and insulate the listeners from the intent of the masters: transcendence. It is a path to perceiving the noumenal world, the real world of vibrating energies. And that is the true legacy of the ancient eastern traditions of sacred music.

IN SEARCH OF THE MOST MYSTERIOUS NOTE

The first time I heard the strange and exotic sounding microtones of ancient eastern 'art' (court) music in a live performance was in 1972 at a public demonstration of the Whirling Dervishes of Konya, Turkey. The musicians played on flutes, bowed spike fiddles, plucked fretless lutes, and the singer sang in modes unknown to my western ears. I was surprised to experience these 'odd notes never heard' as something very beautiful, and real in a mystical way. I felt as if the music reached into some hitherto unknown place deep within and touched inner chords, sensations that triggered thoughts and feelings that were of another world.

A month or two later I had the good fortune to meet an elderly musician originally from Daghestan, a province in southern Russia (North Caucasus), and formerly a part of the Persian Empire. He played a bowed spike fiddle from Azerbaijan called *kamancha* and the form of music known as Azerbaijani *mugham.* From the first notes he played, I felt the connection to the music of the Dervishes, but it was orders of magnitude more intense. He leaned into the music of *mugham* with a forcefulness that bespoke of an ancient tradition that expressed the deepest feelings, the yearnings of a human spirit filled with the nostalgia for a forgotten state of mind. He seemed to express both his own personal journey through a difficult life while reaching for something celestial, something transcendent, through the music.

I was enchanted by the intense moodiness of his ancient music. And once again, I was intrigued by what seemed to be the deliberate use of notes that were not on the familiar, western scale. I sat a few feet away and saw and clearly heard, he was intentionally playing notes that would have to be regarded as out of tune by western standards of tonality. Yet my reaction was not what one might expect; there was no sense that the note was 'off'. It just seemed especially mournful, and it blended well with the sighing sounds of the bow across the strings.

How is this possible? The same note played by accident would cause me to recoil, clench my teeth and suffer, yet played intentionally would lift me into another world with such incredible power. It seemed that the very intention to play that strange note was all it took to transform me from being a listener having a negative reaction to one of overwhelming positivity.

I undertook to learn from the old man from Daghestan, and nearly four decades later and numerous teachers from Azerbaijan, I am still in awe of the effect of microtones, mysterious notes that are so alien to our western ears, yet have such a profound effect on our inner state. Not only do microtones present a mystery in that depending on the musician's intent, they will have two diametrically opposite effects; they also at times seem to be a bit tentative, as if it is still being decided exactly what pitch should be played.

From my studies of *mugham,* I discovered a whole range of microtones between the notes of the familiar Do Re Mi and so on to be explored for their effect. But they must be intended or the music fails. How to intend an unknown note? One learns to intend these microtones by the example set by other players, and depending on how profound their intention to play a particular microtone, that is how powerful and

profound will be its power to transform one's ordinary everyday consciousness into something celestial, something transcendent.

Perhaps this all sounds a bit much. Well, perhaps it is. All I can say is that I spent my adult life – I will be 60 this year – searching for the most intense, most powerful set of microtones that will induce the beloved state of transcendence. In order for a microtone or set of microtones to have the desired effect, they must be framed in the context of the perfect consonance of octaves and the relative consonance of all the familiar tones. The power of microtones is unleashed when the tonic and octave are returned to frequently.

The range of possible tones on the fretless fingerboard of the *kamancha* – like a violin or any other instrument capable of playing all tonalities - is literally infinite. That range is the field of inquiry: what are the most powerful, most intense microtonal notes on the scales, and which ones are most used to play Azerbaijani *mugham.*

All *mughams* incorporate at least a few microtones. Among the many *mugham*s is a range of how deeply microtonal they can be. There are numerous *mugham*s that employ all manner of strange, exotic microtones, but the most profound *mugham,* microtonally speaking, is *mugham Shur*.

I have heard so many versions of this particular *mugham* that it is not really possible to identify any one as 'the one', the only true way to play it. This is both unnerving – especially for me, an American musician with no ethnic ties to Azerbaijan who is primally concerned with sounding authentic – and exhilarating, because of the improvisational potential for rendering ever new versions of it.

Except for the tonic – octave interval, every note on the scale of *mugham Shur* – even the perfect 5^{th} – may be subject to some heavy note bending, starting with the range of microtones from the minor 2^{nd} to the minor 3^{rd}. Such a small range, yet viewed microtonally – think microscope for the ear – it starts to feel more like an ocean. And how many years of training does it take for an average musician to learn to navigate that vastness?

All these many years of careful, attentive listening, feeding a gradually growing sense of the meaning of microtones has helped me to face the challenge of playing them to my own satisfaction. There is no taking them for granted; they are always special to my ears. And the effect they have, it is not possible to describe. All intervals have a certain, mysterious effect on us that we can become aware of by careful listening. Microtones have an indescribable effect; they are even more mysterious than the effect of the familiar intervals that underpin western music.

METER FREE CADENCE AND *MUGHAM*

The next challenge is stringing these pearls together into a wholeness that feels natural for *mugham.* Now, lest I be rightfully criticized for violating the ancient rule never to define a word by using the word, please let me try to say what that natural state of *mugham* is, or, at least, what it feels like.

Thanks to the meter free condition of *mugham*, the 'when' of a note must be learned and intended. In this regard, *mugham* somewhat resembles human speech. It is expressed in bursts of meter free groupings, and the natural tendency of speech to speed up and slow down at will in *mugham* is artistically worked into a smooth and palatable form that is the ideal context in which to embed the intense dissonance of microtones.

The "swing" of the free meter cadence of *mugham* lends itself to wave dynamics. *Mugham* starts out slow then picks up speed, then slackens off, then picks up speed again, and it cycles like this, with some large waves segueing into small ones and back again. Wave dynamics appear in the clustering of notes into phrases, modulation of the speed of the melody and the volume it is played at. Even the vibratos used in *mugham* are meter free and modulated according to wave dynamics.

The meter free cadence of *mugham* resembles the syntax of declamatory speech as employed in the telling of epic legends. This lends a kind of forward driven, imperative statement, softened by the passage of centuries. This cadence is the base for the timing of all the notes, both tonal and microtonal.

The epic storytelling template for *mugham* is a fractal, folded in on itself version of storytelling. A common comment is, *mugham* imparts the eerie sense of being told a story, but the storyline is mystifying. Unlike a story told in language, *mugham* is the story of itself, which is the story of scales, octaves, intervals, microtones, and wave dynamics.

There is something mystifying about the structure of music, as if, like the Periodic Table of Elements, or the Electromagnetic Spectrum, it is a template for reality itself. And *mugham* tells the story of that template, and hearing that story is unfailingly exhilarating.

THE POWER OF INTERVALS

An interval in music is the relationship between any two notes sounded simultaneously or sequentially. In modal music, all the notes in a scale create intervals with the tonic, the first note of the scale. Each interval evokes in us a corresponding unique experience that is somewhere in between a feeling and a sensation. Unfortunately for us language-based intelligent life forms, our vocabulary doesn't have words for these feeling – sensations. We only have syllables for the seven notes that make whole tone intervals: Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti Do. We don't have (commonly known) syllables for the five semitones between the seven whole tones, let alone the 72 discernable microtones between the 12 whole tones and semitones.

Intervals are essential for composing melodies, and melodies can be rich with all sorts of feelings, sentiments, etc, but without any names for the special feeling – sensations of intervals, their place or role in our inner lives remains hidden from us. To reveal the hidden power of intervals, we need to isolate each one and compare them to each other in a very deliberate manner. Then the power of intervals makes itself felt deep within our feeling life. Once we have sensitized ourselves to the experience of intervals we can better appreciate how they are used in the composition of melodies.

Independently of the melodies they are used in, intervals possess a power to evoke very special feeling – sensations that ordinary melodies aren't specifically composed to accentuate. For a melody to evoke the feeling - sensations of intervals (intervalations?) it must tie them all together in a way that gives each note a definite degree of presence in the melody, and that all the notes to one extent or another sequentially take turns serving as the 'center' tone around which the other notes are then played. In this way, the unique feeling – sensation of each interval is artfully blended into a wholeness of the mode, which is the basis of *mugham.*

The *mugham* is the traditional way of tying together all the notes that it is composed of, specific ways of grouping the notes that evoke the sense of being told a story. And the microtones, which have the effect of inducing the mysterious wish to hear the harmonious tone it is near, amplify both the longing for resolution of the "story" while all the time wanting to hear each and every word before it is all over, which is altogether too soon. Unlike some long forms of eastern music, *mugham* is relatively brief, and thankfully so, because it is so intense.

THE STAIRCASE MELODY AND ITS EFFECT

The first principle in the exposition of the scales of *mugham* is the staircase construction of the melodies.

The specific sensation evoked by staircase melodies cannot be conveyed in words. The closest description is the metaphor of transport. When the notes of any scale or of any mode are played sequentially, they impart a sense of having begun somewhere and gone on a journey. As soon as we hear a few notes going up the scale (not really "up" but that's what we say), the starting note - called in music the tonic – begins to feel like home, and the other notes are stopping points on our journey.

In hearing the sequence of notes in an 'ascending' scale, the moment one hears the note that is the octave above the tonic, one feels a palpable sense of arrival at one's destination. Returning "down" the scale, on arriving at the tonic, one has the distinct feeling of return to the "home" note. *Mugham*, along with its other modal, microtonal, meter-free musical cousins from surrounding geographical areas, makes extensive use of the inexplicable transporting effect of staircase music. Upon this base, we lay the unique cadence and microtonal inflections of *mugham.*

That gets us started. However, in order to enchant the listener into a sustained attentive regard, the melody must make use of another property of staircase music, which is the strange experience, the peculiar state of mind that appears when the last note, the octave note, is deliberately delayed. Anyone even the least bit sensitive to music is going to feel a definite, if utterly inexplicable sense of frustration at the delay of the octave note. An extended delay induces an intense wish to hear that final, octave note.

Mugham aims to delay that resolution but in a way which is satisfying rather than frustrating. This calls for the composition of melodies with a certain intricacy. A typical *mugham* melody postpones the moment of resolution by enchanting the listener with a complex way of tying together all the other notes that precede the final, resolving octave note, or the return 'home' to the tonic. The result of this artful manipulation is to induce in the listener the wish to continue hearing the unfolding melody while it gradually moves toward resolution, all the while conveying the sensation of mystical transport.

In addition to all this, *mugham* invokes the sounds of nature. We can hear birds chirping, horses whinnying and neighing, brooks burbling, breezes through leaves, winds blowing, waves rising and falling, storms, then peace and tranquility. We can see dreams passing by. We can feel our own being differently.

THEME AND VARIATION IN *MUGHAM*

Mugham has a certain flexibility that could be called improvisation, but that word may be misleading. The melodies in *mugham* can take some unexpected twists and turns, but the mode cannot be altered by notes that belong to other modes or the whole effect evaporates. The word 'improvisation' can be used to refer to the flexibility that the melodies in *mugham* can have, so long as it is understood that there are limits to what can be played and still be *mugham.*

The concept of theme and variation is well known in jazz, and probably that is a better way to describe the flexible nature of *mugham* melodies. In *mugham,* the theme is a mode composed of (usually) seven notes within an octave that are more or less evenly distributed across that octave. Many modes are possible thanks to the many different notes, 7 harmonious intervals, 5 more dissonant, and another 72 discernable microtones to choose from by making clusters of the notes of the scale of a given *mugham.* The theme of any one mode is able to serve as a framework for variations which are in the details of how those notes are clustered, what the pattern is, how it unfolds and develops. The virtually infinite ways of phrasing, timing, emphasis and microtonal inflection makes *mugham* is a form of music that can support a certain degree of improvisation.

There is enough flexibility in *mugham* that makes it a living tradition and not crystallized into some 'classical' way of playing that may not be altered, as western classical music is usually understood. Not only can individual musicians play their *mugham*s with a unique style that makes the sound of their version identifiably theirs, the same musician can play a *mugham* today and play it again tomorrow in a fresh way. Each time the musician plays a *mugham,* he or she is able to refresh their understanding of how it can be played.

This puts a kind of demand on the musician who wishes to search for ever new ways of expressing the same *mugham.* Whoever wishes to accept the challenge of improvising in *mugham* begins with a question, how to begin today's search for the sound, the way the hand, so to speak, wants to render that *mugham* this time. And the question follows the development of the *mugham* right to the end.

This improvisational way of playing *mugham* makes for an even more intense listening experience. The audience can sense the tentative, exploratory tenor of the musicians' approach to the *mugham,* and it only adds to the mystery: how will the *mugham* be played today? Perhaps this is more valued by experienced listeners as first listeners have no way to know all the other possible ways a *mugham* can be played. Yet first listeners often ask, "Was that *mugham* composed or was it improvised?"

It is both. There is a base melody, a kind of minimal structure, a framework called a skeleton that has to be filled out. The framework has enough structure to inform the musician how it can be filled out. A beginner will be most tentative as there is a veritable infinity of possibilities of exactly how it can be filled out. At the same time, there are traditional tracks that can be followed in the filling out. That is the safe way, and a worthy way to be sure, but not quite as satisfying as when the approach to *mugham* is more open ended. It is more satisfying because it is more of a challenge to

go the experimental way of finding one's own unique 'voice' within the context of an established tradition. It's an immense musical challenge, and for someone who did not grow up in that culture, it is a formidable and intimidating yet alluring prospect.

In any case, it doesn't seem to be a choice, after all. One either finds oneself in the classic track or one finds oneself in the more open ended track.

I think it may have something to do with need. In my case I just feel the need to explore different paths, different ways to better express the mood of the *mugham.* I have heard so many distinct styles, several of them both highly improvisational and unique sounding to the musician, that it seems inevitable that I find myself being drawn to that way of playing *mugham.*

So, I suspect that is what drives others to improvise. Now, it is easier to just write, I have this need to improvise, that's why I do it and that's probably why others do it too, but I really haven't said anything. In order to justify this chapter on improvisation – or theme and variation – I should offer a clearer description of that need. To do that, first it should be said, what draws me to *mugham* in the first place is the same thing that draws me to improvise within the *mugham.* What draws me to *mugham* is something of a mystery, as much as it might mystify anyone who is asked why they are drawn to a particular music, or anything that is a part of a whole category in which one can have strong preferences.

Yet that mysterious, strong preference I have for *mugham* – in the context of a love for music of many kinds – is owing to the uniqueness of *mugham*, the effect of the sum of all the parts we have covered so far. And the same can be said for the particular way that *mugham* lends itself to improvisation and unique stylization.

Following the path of open ended, improvised *mugham* melodies, the uniqueness of a personal style of playing is a function of: what you're most interested in feeling, what the limits of your capabilities are, and what you find most satisfying about the *mugham* you are currently immersed in.

MUGHAM AND THE MAGIC OF HUMAN INTENT

This may remain a mystery, and perhaps that's how it should be, but there is something about the music of *mugham* and the power of human intent that calls for some explication. The discovery that microtones must be played intentionally or sound out of tune calls attention to the role of intent in music, especially ancient eastern music that has echoes of the sacred call to prayer in it.

Once microtones and their peculiar power to induce a mystical state are understood in terms of the human intent to experience that mystical state, it is only a matter of time to understand how the meter free phrasing and cadence of *mugham* must be similarly intended, and with similar effect. Intending the exact pitch of a note that is not on the harmonious interval is similar to intending the exact moment the note is played when there is no beat to rely on. The phrasing of the notes must be similarly intended in order for all the notes in that phrase to bind together into some melodious wholeness, and when all three are lined up perfectly, that's when the power of *mugham* is at its peak.

We can't say what intent is, but we can talk about its effects. Many things and events issue from someone intending something to happen. Of course there are accidents, both happy and tragic, but most inventions were intended, and music is the result of a series of inventions, both in the making of instruments and melodies. Like all real things, the intent in music comes in degrees, and the degree of intent required to rightly play *mugham* may be unprecedented in music.

Looking further into *mugham* and what makes it special, it becomes clearer that the intent needed to play microtones is not the same as the intent needed to play the notes of harmonious intervals. Precision is called for in both cases, of course, but the very energy of dissonance issuing from a microtonal interval forces one to intend that microtonal note with even greater force of intent.

It is easy to intend a harmonious interval; it is not easy to intend a microtone. It is very easy to intend to play on time; it is not easy to intend to play outside of regular timing. It is very easy to cluster notes that are in logical sequence; it is not easy to cluster them in surprising and unexpected ways. The very effort to play *mugham* intentionally calls forth an energy that I can only call intent, and its effect is to pull the listener into another world.

One can practice the melodies of mugham and polish them to a high shine. Or, it might be more interesting to allow for a certain degree of uncertainty to remain. Perhaps too much practice and the curiosity and uncertainty gives way to routine. *Mugham* may be at its best when there is a sense of the explorer looking for the path. Then the path of *mugham* must be intended anew each time it is traversed.

THE SEVEN MYSTERIES IN MUSIC AND *MUGHAM*

There is a great mystery in music, the interval known as the octave. The octave interval is made of two notes that are both the same yet different. How is that paradox possible? The octave calls attention to itself in a very mysterious way: what is this universe that the phenomenon of the octave is a ubiquitous reality? The mystery of the octave reveals the mystery of music in general, which is the mystery of vibrations, the mystery of scale and the mystery of intervals. To stop and ponder the octave is to stare directly into the abyss of the utterly unknown and unknowable. And the octave is unique among all the intervals. The octave is the king of consonance. Compared to the octave, all the other intervals are dissonant to some extent. Among all the possible intervals in music, only the octave generates no third note.

Sounding the octave interval evokes a unique feeling in us. Listening to the other intervals, we enter into the second mystery, which is the awareness that each and every musical interval evokes a unique feeling in us. Our language does not have the vocabulary to help us isolate and identify these unique feelings – more like sensations – other than the familiar Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti Do. But these seven syllables are insufficient to help us isolate and identify the unique feeling / sensations evoked by the corresponding musical intervals the syllables represent. For that we would just need to listen to them while remaining very sensitive to what takes place within, in response.

Also, there are five other intervals on the (familiar) tempered scale of the piano and guitar but they do not have familiar syllables to represent them. With or without syllables to represent the interval, all the 12 notes make intervals with the 'Do' also known as the tonic. Each interval evokes a unique feeling / sensations. The mystery is how all 12 musical intervals have the power to evoke unique feeling / sensations in all of us.

The third mystery is the feeling sensation evoked by the sounding of the above mentioned seven tone scale. It is the feeling sensation of transport. Any melody can be beautiful, intriguing, emotionally evocative, and enchanting, but only melodies made of staircase compositions evoke the mysterious sense of transport.

This leads us to the fourth mystery, a strange effect when the last note in the scale is delayed. Any delay induces the wish to hear that last note, and when it finally sounds, there is a sense of relief along with the sense of arrival. Why music should have this power is a complete mystery, yet it is that mystery, along with the other six mysteries, that enables mugham and similar forms of staircase music to have its unique effect.

There are more musical intervals that we can hear but which are not on the piano. In fact, the untrained human ear can discern up to 84 divisions of the octave. This leads us to the fifth mystery, that beyond the 12 familiar intervals are potentially 72 more intervals not used in western, tempered scale based music. Known in music as microtones, this vast range of potential intervals can be tapped for unique musical effects. The effect is to deepen one's desire to hear the harmonious interval that is proximal to that microtone.

Perhaps the first time one hears a microtone, that is, an interval that has been deliberately and noticeably flattened or sharpened, it may just seem out of tune. But by the second sounding, it is beginning to convey the musician's intention to play that note on purpose. By the third sounding, the musician's intent has fully entered the field, mysteriously, and has changed the way we listen to that microtone. Now we want to hear the microtone. We want to hear it again and again, and this sets up the tension between our desire to hear the microtone and our desire to hear the harmonious note near it.

That tension must be artistically handled which introduces the sixth mystery, the way the notes in mugham melodies are clustered. They are clustered in a way that evokes the distinct feeling that a story is being told. What could that story be about, but the very intervals the notes make with the tonic that appear as the melody unfolds, and all the mysterious feelings and sensations they evoke in us. The method for evoking this storytelling effect is to dispense with a regular beat. The clustering of the notes in mugham melodies is meter free, and very flexible. This means the timing of the notes must be just as intentional as playing the microtones. The added dimension of intended timing further increases the power of the other mysterious effects of mugham melodies.

The seventh mystery is the power of the silences between the bursts of notes. There is no way to evoke that unique feeling sensation from mere words. The closest I can come to describing the effect of the silences in the context of this most mysterious music, is to say that they seem to fill the room with some kind of invisible solidity that is dead silent, and very present.

The ornamentation embellishing the melodies of mugham is not a mystery. The sounds are meant to evoke the sounds of nature. One can hear birds chirping and warbling. One can hear horses whinnying and neighing, brooks burbling, cats meowing, cows bellowing, and breezes whispering through the leaves. No mystery there, that mesmerizing flourish comes from an ancient belief system anthropologists call animism. The belief is that there is an animating spirit which courses through the forms of all life, and which renders the sounds of nature sacred.

In sum, the great mysteries of the octave, the intervals, staircase melodies evoking the sense of transport, desire for the sense of arrival, the mysterious effects of intentional microtones, of being told an ancient story, of the silences, and the enchanting effect from evoking the sounds of nature all fold together into a complete mystery, the power of mugham to take us away to another place altogether. And that is what the word means. Mugham is the Azerbaijani way of saying – and playing – the ancient makam or maqqam of the Middle East. The word means a place, a station, a state of mind. That's what mugham does; it is otherworldly music that takes us to another place, another state of mind.