

IMPROVISING IN MUGHAM

The word 'improvisation' is well understood in the context of jazz, blues and rock. In the context of an ancient eastern tradition such as mugham, it has a somewhat similar meaning in that there is a theme (which, in the case of mugham is set in a specific mode) and variation on that theme. Unlike those modern genre's, mugham is meter free, so the improvisations, or variations on the modal theme, are played without the support of a metered beat. The melodies of mugham are very flexible in both the timing of the notes and the way the notes are clustered together to make distinct phrases.

Mugham phrases tend to be asymmetrical. In addition to slowing down and speeding up the tempo at will, mugham melodies are composed of phrases which are clustered in asymmetrical groupings so that if you did set the pace of the notes to a meter (measure), every phrase would have a different time signature. One phrase could be a 3/4, the next a 4/4, the next a 5/4, and so on.

Another way to refer to improvisations is 'spontaneous composition'. Within the confines of a given mode, the improvisation, or spontaneous composition, has to fit within the general sensibility of the mugham. An experienced listener must not be jarred by some improvisation that doesn't have the 'feel' of mugham; it must be recognizable as a phrase of mugham. A good analogy is speech. If you speak in one language and everyone understands you, you can say pretty much anything you want, even make up a story on the spot. But if you start to toss in words from other languages that your listeners don't understand, they will be jarred by that, and lose the sense of the storyline.

Another way to refer to the act of improvisation in mugham is 'personalization'. There is a base, or core melody that the students in the (traditional or national) music school must learn to repeat exactly. It is the basic framework of notes for a given mugham and how they are traditionally arranged. After a student has mastered the base framework of a given mugham, they go on to learn another. After they have mastered them all, they may wish to embellish and ornament the melodies with their own style. They try to balance the need to sound 'correct' and recognizable to the audience, and their desire to lean in certain directions in order to establish a signature style of playing or singing. They hear what other musicians and singers are doing with those base melodies, and consciously or unconsciously pick up certain key phrases and specific ways of clustering notes that appeal to them. They go to a concert and hear classic mugham. They go to a wedding and hear free-wheeling improvisations. They pick up on the wide variety of ways to play or sing a certain mugham, and that helps them to personalize the mughams for themselves. Some musicians and singers have their own stylistic way of playing, and listening to all the varieties of how mughams are played enables us to understand the core point from which all mugham is played.

Not every mugham artist has a distinctive style. Most musicians and singers in Azerbaijan sound pretty homogenous. But there are some who distinguish themselves with a highly recognizable personal style. Perhaps that comes about consciously, deliberately, or perhaps it is just the natural drift of a given musician or singer, to lean in

a particular direction, stylistically. Not everyone wants to improvise, to challenge oneself with a fresh new way of getting from A to Z in a mugham. Improvisation is not really possible in an ensemble setting; only a soloist has the luxury of playing with the melody, clustering the notes in the mode in creative ways, stretching out the phrase as long as possible while actively searching for new paths to take, experimenting with certain microtones and reaching for particular ways to cluster the notes of the mode into phrases.

Mugham improvisations are played to advance the overall effect that mugham music has on the listener. It may be near impossible to separate the sense of intrigue that the convoluted melodies inevitably evoke in anyone who listens closely to them from the effect they are intended to help enhance. In a way, the very nature of the human response to listening closely to those odd melodic compositions is to conclude that they are intended to have that effect, when it is the overall effect of mugham that is being supported by those intriguing compositions.

The overall effect of all mugham melodies is the profound sense of mystical transport, and if the composition of the melodies supports that sense of mystical transport, then they are in line with the purpose of mugham. If they become an end in itself, then something is lost. What could be the purpose of rendering mugham melodies so complex and strangely constructed, if not to be at the service of the sense of mystical transport that mugham is so effective at inducing?

This question is worth exploring when listening closely to mugham melodies, be they sung or strummed, bowed or blown. The sense of intrigue at the microtones, the convolutions of the melodic line, and inscrutable asymmetric note clustering will be infused by the mystical sense of transport, just as the mystical sense of transport will be boosted by the sense of intrigue of the strangely composed melodies. The unusual note clustering has the power, when it is listened to carefully, to pull one into the special state of mind that mugham in general is there to take us to. It is difficult if not impossible to precisely identify that state of mind. It can only be alluded to, with words such as 'deep', mesmerizing, pacifying, transporting, but none of these metaphors can replace the experience of listening to mugham. One has to feel oneself being pulled into it and carried away to the place that only mugham can take one to.