

[RUNNING HEADER] PERSONALITIES

[HEADER] Jeffrey Werbock – western champion of Azerbaijani music

In the USA, his name is synonymous with Azerbaijani mugham – Jeffrey Werbock. As a practitioner of the music for 37 years, he has a deep understanding of both the form and its metaphysical dimension. Due to his championing the music, Werbock has ploughed a unique furrow in his homeland, opening ears and minds across the US - and beyond - to the glories of this magnificent art form, which he performs on kamancha, tar and oud. As the Founder and Chairman of the Mugham Society of America, he has sought to raise awareness of mugham in the west and to increase knowledge of Azerbaijani culture on an international level. He recently visited the UK to undertake a series of lecture-concerts as part of the BUTA Festival of Azerbaijani Arts. I had the honour of interviewing him on the evening of his performance at Pushkin House, London.

[BOLD] I understand that you have been undertaking a series of performances and lectures on mugham this week in the UK. What kind of reception has the music received?

My initial performance this week was held at the London-based School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), attracting about 40 audience members representing a wide range of ages, everyone very attentive, and many asking questions after the performance. The following evening during the presentation at Oxford University where there were a few serious musicians studying oriental music, I was particularly impressed by the level of the questions. The audience was very knowledgeable and enthusiastic, asking for information on the minutiae of performance styles and the musical syntax of mugham.

[BOLD] You first encountered mugham via a meeting with Mr. Avshalomov from Dagestan, who you met in Los Angeles in 1972. How did this meeting occur, and what was it about mugham that particularly resonated with you?

The first time I experienced mugham I was deeply impressed by its power on both a physical and spiritual level. It was quite different from any music that I had previously encountered. As an American, my prior musical experience had solely been in the western idiom. I was based in Topanga Canyon, a suburb of Los Angeles where other musicians and composers lived. I hoped to cultivate a following there for the moody and introspective pieces I was composing. During this time I was searching for the cosmic dimension in music, and when I first heard mugham, it struck me as both serious and ethereal while delivering a quality I can only call 'intensity' that was unique in my experience.

That meeting with Mr. Avshalomov, which changed the direction of my life, was purely serendipitous. Someone who had heard me play one of my compositions told me about Mr. Avshalomov. I sought him out and immediately upon hearing him play the kamancha I knew that it would not be enough just to listen to this music; I had to be taught how to play it, how to create that amazing atmosphere. At first Mr. Avshalomov refused, insisting that his music would be too difficult, too alien for me to learn. However, I persisted and eventually convinced him to teach me, so early in 1973 I began my studies learning Mr. Avshalomov's version of Azerbaijani mugham. He remained my teacher for the following 14 years, up to the time he died in 1987.

[BOLD] Did you have any knowledge of Caucasus music prior to this time?

In 1971, I read the autobiography of George Gurdjieff, a mystic philosopher from the Caucasus, entitled *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. The first chapter was devoted to his father, who was an Ashiq (Ashokh), and from the first page Mr. Gurdjieff described the music's unsurpassed power. This was the first time I heard of the country called Azerbaijan, and it left a very strong, very deep

impression on me. I think that helped to prepare me to appreciate the experience of mugham when I first heard it about one year later.

[BOLD] Did you find the tar and kamancha difficult to learn? How did you deal with the improvisatory elements?

Mr. Avshalomov taught me to play the kamancha, however we also wanted to play concerts as a traditional trio, so he taught another American to play the Azerbaijani frame drum (gaval) and I taught myself how to play the tar. He was also a good tailor and made the famous Kavkaz Cherkess, the traditional outfit with the flat top sheepskin hats, leather boots and embroidered robes worn for centuries by Azerbaijani singers and musicians, for us to wear at our concerts.

All instruments present technical difficulties but fortunately I was familiar with stringed instruments in that I had been playing on guitar for about 11 years prior to my learning the tar and kamancha. The bowing technique for playing kamancha was a challenge for me, as was the fretless fingerboard, just like a violin. However, it was the unique timing of the rhythms of Azerbaijani folk music, and the truly elusive phrasing of mugham, what I have come to call the syntax of mugham, that was by far the biggest challenge of all.

A few years after Mr. Avshalomov passed away, I met an Azerbaijani tar player who visited the USA, and I was able to get a few lessons on the tar. That gave my understanding of mugham a good boost. But it was not until my second visit to Azerbaijan in 1991 that I began to learn to play the more classical version of mugham on kamancha from Adalet Vezirov, one of the greatest mugham musicians and a renowned exponent of the kamancha. Later, in 2000, I began to study with a young virtuoso on kamancha who had emigrated from Baku to Brooklyn, New York named Imamyar Hasanov. After studying with him for more than one year, Mr. Hasanov moved to Virginia and I continued on my own since then, guided by what I had learned about mugham from all these great teachers, to show me the way.

Some years later I taught myself to play the oud, transposing what I had learned on kamancha and tar to the oud. Interestingly, the oud originated in an area some call Southern Azerbaijan, and it was known there as the barbat, featuring a slightly longer neck than most other oud types found across the middle-east and North Africa. I like the oud because it's soft, understated sound contrasts nicely with the bright and powerful sound of the tar. The oud combines the picking or plucking technique of the tar with the fretless finger positions of the kamancha, and like the kamancha, is capable of playing fine microtones.

Mr. Avshalomov played a simple version of mugham, but it was incredibly powerful nonetheless. Sometimes he varied slightly the sequence of notes in a mugham, imparting an improvisational aspect to the music. As I progressed on the path of learning mugham from different teachers, each with their own unique style, the improvisational aspect of mugham became a natural part of my understanding of it. Mugham has both theme and variation. This aspect of the music is analogous to jazz, but it should be emphasized that mugham is in most respects quite different from jazz. Also, I should mention that most mugham instrumentalists perform in an ensemble and must follow the group so they may not have as much improvisational latitude as a soloist might have.

[BOLD] Many elements of mugham song are based on emotion. How is it possible to express this through the instruments and achieve empathy with the singer?

Playing as an accompanist for a mugham singer is very different from playing as a soloist. I can do it after a fashion when called upon, but the occasions are mostly confined to my visits to Baku. In these instances, one has to follow the singer with a very minimalistic playing style, with a few

moments when the singer pauses to rest for expressing oneself with a spontaneously improvised phrase or two. The role of the instrumentalist in this context is one of supporting the singer. What brings us together is the deep and mysterious beauty of the mugham we are all engaged in at the moment.

[BOLD] After first encountering Mr. Avshalomov, 17 years passed before you visited Azerbaijan. What were your reactions when you arrived? Had the mugham traditions been maintained under the Soviet system?

I was really happy to be in the country after so many years of devotion to their traditional music; however I did have mixed feelings at the time. It was June of 1989 and war had just broken out in the western provinces. Trouble was brewing, a curfew had been imposed, and there was much unhappiness in Azerbaijan. Despite the situation, I was welcomed in the country and treated well by all the people that I encountered, thanks to the famed Azerbaijani hospitality. I have always found that Azerbaijanis are surprised and delighted that a foreigner wishes to understand and perform their music.

I was given to understand that under the Soviet system Azerbaijani national music had a few advocates, and plenty of adherents, but I had the sense that it was of secondary importance in society compared to the European classical music taught and played there, at least in the conservatory and perhaps even officially. Thankfully, nowadays official Azerbaijan is actively promoting mugham and its popularity has increased dramatically.

[BOLD] Did you find former President Heydar Aliyev to be knowledgeable and appreciative of mugham?

I only spoke at length with President Aliyev once, in 1997, and found that he placed great value on mugham as a true expression of the Azerbaijani soul. In his youth he was a tar player himself.

[BOLD] In short, what does mugham mean for Azerbaijan?

For Azerbaijan, mugham is the equivalent of opera for Europe – for the cognoscenti. It has a different motivation than other musical forms. It flows towards the listener's soul and is a defining characteristic of the people of Azerbaijan.