

NOTES ON MUGHAM

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

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

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

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

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

Intent can be practiced. In fact, it has to be practiced; there is no other way to get it right. Once the intent to harness the power of the dissonant intervals of microtones arrives at

the requisite level of intensity, the musician will be able to create the desired effect every time. Although the desire to play mugham belongs to the player, the intent needed to play mugham does not. It must be passed on to the student along with the music itself from a teacher, and the traditional musical soundscape of that culture. The student of mugham absorbs the intent of mugham musicians in a chain of transmission going back to the remote past.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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