SPEAKING AS AN AMERICAN WHO LOVES AZERBAIJANI *MUGHAM*

I am an amateur musician, and not a scholar on any subject. However, I decided to write something about Azerbaijani *mugham* because I studied it intensively for 38 years, and from a variety of sources. My primary sources were carriers of the tradition, mainly Azerbaijani musicians who helped me to bridge a wide cultural gap so that I might understand their traditional music, hopefully at their level.

Although I don't perform regularly with other Azerbaijani musicians and singers, I have performed publicly many times - mostly lecture demonstrations in academic settings - as the dedicated, perennial student. My high regard for Azerbaijani *mugham* led me to analyze this unique musical tradition with the aim of explaining it to others - mostly English speaking westerners - and in a variety of venues: universities, academies, institutes and museums.

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 all 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 gently 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 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 also gave us 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 and over a definite period of time. 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 consonance, the measure of 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 sense. Every interval has its own degree of consonance and dissonance. We could even establish a scale of consonance - dissonance, beginning with the most consonant interval and listing all 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?

Personally, I would dwell on this mystery, 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.