

THE MAGIC OF *MUGHAM*

By Jeffrey Werbock

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 quite mystical. I felt as if the music reached into some hitherto unknown place deep within myself and touched inner chords, sensations that triggered thoughts and feelings 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 music and the apparent antiquity, as if the remote past were speaking to the present. 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 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 how to play this strange and wonderful music of the old man from Daghestan, and now, after nearly four decades 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 which can have such a profound effect on our inner state. Microtones are a profound mystery; depending on the musician’s intent, they will have two diametrically opposite effects.

As I continued to explore the unique tonalities of *mugham*, I discovered a whole range of microtones between the notes of the familiar Do Re Mi and so on, and their marvelous

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 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 searching for the most intense, most powerful microtones that will induce the beloved state of transcendence. In order for 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 harmonious tones on the familiar scale. 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 our 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 *mughams* is a range of how deeply microtonal they can be. There are numerous *mughams* that employ all manner of strange, exotic microtones, but arguably 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 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 5th – may be subject to some heavy note 'bending', starting with the range of microtones from the minor 2nd to the minor 3rd. Such a small range, yet viewed microtonally – think microscope for the ear – it starts to feel vast, like an ocean. And how many years of training does it take for a musician to learn to navigate that vastness?

All these many years of careful, attentive listening, a gradually growing sense of the power 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*. 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. Expressed in bursts of meter free note clusters, *mugham* shows the same natural tendency speech has to speed up and slow down at will, to provide an artistically 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* calls to mind 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 tone, 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 fractalized, 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 and sentiments, but without 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 it must tie them 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.

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 common modal 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*

The word ‘improvisation’ is well understood in the context of Bach compositions, Jazz, Blues, Rock, Folk and so on. *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- also well known in jazz - is probably a better way to describe the flexible nature of *mugham* melodies. The theme is played out in the mode by making clusters of the notes of the scale of a given *mugham*. The variations are in the details of how those notes are clustered, what the pattern is, how it unfolds and develops. The variations of *mugham* are in the minute details of the clustering, phrasing, timing, emphasis and microtonal inflection. Thus, *mugham* is a form of music that can support a certain degree of improvisation.

There is enough flexibility in *mugham* to make it a living tradition and not be 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 *mughams* 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-time listeners have no way to know all the other possible ways a *mugham* can be played. Yet first – time 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 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, then one understands 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 composing 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 far greater 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.