

WHY I LOVE *MUGHAM*

A Westerner's View of Azerbaijan's Traditional Art Music

By Jeffrey Werbock

I grew up surrounded by music. My mother and cousin played piano, my father sang, and my older brothers played guitar. I took piano lessons when I was a small child, but later gravitated toward guitar. I loved the sound and the direct contact with the strings. I adored Andalucian Flamenco and American folk music. Then rock and roll appeared and grabbed everyone's attention.

As a teenager I began to compose my own music. After dabbling in original composition based on guitar and piano, with recorder and harp, the moody character of my music sensitized me to the power of modes and eastern music in general. When I first encountered the idea that music can be used to induce specific mental and emotional states, it made perfect sense to me.

In the summer of 1971, at the age of nineteen, I read a book written in 1927 called Meetings With Remarkable Men by G.I. Gurdjieff describing some of the people living in the regions of the Caucasus and Central Asia and their cultures that made a deep and lasting impression on me. Among other things, he introduced me to the name of the country called Azerbaijan, noting the extraordinary power of its traditional music. About one year later, the Whirling Dervishes from Konya, Turkey, made their way across America, offering the marvelous spectacle of spinning monks and the haunting music sung and played on their exotic eastern instruments.

Still feeling the effects from that unprecedented and otherworldly experience, a few months after that event I had the great fortune to meet an elderly man originally from Daghestan named Zevulon Avshalomov. Known locally by a small group of followers as Mr. Z, he played a unique version of Azerbaijani *mugham* (mu-GHOMM) on an ancient folk instrument called *kamancha*, a vertically held spike fiddle featuring a skin-faced spheroid resonator played with a horsehair bow. His rendition of *mugham* was simple yet very powerful, and it stirred something unspeakably deep within me. From the first moment of hearing his *mugham* I felt compelled to learn how to play it.

I am not even sure when he finished tuning and began to play, but his music entered into me and shocked my consciousness into a new state of awareness. As the energy of this ancient music penetrated into unknown parts of myself, it felt as if I was somehow being made immobile in my chair. The plaintive sound of the instrument and the intense focus of the old man playing it were working some kind of magic in me. At the same time, the mournful quality of Mr. Z's rendition of *mugham* spoke to me on a very personal level, as if he were also telling me the story of his long and arduous life.

Mr. Avshalomov had spent only one year in Baku learning the traditional music of Azerbaijan when he was still a teenager, nevertheless over the years he developed a very impressive and incredibly moving style of this ancient art music that was able to captivate audiences around the world. By the time we met in Los Angeles, California,

he had retired to the United States, and his career as a musician had come more or less to a halt.

I found some old recordings of instrumental *mugham* and I often pondered the difference between what I heard on those recordings and what I was learning from Mr. Z. They demonstrated a version of *mugham* that was orders of magnitude more complex and subtle, yet I was perfectly satisfied with the intense feelings generated by Mr. Z's much simpler version of *mugham*, and felt that the challenge of learning his way of playing was formidable enough without the added complexity I detected in the recordings.

Early in my apprenticeship I had an opportunity to perform in public, at a university. That experience convinced me that I should try to promote the music I was devoted to. I also felt that Mr. Z might like to perform in public again. Sometimes he was interested in performing; often he would prefer to not be involved. When he was involved, he dominated the scene and I was only too happy to let him be the revered old man of the music while I played supporting acolyte.

Together we worked on his music until he died in 1987.

The following year I witnessed a professional master of *mugham* on *kamancha*, Mr. Adelat Vezirov, who briefly visited the United States as a member of an ensemble of singers, musicians and dancers from Azerbaijan. After 15 years of struggling to play *mugham* in the way that my first teacher taught me, hearing Mr. Vezirov play made me realize that *mugham* was a much bigger subject of study, with a greater range of possibilities than I ever imagined.

Although we lived on different continents, I felt compelled to take some action. For years I had been convinced that playing *mugham* was a part of my destiny. This conviction prompted me to write a letter to a certain government agency in Baku, and the next year I received an official invitation for my first visit to Azerbaijan.

Since then I have visited Azerbaijan numerous times, taking advantage of the opportunity to advance my understanding of *mugham*. During the same time, several performers of *mugham* had visited the United States during these years, and whenever possible I would take lessons from them. The capstone to this phase of learning was the work with a young Azerbaijani *kamancha* virtuoso, a graduate of the Conservatory in Baku. Classically trained in all the *mughams*, Imamyar Hasanov was a musical tour de force. The control, precision, and speed he possessed were intimidating. We worked together for 14 months from 2000 – 2001, once a week for over 60 lessons.

My lessons came to an abrupt and unexpected end when Imamyar moved to Virginia with his wife and child. Not that I wasn't ready to travel the three hour drive to see him; for some reason he decided not to show me any more of his hard earned understanding of *mugham*. Thankfully, we were at the last parts of *mugham Segah*, the last *mugham* to learn. The most elusive of all the *mughams*, *Segah* required a subtlety that was unique in my experience of music.

The effort to get inside of *mugham Segah* reminded me what it was like to begin learning *mugham*. It was the one *mugham* I refused to play in front of others, until an

Azeri friend who lived in Philadelphia wouldn't take no for an answer, mercilessly egging me on to give it a shot, when it all came tumbling out of someplace in here that is definitely not the mind I presume to be familiar with. Something had cracked open, something that had been building for decades had just yielded, and I understood that from now on, *mugham* itself will teach my body how it is, how it can be.

Now, after more than three decades of struggle to learn this complex, highly nuanced and difficult music, I believe that I have come to understand *mugham* like an Azerbaijani.

However, not all Azerbaijanis agree about what *mugham* is. I have been told by some Azerbaijanis that *mugham* is antiquated and irrelevant, repetitive, boring and even irritating. Of those who look more favorably upon it, some regard *mugham* in a patriotic way, emphasizing its provenance. Others, especially many professional musicians, seem to regard *mugham* primarily as a kind of classical music that needs to be mastered technically and presented as any other performance art, with a strong emphasis on virtuosity and technical prowess. Under the influence of this notion, finger speed, with highly intricate and convoluted melodic lines, becomes the measure of greatness.

And indeed, there is something truly great in the intricate syntax of *mugham*. It has an aesthetic that is completely unique and independent of the inner power of *mugham*. The beauty in the complexity of *mugham* is surely derived from the power of *mugham*, a power I learned from the beginning of my studies which can be there even in its simplest version.

And I know some Azerbaijanis who feel as I do, that *mugham* is a spiritual force which can bring about a transformation of one's consciousness through evoking certain intense and unfathomably deep feelings. For us, *mugham* provides an uplifting experience, an exhilarating, euphoric rush of sound-induced ecstasy.

Mugham releases an extraordinary energy in the consciousness of the active listener. Azerbaijanis who love *mugham* accept this phenomenon as a normal thing, regarding that effect as an essential component of its value. For us westerners who have been fortunate to have heard *mugham*, we do not take this for granted; we are astonished by it, and we marvel at it. For some of us it is nothing less than a genuine spiritual experience. On behalf of all westerners who now love *mugham*, let me express our gratitude to Azerbaijan for having evolved such a wonder, a miracle in music.

Why Azerbaijan? In Azerbaijan, there co-existed two very different ancient traditions of music. One is the Islamic call to prayer heard in all countries that practice Islam. Known as *azan*, the Islamic call to prayer is an eerie, otherworldly chant which makes use of strange melodies with long pauses that induce in the listener an awe inspired, impressive sense of the sacred. The other is a local indigenous folk music unique to Azerbaijan, a delightful and rousing form of bardic singing known as *Ashikh*, dating back perhaps thousands of years. High pitched, high volume, full throated mountain yodeling Caucasian style, rendered in the dramatic declamatory manner of epic storytelling, the tradition of *Ashikh* singing and playing (on *saz*) is an electrifying musical experience. When the chanting of the Islamic call to prayer, an esoteric form of music with a rhythm-free, speech-like cadence that seems to emerge from the

world of invisible forces met with the vibrant folk tradition of the *Ashikh*, *mugham* was born.

The melodies of *mugham* are highly embellished modal scales composed of a series of tones that proceed up and down the chosen scale, sometimes following a clear and orderly path, and sometimes following a complex convoluted pattern that calls to mind the intricate looping geometry of Arabesque. They can be unpredictable in the direction they take, a feature of *mugham* that can be intriguing to the point of utter fascination. Even after all these years of dedicated listening and increasing familiarity with the melodic structure of *mugham*, the order in the sequence of notes and the timing of their play still often surprises me and make me shake my head with a mixture of delight and disbelief.

Ultimately, *mugham* is the use of sonic energy in a musical format which is intended to have a profound effect on our state, to draw us away from the familiar world of ordinary human sentiment and toward something much more subtle, an energetic boost of consciousness in the direction of the cosmic dimension in life.

In principle, any monophonic music that is listened to long enough will change the listener's state, even if only into a mellow trance. But how to induce someone to listen long enough and with the requisite dedication of attention for the change of state to take place. *Mugham* begins to exert its power from the beginning but to keep the listener riveted to the melody it must progress in a way that sustains keen interest. Only then can the full effect take place and be savoured.

So, *mugham* is not just a sequence of notes that conforms to some formulaic way of constructing melodic lines; it is a tradition of intentionally creating a specific psycho-spiritual atmosphere and the melodies of *mugham* serve as the ways to implement that effect.

Mugham is the product of a long lineage of musicians, each one of which served to carry this ancient intention up into the modern age. Because *mugham* is an ancient tradition that has been handed down over the centuries, even though it has evolved musically, the original intention is still intact, which is to transform the consciousness of the listener.

Transported to another realm by this ancient intention – immersed in the sound of *mugham* – we become transformed by it. For that brief interval in our lives, we no longer suffer the concerns that weigh us down and make us heavy. We are transformed into a vessel of pure joy, mixed with a deep nostalgia for something unknowable, something we have forgotten in our plunge into the peculiar and bizarre psychodrama of daily life in modern times.

Mugham aches. *Mugham* soothes. *Mugham* energizes and surprises. It is the medicine for the part of us that suffers being human and being aware. How fortunate we are, it is so easy, just to slip a CD into a player, and off we go.