REEEC Event: Performance by Tuvan Throat-Singing Ensemble Alash

On February 10th, 2016, the Tuvan throat-singing ensemble Alash performed a show at Smith Memorial Hall at the University of Illinois. The event was co-sponsored by REEEC and Robert E. Brown Center for World Music. Alash played to a full house, with over 450 people in attendance.

Located north of Mongolia in southern Siberia, Tuva is a republic of the Russian Federation. Tuva is famous for its throat singing (xöömei), a traditional form of overtone singing developed by the nomadic peoples of Central Asia. The most striking feature of throat singing is that its practitioners can produce multiple pitches at the same time.

The three members of Alash—Ayan-ool Sam, Bady-Dorzhu Ondar, and Ayan Shirizhik—are masterful singers, all of whom have received recognition of their talent: Ayan Shirizhik was named a Merited Artist of Tuva in 2007, and Bady-Dorzhu Ondar and Ayan-ool Sam have both been named People’s Xöömeizhi of the Republic of Tuva (in 2009 and 2015, respectively). Additionally, all three members of Alash are multi-instrumentalists: they played many Tuvan instruments during their performance, such as the igil (a two-stringed instrument that sounds something like a cello) and doshpuluur (a three-stringed banjo-like instrument). Impressively, Alan Shirizhik was able to throat-sing while playing a murgu (or “shepherd’s flute”), and Ayanool Sam sang while playing a xomus (jaw harp). In addition to Tuvan instruments, Alash also incorporated traditionally Western instruments, most prominently the acoustic guitar.

Tuvan throat singing diverges from Western musical sensibilities in that it is “based on appreciation of complex sounds with multiple layers or textures. To the Tuvan ear, a perfectly pure tone is not as interesting as a sound which contains hums, buzzes, or extra pitches that coexist with the main note being sung.” Indeed, the members of Alash are capable of producing an extraordinary range of vocal timbres and overtones, bringing to mind anything from a songbird’s chirp to a bubbling brook or an oscillating synthesizer. At times, this ability can create an uncanny or otherworldly impression—but such a description fails to account for the characteristic warmth and humanity of Alash’s music.

There are three basic styles of throat singing (xöömei, sygyt, kargyraa) and many sub-styles, all of which are described by analogy with nature—kargyraa, for example, “suggests the howling of winter winds or the cries of a mother camel after losing her calf.” The imitation of noises found in nature is a quintessential aspect of Tuvan throat singing, and possibly its original source. It is also a typical feature of Alash’s music, perceptible in the sounds of their instruments—the thunderous roll of a goatskin-headed drum, or the cadence of jingling bells evoking a horse’s canter—as well as in their voices. The importance of nature in the Tuvan tradition is evident in the name of the ensemble itself, which is a reference to the Alash River in Tuva.

Perhaps more than any other quality, the music of Alash evinces a sense of place. According to the band’s manager Sean Quirk, there are historical reasons for this:

“The people of Tuva have traditionally been nomadic, moving from seasonal camp to seasonal camp…and the ability to describe place is very
important for nomadic people: you need to know where you're going… and what it's going to be like there. The Tuvan language is full of beautiful terms that allow speakers to exactly describe locations and natural landscape with very few words, and the music itself has a quality that is intimately connected with nature.”

The central role of place in Tuvan culture is also connected to the historically animistic religious practices of the region, in which spirits or souls are attributed to natural objects (or non-human persons), a spiritual essence which is also associated with place and sound. Thus, the mimicry of natural sounds has a deep religious significance.

As in other folk music traditions, material for Tuvan songs is often drawn from everyday life. One of the songs Alash performed is from the Tozhu region of northeastern Tuva, where people traditionally herd reindeer. Quirk provided the following translation of the song’s lyrics: “We don't get stuck in the mountain when it snows/we don't get stuck in the river when it overflows its banks/I am a reindeer herder/I am a hardworking hunter/I have reindeer, and they are awesome.” While some such themes are regionally specific, others can be found in musical traditions around the world—Ayan Shirizhik introduced one song by remarking, “We have many songs about horses, and women, and rivers and mountains… this song is about fast horses and beautiful women.”

For more information, visit http://www.alashensemble.com/.

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