

Educational Resources and Developments

Music of Central Asia at SOAS

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The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of London University added a Music Department a few years ago, dedicated to teaching the musical cultures of Asia and Africa (and their diasporas). The department has expertise in Arab, Turkish, Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, West African and Jewish music. Over a hundred students choose from a range of regional and theoretical courses, and there is a strong emphasis on performance. In 2001 we added the music of Central Asia to the range of musical traditions we teach, with two lectures in the first year, Introduction to the Musics of Asia and Africa, and a dedicated half unit course for undergraduates entitled Music of Central Asia.

The course covers various musical traditions from the former Soviet Central Asian states, plus Xinjiang and Afghanistan. We look at concepts of music, comparing nomadic and sedentary traditions. We discuss the relation between music and Islam in the region, looking at definitions, prohibitions, and questions of the status and roles of musicians. We also look at music in the ritual context, from the shamanic roots of the bardic traditions of the nomadic peoples to Sufi *zikr*, festivals, weddings and ritual healers. The subject of musical change is an important and recurring theme throughout the course. We consider changes in musical sound brought about by professionalization and the impact of political policies and social changes on musical traditions. Ethnicity is another key issue: we look at how musical traditions relate to ethnic boundaries, the impact of Stalin's creation of nation-states, and trends in the post-Soviet era. We also consider the rise of recorded music, greater access to global sounds, and the political uses of pop.

The course is designed primarily for students enrolled in the Music Department who have basic skills in musicology and who may also have knowledge of related musical cultures (e.g., Arab, Persian or Turkish). We do occasionally talk about aspects of mode and rhythm, but there is an

emphasis on music as culture, taking the anthropological approach. We have admitted students taking courses in SOAS on Central Asian society and politics, as well as some with a purely Western music background.

Teaching students with such a wide range of backgrounds has been challenging. One student in the course this year has been playing the Afghan *rubab* for years, while others had never heard of Uzbekistan before enrolling. A mature student had spent a year working in the development sector in Kyrgyzstan and gave a lively presentation on the contemporary pop scene. A Kazakh Ph.D. student (who is actually writing her thesis on the medieval theorist Al Farabi) audited the course, gave us an excellent presentation on instrumental pieces (*kui*), and now plans to do fieldwork in Kazakhstan when she returns home. Beginning in Fall 2003 we will expand the course to offer a half unit at the Masters level. The first student to be accepted into this course is a Sakha disk jockey from Siberia who wants to seek out the musical links between his ancestors and the Turkic peoples of Central Asia.

We have been fortunate in SOAS to host a number of Central Asian musicians over the last few years. The renowned Tajik singer Dawlatmand Kholov was invited by another Ph.D. student who is currently doing fieldwork in Tajikistan to give a concert in 2002, and he was accompanied by Afghan and Kurdish musicians resident in London. In February 2003 two Uyghur musicians, Kamil and Gulendem Abbas, took up a month's residency in the department funded by our Centre for Music and Dance Performance Research. Two students spent some time interviewing them and produced written projects documenting their lives and music. They also held workshops on the *ghijak*, *dutar* and *rawap* and on singing styles, and had some of the students performing a folk song after only a day. We often find that musical skills are transferable: violinists with a little adaptability can literally turn their

technique upside down, put the instrument on their knee, and immediately be playing the *ghijak*. After that it's just a question of absorbing the style and ornamentation.

I teach using as many video and sound recordings and actual musical instruments as possible, to counter students' lack of familiarity with the sounds and construction of the different instruments. I have a personal library of video and sound recordings made during fieldwork over the last few years, mainly in Xinjiang. There are increasing numbers of good CDs from around the region, many with excellent liner notes by Jean During and Ted Levin. Without their work, and especially without the very accessible book by Levin, *Hundred Thousand Fools of God* (1996), teaching such a course at an undergraduate level would simply not be feasible. English-language books and articles are still somewhat sparse for most regions, with the exception of Afghanistan which is better represented in the literature.

Still, there is a strong sense that interest in the region's music is taking off. I was fortunate to work on the Smithsonian Silk Road Festival in 2002, where I was able to spend time with some of the most extraordinary and talented musicians of the region, albeit in very strange circumstances. The CD from the Silk Road project (*Silk Road: A Musical Caravan*) is now at the top of the students' essential

listening list. Groups from Uzbekistan, Xinjiang and Afghanistan have performed in London during the past year, and the Uzbek pop singer Sevara Nazarkhan is currently on the UK World Music charts, with her CD *Yol Bolsin* (2003), singing folk songs and Maqam over ambient beats provided by French producer Hector Zazou. While I do not anticipate that Central Asian music will overtake Cuban music on the undergraduate charts of what's cool just yet, the number of students who have never heard of Uzbekistan should start to diminish.

For further information on the course please contact Rachel Harris at rh@soas.ac.uk and visit the SOAS Music Department website: <http://www.soas.ac.uk/departments/departmentinfo.cfm?navid=16>

References

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