



DOI: 10.25178/nit.2017.2.10

## TUVAN MUSIC IN SCHOOLS IN THE UNITED STATES

## ТУВИНСКАЯ МУЗЫКА В ШКОЛАХ США

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*The essay sums up the author's reflections in the field of musical anthropology, with the focus on how ethnic music is understood by listeners with a different cultural background.*

*The author was born and grew up in the USA. He graduated from Macalester College in Saint Paul, MN with a bachelor's degree in music and classical languages. On a Fulbright grant, in 2003 he first came to Tuva to study*

*Tuvan throat singing, culture and language. He took classes from many famous xöömeiji of Tuva. During his subsequent visits, the author improved his command of the xöömei (as well as the Tuvan language, which he speaks fluently) and worked in the National Orchestra of Tuva. In 2008 he was awarded the title of People's Artist of Tuva. Since 2015, he has worked at the Center for the Tuvan Traditional Arts and Crafts, while continuing to perform with the National Orchestra of Tuva.*

*Since 2006, he has also worked with Alash, a Tuvan folklore music band. As their manager, producer, sound engineer and translator, the author organized a number of tours around the world, visiting many countries. He also produced their three studio albums.*

*A number of concerts took place at US educational institutions (schools and colleges). In this article, the*



*Статья представляет собой наблюдения автора в области музыкальной антропологии; поднимается тема восприятия этнической музыки слушателями из другой культурной среды.*

*Автор родился и вырос в США. Закончил колледж «Макалестер» в г. Сэйнт-Пол (Миннесота) со степенью бакалавр по музыке и древним языкам. Получив грант «Фулбрайт», в 2003 г. впервые приехал в Туву с целью изучения тувинского горлового пения, культуры и языка. Был учеником многих известных хоомейжи Тувы. Впоследствии вернулся в Туву, продолжил совершенствовать свое исполнение хоомея. Работал музыкантом Тувинского Национального оркестра. В совершенстве освоил тувинский язык. В 2008 г. ему присвоено звание «Заслуженный артист Республики Тыва». С 2015 г. работает специалистом-артистом в Центре развития тувинской традиционной культуры и ремесел, выступает в составе Национального оркестра Тувы.*

*С 2006 г. стал менеджером тувинской фольклорной группы «Алаш». Успешно организует гастроли группы по всему миру, одновременно работая в ансамбле в качестве продюсера, менеджера, переводчика и звукорежиссера. Побывал с группой во многих странах. Был продюсером трех студийных альбомов ансамбля.*

*Много концертных выступлений было организовано в учреждениях образования (в школах и колледжах) Америки. В своей статье автор опи-*

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*author focuses on the reactions from people who for the first time in their lives had heard Tuvan music with the astounding effect it usually has on its audience. His observations in anthropology are of significant interest for such fields as musical studies, cultural anthropology, psychology, cultural studies, etc.*

*Keywords: Tuva; Tuvan music; Alash; concert tours; throat singing; school; USA; хөөмей; musical anthropology*

*сывает реакцию людей, которые впервые в своей жизни сталкиваются с тувинской музыкой и какой ошеломляющий эффект производит на них тувинская музыка. Его антропологические наблюдения представляют чрезвычайный интерес для таких наук, как музыковедение, культурная антропология, психология, культурология и т. д.*

*Ключевые слова: Тува; тувинская музыка; Алаш; гастроли; горловое пение; школа; США; хоомей; музыкальная антропология*

This last winter, after a lecture and presentation on Tuvan music with the members of Alash, Bady-Dorzhu Ondar, Ayan Shirizhik, and Ayan-ool Sam, at Macalester College, one of the undergraduate students approached us, thanking us for the great music and information. However, this wasn't his first experience of Tuvan music. He informed us that he had seen us years ago, in the fourth grade, at his elementary school, in Vermont. The fact that this conversation was taking place at the Janet Wallace Fine Arts center of my alma mater, in St. Paul, MN, less than a mile from the apartment on Saratoga street where I had first heard Tuvan music nearly twenty years ago from the Huun-Huur-Tu album 60 Horses in my Herd, added extra weight to the feeling that hit me when this young man told us he had seen us before, at his elementary school, half of his lifetime ago. The feeling was of course an acute sense of the passage of time and it caused within me a deep reflection on the unique nature of our job as musician-ambassadors for the Republic of Tuva. I reflected not only the personal journey I had taken as an American adopted by Tuva, seeking to find the best way to connect the people of my two home-places through music, but also on the journeys that Alash has inspired in some if not many of the thousands of students of all ages who have witnessed Alash's performance of Tuvan music.

The first time I had the task of presenting Tuvan music in schools in America, I had to do it by myself, without the help of Alash. It was fall of 2004 and I had just come back from my first year in Tuva, which I had spent learning from and playing with the Tuvan National Orchestra in Kyzyl. Among the many other transformative events that happened during my first year here, I had occasionally worked with and taught members of the wind instrument department at the local music school, specifically the saxophone players. During my year and Tuva I had watch them undertake a phenomenal progression from playing Glenn Miller tunes when I arrived in the fall to taking the stage with the Sun Ra Arkestra. That band's first visit sparked a fire for learning in the jazz musicians of Tuva the results of which can be seen today in the successful career of the Tuvan Wind Orchestra. Their biggest problem at the time was a dearth of decent musical instruments and all of their attendant accessories. When I left Tuva in October of 2004, I promised to bring them musical supplies upon my return to Tuva. That bargain began to bear fruit immediately upon my return,



and those fruit are still being plucked today by myself, the members of Alash, and thousands of young people in my homeland, the United States.

I had grown up learning music at the local music store, Brass Bell, taking saxophone lessons there with Dave Melstrand for all of my high school years. When I came back from Tuva that first year, the children of the owners, who were my age, had taken over management of the store from their parents. When I approached them on making a deal about acquiring quality music supplies at wholesale prices, they suggested that I present Tuvan music in the local middle schools as part of their musical outreach program in the area, and they would give me a few boxes of music supplies to send to Tuva — reeds, mouthpieces, rosin, strings, and other sundries. I wholeheartedly agreed to this effort, as it gave me a chance to do two things that I really enjoyed, performing Tuvan music, and teaching about it.

The whole thing ended up being a lot harder than I had imagined, for even though I had made great strides in my performance skills during my Fulbright year as a student and then member of the Tuvan National Orchestra, there was no way it was on a par with any Tuvan musician. Nonetheless, I did my best to share with them what I had learned about Tuva's incredibly deep and fascinating music. While my xöömei was a far cry from any decent Tuvan's, I managed to hack around well enough that it was only a few kids in each class who would involuntarily burst out laughing. I found out a few years later that having Alash ensemble with me presenting the music resulted in a lot less laughter and a much deeper connection for everyone.

When Alash was first invited to the United States in 2006, I had been back in Tuva for a couple years, living with my wife and working in the Tuvan National Orchestra as a bass doshpuluur player/ somewhat wacky Tuvan-speaking mascot. We came over with our teacher, Kongar-ool Ondar, as part of an exchange program that brought cultural leaders for small tours in the United States. Since a Tuvan-English speaking interpreter was required for the program, I was hired thanks not only to my proficiency in Tuvan but also a somewhat significant lack of competition in that field.

A part of that program included presenting Tuvan music to young people in some fairly disparate settings — a college campus, a couple of elementary schools, a home for youth who had been troubled with the law. Kongar-ool Ondar led the presentations and it was my task to convey his deeply-rooted and well-developed explanations of Tuvan music to the young people. This was when I realized that knowing two languages well is a completely different thing than being a good interpreter. As I conveyed our teacher's words to the students, I found myself learning strategies for bringing the essence of this beautiful music, so eloquently presented in Tuvan by Kongar-ool, to complete foreigners, over a period of 45-minutes.

One of things I noticed that first tour was that of all the places we visited, the home for troubled youth was not only the most attentive and respectful, but also asked the most interesting questions. It was certainly the only place out of all the



educational institutions we visited (all of them on the East Coast) where a member of the audience had had any experience with livestock animals. This was just one of a series of preconceived notions I had had about young people and their reaction to Tuvan music. As the years went by, many more of these notions were disproved. For instance, just as the very troubled kids in 2006 had been the most attentive and incisive, we found the very rich kids in Manhattan in 2007 were a fair bit more blasé about the occurrence of Tuvan Throat Singers at their schools — after all, we were there only a week after the Gamelan people.

That week on the Upper West Side was a grueling week that had followed that tour's first grueling week, in and around Wylie, TX. Our first two school gigs in 2007 — our first tour without our teacher — served as an severe introduction to our physical limits as touring performers and a crucible for the development of a presentation of Tuvan culture that was efficient, informative, and conserved the strength of not only my own very talkative throat, but the vocal apparatus of my friends and colleagues, the singers of Alash. At the schools in Wylie, and Manhattan, we were presenting Tuvan music to classes 5-7 times a day for 5 days, with a couple evening concerts in mixed in to boot. Even though Bady, Ayan, Ayan-ool, and Mai-ool were in their early 20s at the time, the physical strain on them as performers became quickly evident, as we all felt wiped out at the end of those weeks, with 10 more weeks of tour to go.

This physical strain introduced me to the first reality of the professional performing Tuvan musician. Even though the question “Does it hurt?” that is so frequently asked in schools is always answered with an emphatic “no” by Alash, the veracity of which reply I can vouch for as a performer of xöömei myself, there is a limit to which even this surprisingly gently vocal art can be pushed. We learned that school administrators often do not take this into account when bringing Alash to their schools, and we have learned how to communicate to them that quantity does not equal quality when it comes to a presentation, for the reasonable limit seems to about 4 45-minute performances per day.

One of the ways to preserve the performer's voice in a school presentation, of course, is for the presenter to talk more. While of course this is not ideal, a 60/40 ration of talking to music really helps the band's health while still providing the students with ample opportunity to listen to Tuvan music live, oftentimes without sound amplification. The power of this music can be seen within the first seconds of Alash's music. After a quick introduction to Tuva's location on the map and the integrity and uniqueness of its culture, there is a moment which repeats itself at every performance, which I have had the honor to behold many times over 11 years.

Many school hosts, especially when we are working with younger kids, or a school known as “rowdy,” express concern about the foreign nature of Tuvan music and how their students will react. I calm their fears by telling them what will happen, because it has happened with such regularity over 11 years. When the band begins to



sing, Ayan-ool starts out in a powerful, xöömei, chest voice for a single line, and then Bady and Ayan join in with him, in harmony, for the second line. It's at this point that if there's going to be someone who is going to laugh or chuckle, it happens here. Whatever reactions are happening at this point quickly stop, because after the second line, the band breaks into what you could call the 'instrumental' portion of the song — wordless xöömei, with Ayan-ool performing the piercing yet clean and soft whistle tone of sygyt over the top. This single sound adds to the power of the music in such a way that the reaction of the listener changes rapidly from one of awkward surprise at the unexpected volume and harsh-seeming timbre of xöömei to one of absolute wonderment as the song unravels into a wordless multiphonic harmony.

I have observed this reaction at every performance of Alash. In my unique position as observer of the observers, it is a never-ceasing pleasure for me to watch the faces of my countrymen from the land of my birth transform with joy, brought to them by my countrymen from the land of most of my adult life. This phenomenon happens to audiences everywhere, whether it is a fancy concert hall in New York, a brewpub in Ohio, or an elementary school gym in Alabama. Stacey Moriarty, the head of the Creative Arts and Sciences committee at Newton Public Schools in Newton, MA, describes this universal reaction well:

“Across the board students responded virtually the same—initially unsure, then intrigued, then appreciative, then wanting to share the experience. It sets the theme for the rest of the presentation as something that bears worth listening to, for though the students do not understand the language of the singers, the unexpected power of the music inspires a desire to learn more about the music.”

Over the rest of the presentation, following the template set for us by years of listening to our teacher's eloquent explanations of Tuvan music for Tuvan and non-Tuvan audiences, we strive to give the students as complete a picture of Tuva and its music as is possible in the time we have, using words and music. Through the music we attempt to create a picture of Tuva and its culture as a whole, reminding the students that while the music of Tuva has ancient roots and a deep connection with nature, the music is a living part of a culture that grows and changes as a full participant in the 21st century world. We teach the students about Tuva's nomadic traditions and the role that those lifeways played in the development of the music.

I have learned over the course of these last eleven years how easy and tempting it can be as a foreigner presenting the music of Tuva to exoticize the art and the place it comes from. The ancient history of the music and place, its somewhat 'mysterious' status as a little-known minority group in a remote territory of Russia, the traditional lifeways of Tuva, and the unique vocal music are all important and fascinating features of Tuva as a culture, but as a cultural presenter and ambassador I have learned that it is crucial that audiences, especially in America, understand the musicians who sit in



front of them represent not only an ancient and foreign art form but also a culture that is alive and actual and functioning, right now, today, in the 21st century.

One example that I often use in the presentation comes from an experience I had several years ago, when smartphones were still fairly not just here in Tuva but across the world, wherein I traveled to a friend's herding camp not far from Kyzyl to pick up a goat. Driving my 1976 Moskvich-412 up to the camp, I was told that the goat I needed was further up the valley, where the men were haying. As I drove the dirt road up the grassy valley, the haymakers and their yurt presented an idyllic picture of times past, as several bare-chested men of various ages bore down on the long grass with their well-handled scythes. Upon entering the yurt, however, I was startled to discover the fellow I was looking for, from whom I was to receive the goat, intensely scrolling through his Facebook feed as he sipped from a steaming bowl of süttüg shai, the ancient and traditional Tuvan milky tea.

Reminding the students that Tuva is a place that exists in the 21st century while maintaining many ancient ways not only helps to combat the tendency to exoticize the music and musicians but also serves as a context for understanding that the music that Alash plays, and indeed the music of Tuva, is a living art form that while deeply rooted in its past, is not an art form that is immutable, but rather, by its very nature as a living tradition, is an art form that continues to grow and change and spread out from its roots, much like a great ancient tree, anchored in thick subterranean roots but bursting forth each season with a new array of leaves and colors, that changes and grows over long years, gaining and shedding branches and leaves, and yet remains the same tree.

There are of course many concrete examples of Alash's effect on the schools we have visited, and here I would like to share just a few of them.

Stacey Moriarty of Newton Public Schools provides us with one such example, writing after a recent performance,

“Students talked about the concert with their teachers and parents. As director of the program I heard from both groups, so anecdotally I know this to be true. This quote from a teacher pretty much sums up the response, ‘I loved it! I think some of the students were having a hard time at first because they were out of their comfort zone. I saw many making funny faces at each other and others trying not to laugh. By the end of the performance, I think it more than accomplished what I think were some of the goals of exposing them to new kinds of music, thinking, cultures, etc.’ The success of an enrichment program is measured by whether students leave the auditorium feeling engaged and inspired. By this measure, Newton's experience with Alash Ensemble was extremely successful!”

Dr. John Jinright of Troy, Alabama, writes of our visits to the schools, retirement centers, and university in Troy and the surrounding community, “The costumes and instruments were especially engaging, but we all shared a special connection when



we heard their stories and heard their music. It was magical and unlike anything we've ever presented. It helped us connect to a truly beautiful land and people." Damon Postle of the University of Georgia elaborates on this, saying

"When Alash performed at U of Georgia, the audience was a mix of undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty and a few community members. As I surveyed the room, all I saw were smiles and mesmerized eyes. In the days after the performance my colleagues and faculty advisers came to me, talking about the performance and finally understood what I am studying here. Before a performance, Tuva was a far flung place and throat singing was implied by making a crooked face, a few weird vowel tones and growling. After the performance, Tuva was real and people began to understand the music. In some ways, I think the university visits are potentially more important, especially if the targeted audience is music education majors, as they will be in the public schools more than the musicology/performance/theory majors and tasked with teaching not only Western music, but music of the world through all grades."

An even more striking example of the effects of Tuvan music on students comes from a visit to the school district in Springfield, VT, a community that was once a center of manufacturing but had long since fallen on hard times with the loss of manufacturing jobs overseas, like many places in America. Also like many places in America this working-class community was struggling with the problems of methamphetamine and opioids, and the teachers warned us that the kids could be 'kind of rowdy' and 'not to take it personally' if they reacted poorly to our performance. We came and did our performance and lecture in the old but beautiful school auditorium, for hundreds of these 'rowdy' kids. The 45 minutes went by quickly and at the end of the performance, these underprivileged children and overworked teachers rose to their feet and gave us a standing ovation. A couple of kids came up to us after the concert and told us they wanted to learn to throat sing. When they asked us what they could do, we gave them a CD and we told them to listen and practice.

Two years later, we were invited back to the school district thanks to the impression that Alash had made on the children. Once again we did our performance, and once again we were received warmly. At the end of the performance, the school librarian, Cynthia Hughes, asked us to stay where we were, as they had a 'surprise' for us. Wheeling out an old overhead projector, she placed a transparency upon it and summoned a tall bearded man with a guitar, simultaneously picking up her own guitar. We could not see what was being projected on the screen, as it was behind us, but their first chords were awfully familiar. And then, reading off of the projected words on the screen, the entire school began singing in Tuvan. They were singing a song called by many different names, including "Ene-Sai" and "Ancestors," a song that had been included on Alash's first album. While we were busy being bowled over by this massive and unexpected serenade, we did not see the three young students approaching the microphones on stage. We did notice them however when, in between



verses, the three of them began performing very credible versions of Tuvan throat singing styles — specifically, xöömei, sygyt, and kargyraa, which while by no means refined were quite good for some 12-year old kids from southeastern Vermont. They were the same kids that had come up to us after our first performance, and when we asked them how they learned, they said, “we listened and we practiced.”

A final example comes from Theodore Levin, ethnomusicologist on the faculty of Dartmouth College. I wrote him asking for his thoughts about the unique relationship Dartmouth shares with Tuvan music and musicians, and the following paragraphs comprise a summation of his response. Dartmouth’s relationship stems from Levin’s own work as the first American ethnomusicologist to travel to Tuva and study its music, starting in 1987. Thanks to Levin’s work, Tuvan music has been an integral part of the world music program at Dartmouth and Dartmouth students have had the opportunity to engage with Tuvan musicians 25 years. Regarding this unique relationship, Dr. Levin writes “the advantages of presenting live music to supplement reading, listening, and viewing assignments cannot be underestimated,” citing the case of Dartmouth, where he uses his own extensive experience in the scholarly study of Tuva and draws on his own audio and video recordings, book, and articles as resources for class assignments, presentations, and discussions. Nonetheless, he writes, “These resources nonetheless pale in comparison to the power of live music performed by expert musicians in an intimate setting to touch and inspire student listeners.” As an example, Levin mentions Alash’s most recent visit to Dartmouth in winter of 2017, where Alash made a brief visit to the college, performing two 45-minute sets in the evening and participated in two world music classes the next day, each with around 30 students. In preparation for the class, the students were assigned reading from a draft version Levin and Dr. Valentina Suzukei’s upcoming book chapter regarding “timbre-centered listening” in the soundscape of Tuva. Dr. Levin also asked his students to write a short critique after the evening performance, in response to this prompt:

“Like other musicians we’ve encountered this term, the three members of Alash (Bady-Dorzhu Ondar, Ayan-ool Sam, Ayan Shirizhik) work in a zone of artistic hybridity in which elements of tradition and innovation blend to create a unique musical style. Based on your understanding of music from Tuva and neighboring regions of historically nomadic Inner Asia, describe Alash’s music, and in particular, the way in which the group both preserves and transcends the conventions of indigenous musical styles and traditions. As a music critic, how would you assess their artistic success?”

Dr. Levin also informed us about this critique assignment prior to the class visits the following day, and we spent both of the class periods discussing and listening to Alash’s presentation of Tuvan music in the context of this question. We left Dartmouth that afternoon for a quick dash to Portland, Maine for an evening concert that night and continued on the rest of the tour, the demands of the road leaving no





time for contemplation on the effect we'd had on these young minds, making for a pleasant surprise when Ted later wrote me about the final projects for his course, a requirement that can take the form of either a research paper or a creative project such as a composition, improvisation, video, etc.

“Quite a few students, most of them working in small groups, chose to do projects inspired by their brief encounter with Alash. Among the most interesting was a video that showed a group of three students “nomadizing” in the environs of Dartmouth and reciting poetry they'd written themselves about their favorite places on campus. At the end, they all sang a version of the song “Ödügen Taiga” with their own lyrics and natural sound effects. Another project featured one student improvising a version of “Tooruktug Dolgay Tangdym” on the piano while her classmate, a talented artist, quickly created a pen and ink drawing of a galloping horse that was overflowing with kinetic energy. Several student cobbled together their own Tuvan “fusion” pieces using Garage Band to loop and layer cuts from different musical sources. The most impressive of the Tuvan-inspired projects was that of a young woman who made her own Jew's harp from scratch and learned to play it. Year after year, student evaluations of Dartmouth's “Global Sounds” course overwhelmingly mention the visit of Tuvan musicians as one of the course's highlights. It is clear that exposure to live music performed by musicians of the highest quality offers an unparalleled resource for university-level music education.”

In this way, over 11 years, Alash has performed for several thousands of young people in the United States. In the context of Tuva as a unique culture that is a cultural minority within the greater Russian Federation, this is important work in the sense of Tuva's representation in the greater world. Tuva's music has gained a level of cultural cache in the global consciousness that could be considered rare for an ethnic group comprising approximately 300,000 people. Not only has this music served as a cultural calling card for a one little-known culture, it has affected the lives of very many people who have been inspired in one way or another by their encounter with Tuva, leaving an impression that will last for a long time in the memories of the young listeners as they embark on their life journeys, grow, change, create, and eventually tell their own children about the real, yet magical place called Tuva and its beautiful music.

*Submission date: 19.04.2017.*

*Дата поступления: 19.04.2017 г.*

**Для цитирования:**

Quirk S. P. Tuvan music in schools in the United States [Электронный ресурс] // Новые исследования Тувы. 2017, № 2. URL: <https://nit.tuva.asia/nit/article/view/715> (дата обращения: ...). DOI: 10.25178/nit.2017.2.10

**For citation:**

Quirk S. P. Tuvan music in schools in the United States. *The New Research of Tuva*, 2017, no. 2 [on-line] Available at: <https://nit.tuva.asia/nit/article/view/715> (accessed: ...). DOI: 10.25178/nit.2017.2.10