

ScholarWorks@GSU

Tuvan Throat Singing: The Globalization of the Tuvan Spirit

Authors	O'Toole, Caitlin
Download date	2026-04-10 22:16:47
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14694/7886

Caitlin O'Toole

Dr. Greene

World Music

December 1, 2015

Tuvan Throat Singing: The Globalization of the Tuvan Spirit

Rooted deeply in spiritual and traditional practical uses, the unique practice of throat singing and the folk song genres of the nation are encountering many challenges in the modernization and the merge into the global music world. Tuvan throat singing is an intense skill that is a cultural norm in the North-East Asian region, and has just recently begun to disperse globally, beginning an experiment of how cultural-specific spiritual musical practices are translated and interpreted around the world. This paper provides an analysis of the integration of the Tuvan throat singing practices in the Western music world, focusing on how the context in which it is performed impacts the performance and the aesthetic meaning of the music. In accomplishing this paper's aim, an in-depth historical and cultural perspective is necessary, thus through the work of ethnomusicologists' field work, the genre's spiritual roots are identified, followed by the use of traditional performer's opinions, commentaries and current perspectives that will forge a connecting revelation into how the perception of this music is struggling to adjust to the culturally ignorant ear. The methodology for this paper includes collections of articles and books that offer descriptions of the Tuvan culture, history, and explanations of the complex throat-singing genres within the region, followed by the comparison and analysis of modern-day sub-genres that are arising as a result of the globalization of Tuvan throat singing.

There is a critical spiritual element of Tuvan throat singing that is lost in modern translation which is proved through these different perspectives and research methodologies.

Tuva: A Brief Historical Overview

In any secular interpretation of the spiritual, or a spiritual interpretation of the secular, there is a prominent and significant change of sense, or simply put, 'misinterpretation.' There are elements of certain artistries that are unique to their origins, and sometimes the tie between an art and its origin plays a strong, critical part in the art itself. The Tuva Republic is a region within the country of Russia that borders the country of Mongolia and was only constituted as a sovereign nation between the years 1921 and 1944 (McMullen, 1). Throughout the region's history, Tuva has been occupied by The Scythians, the Huns, the Turks, and many other historical ethnic group that all left influences in Tuva that can be seen in the region's culture today. "Clan, family, ethnicity, and religion" are Tuvan cultural values that dictate largely the Tuvan identity that is rooted in the land in which they live (Mongush, 2006, p.275). Music is a very important part in a Tuvan's personal identity, thus making the folk music of Tuva a rich tie and bond to its culture and traditions.

Tuvan throat singing, the most distinguished unique aspect of Tuva's music, is a very origin-heavy art form whose original purpose had and has many practical uses in the Tuvan culture. The cultural and spiritual element of Tuvan throat singing and folk songs is critical to unlocking the entirety of this art form. Like many cultures' use of music, Tuvan folk songs are prioritized around rites of

passage, holidays, and extended journeys or excursions through rigorous, mountainous regions (Aksenov, 1973, pp. 8). The nomadic excursions are where the spiritual element in this style of singing originally derives. As Matrenitsky & Friedman studied, Animalistic traditions in the Tuvan society focus on “nature spirits, including of local trees, springs, mountains, and many other aspects of the world. Tuvan shamans developed specific languages to communicate with these spirits. By imitating the sounds of nature and animals, Tuvans developed the art of throat singing, called *khoomei*. This spread into the whole of Tuvan culture, and became a part of a larger singing folklore tradition, as well as used for spiritual and healing purposes.” (Matrenitsky & Friedman, 2012, pp. 111). When one observes a native Tuvan performing a traditional song, the performer usually sings with eyes closed, as the performer is connecting spiritually with the world and nature around them, attesting to the critical element of spiritual connection in the music.

Contesting to the traditional aspect of this throat singing genre, the complexities behind accomplishing and performing this art form are intense and physically challenging. Referred to as throat singing, overtone singing, harmonic singing, biphonic and diphonic singing, Tuvan throat singing revolves around the principle that a single vocalist produces multiple notes at one time. *Khoomei* literally translated to “throat” in English, thus reiterating the manipulation of the anatomy required to succeed at performance. To properly sing the *khoomei*-styled overtones, one must change the shape of their lips, mouths, larynx, pharynxes, and manipulate the amplifying abilities of the sinuses of the skull. The resonance

which comes from such manipulation is of one or more pitches made simultaneously above a drone sound. Explaining the science behind this, the notes accompanying the Smithsonian Folkways CD, "Tuva: Voices from the Center of Asia," state "In music, harmonics are sounds whose frequencies are integral multiples of the frequency of a common fundamental tone" (3 Alekseev, Kirgiz, Levin). In Tuvan throat singing, the higher harmonized notes that arise from the drone -bass- tone are sequenced and controlled into melodies. Also included in the notes of the CD is a musical notation of a Tuvan melody, showing the drone on the bass clef which is held for thirty-seven beats while a melody runs above it, consisting eighth and quarter notes that are sequentially numbered in relativity to the drone note. It is also important to mention that according to a physics analysis of the throat singing sound, the perceived assumption deduced by our ears is that there are two separate tones at the same time, but instead "by a change in the vocal cavity, the singer is altering and sharpening the resonance of that vocal tract so as to produce one single very sharp resonance at about 2000Hz," (Unruh, n.d, p. 1) which thus emphasizes the harsh contrast between the melodic note and the drone note. So it is the sudden loudening of one of the harmonics from the drone note that creates the perception of two separate tones rather than simply a change in the tone color of the drone note.

These different tone colors hold different spiritual meanings within the Tuvan culture. In the past, Tuvan shamans equivocated these different levels of pitches as symbols of the different worlds and levels of the universe (Matrenitsky, 2012, pp. 112). Within this khoomei style of singing, there is a *sygyt* style used to

communicate with the spirits of the Upper World. The *kargyraa* style of *khoomei* is the deepest style of singing, which is used to communicate with the spirits of the Lower World. Because animism is a Tuva cultural dominating belief, throat singing is used to communicate with birds, animals, and landscape with a further belief rooted in throat singing's ability to influence animal behavior, to gain weather knowledge, and arrange seasonal movement (Pegg, 2002, pp.196). The physical symptoms from performing these types of throat singing have been scientifically studied and have been described as "positive changes in self-perception as well as specific transpersonal phenomena including freedom from body limits, extending of mind limits, and visions of light." (Matrenitsky, 2012, pp. 196). These energies experienced by this throat singing has led to a system of teaching and healing called "Un-Hun System" developed by Nikolay Oorzhak, one of the leading global innovators of Tuvan music. This Un-Hun shamanistic study uses Tuvan throat singing to "learn how to use the internal energy to open the heart, develop a spirituality, improve the heart, and reach a longevity" (Oorzhak, pp. 1). Today, in a broader cultural sense, throat-singing is not taught formally but is picked up like a language (Edgerton and Levin, 1999, pp.82), enhancing the idea that the spiritual aspect is culturally understood, and otherwise must be specifically taught to those outside of the Tuvan culture.

Globalizing Tuvan Throat Singing

Spreading any traditional element from one culture to another culture is an interpretive risk, and the global spread of Tuvan throat singing is no exception. It is only within the past decade or two that western audiences have been exposed to

this musical phenomenon, through materializing and adapting traditional Western techniques and performing Tuvan throat-singing in the context of the modern 'song' (Lusk, 2000, pp. 27). This is a concept that is challenged due to the Western bias that seemingly judges and categorizes the Tuvan throat singing on a Western scale. Thus, taking into consideration the music's roots in nature and spirits, there is almost an automatic "Westernization" sentiment and feeling about putting performers on a stage to perform these songs to groups of people who know nothing of the backgrounds, the contexts, or the stories behind this incredibly complex tradition. Alexander Cheparukhin, music manager of the world-known Tuvan band Huun Huur Tu, described the challenge in integrating this music globally: "Tuva for some many years was unspoiled by any industrial development. Most people were nomads, very close to nature and the overtone approach is very close to nature, because in nature, you don't feel a lot of melodies, but you feel a lot of overtones. That's why this overtone understanding of music is very close to communication of human beings in nature. It's mostly not designed for performance" (Lusk, 2000, pp.28). A further exploration into the global interpretation of this pastoral music reveals musical terms containing cultural pre determinants, thus confronting a larger anthropological issue. However, using Kaiser's model of redefined sound, musical structure usually considered in terms like pitch, tempo, rhythm, and harmony can be re-analyzed in terms of the physical, sensual nature of the sonic event. Words like spectrum (showcase of activation of overtones), motion (patterning), pulse (physicality of music) replace historical musical terms which were born in a time and place

where music did not stylistically defer beyond the words' initial realms (Kaiser, 2004, p. 36). This analysis and re-interpretation of globally spreading music is an incredible feat towards de-centralizing a certain view of music and opening the portal towards music being a spiritual experience, versus just an analytical or scholarly study.

There is a radical new direction that the globalization of this music is taking. Two decades ago, the Western popular culture caught wind of this mysterious vocal sound from Tuva and began to commercialize this traditional style of singing with its own musical culture, thus producing a new sub-genre: Tuvan Pop, which ranges from hip-hop and rap influences to bluegrass and jazz. Sparking the start of this modern innovation, Kongar-ol Ondar, one of Tuva's musical superstars and winner of Tuva's international throat singing competition in 1992, toured the world shortly after his victory, mesmerizing audiences worldwide with his bellowing, rich, harmonically mysterious notes. In 1999, Kongar-ol Ondar appeared on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. Following his appearance on the infamous American late night show, Kongar-ol Ondar was presented with an opportunity by an American music producer to create a Tuvan-American pop fusion album, entitled *Back Tuva Future*. This album, released in 1999, includes the use of guitars, synthesizers, and most notably, the Tuvan throat singing style in the pace and style of American rap. Contrastingly, there is also a bluegrass track on the album that features the famous country singer Willie Nelson, who duets with Ondar on a song about patriotism. This album is the direct result of the Westernization of this spiritual music, encompassing a total re-

invented characterization of this throat singing's purpose. Tuvan throat singing is going through a modern evolution in terms of the context of where it is performed as well as for whom it is performed. As Khaikin states, because Tuvan throat singing was traditionally performed solo in pastoral settings, contemporary performance evolving with bands, audiences, and a stage presents new challenges for the music, as described by throat singer Choduraa Tumat: "The power and technique of a performer relies on how much they can control their emotions while performing in a new context, on a stage in front of other people and not in nature, not for one's self. In order to overcome nerves during performance, I visualize nature and listen to my own voice, painting in my mind the mountains and steppe. And it is because of this that sadness, nostalgia, pride, and joy are all present in song" (Khaikin, 2013, p.1).

In 1999, a documentary titled *Genghis Blues* revealed the journey of blind, American blues guitarist, Paul Pena, into the land of Tuva, where he competed in the 1995 Tuvan national singing competition. Pena self-taught the Tuvan singing style by listening to discs and tapes, and thought little beyond the physical challenges and sounds of throat singing before he embarked to Tuva. Upon cultural immersion, however, the documentary showcases the Tuvan spirit and traditions that completely alter Pena's understanding and connection with the throat singing style. Pena is shown the overarching dogma of Tuvan culture, freedom, which is the cultural significance of this style of singing. The people of Tuva have no property lines, as it is understood that one "goes where the herd takes you," thus the connection with Tuvan throat singing, animal herds, and

migration are the spiritual wisdom and key that is critical to the genre that cannot be translated into archived recordings.

In conclusion, this unique production of sound from Tuva has, over the years, begun to slowly spread from the spiritual land of Tuva out into the culturally diverse world where one's ears can only hear and observe the gritty tone and bellowing low notes muttered by the performer, with no other knowledge of the reasoning or traditions behind the musical art form. The danger of the globalization of something artistic is something not being viewed, honored, or understood for its true potential and meaning due to cultural differences and misinterpretations. The popularization of Tuvan throat singing is facing the danger of putting it on a Western scale, risking mockery, as Tuvan throat singing sounds so different to the Western musical approach to singing. There is a risk that it is not until people learn the historical, cultural, and spiritual purposes of the throat singing that true acknowledgment of its bellowing powers and spiritual experiences come to light. The study of such diverse musical traditions is critically important to the flourishing musical world, especially in modern day when technology enables sounds to be shared all over the world instantaneously. In the Western music world still, there is a popular grouping of 'world music' into one category, depriving so many music traditions of their musical divinity and complexities. Cultures are more capable than ever to learn of each other and understanding culture is a huge key to human connection. Music is the aspect of culture that people can feel connected to the quickest, but the step that most skip over is understanding a foreign music. Tuvan throat singing is a style and genre of

music so unique and contrasting to any Western style of music that it has the potential to serve an incredibly innovative role in the world of music and how music is appreciated and understood worldwide.

Bibliography

- Aksenov, A.N., "Tuvan Folk Music," *Asian Folk Music* 4, no. 2 (1973), pp. 7-18.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/833827>.
- Alekseev, Eduard and Kirgiz, Zoya and Levin, Tim: credits. *Tuva Voices from the Center of Asia*. Rec. 1987. Smithsonian/Folkways, 1990. CD.
- Edgerton, Michael, and Levin, Theodore. "The Throat Singers of Tuva." *Scientific American*, 1999, 80-87. <http://www.uvm.edu/outreach/ThroatSingingArticle.pdf>.
- Genghis Blues*. Directed by Roko Belic. Performed by Paul Pena. Documentary: 2000, DVD.
- Kaiser, Andrew, "Sound as Intercultural Communication: A Meta-Analysis of Music with Implications for SETI," *Leonardo* 37, no. 1, 36-37. 2004.
- Khaikin, Lital. "Tuva's Meridian of Musicality, Spirituality, and Cross-Cultural Place: A Primer on Tuvan Throat Singing." *Redefine*. 2013.
- Lusk, John, "By the Throat: Even Bands from Tuva Have Their Musical Differences," *Folk Roots* 21, January-February 2000. 27-31. Print.
- Matrenitsky, and Friedman. "Transpersonal Effects of Exposure to Shamanic Use of Khoomei (Tuvan Throat Singing)." *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*. 2012.
- McMullen, Ronald. "Tuva: Russia's Tibet or the Next Lithuania?" Friends of Tuva. No Publication Date. Accessed November 21, 2015.

Mongush, Marina. "Modern Tuvan Identity." *Inner Asia* 8, no. 2 (2006): 275-96.

Ondar, Kongar-ol, Richard P. Feynman, Willie Nelson, and Randy Scruggs. *Back Tuva Future: The Adventure Continues*. Warner Bros Records, 1999. CD.

Pegg, Carole, "Reviewed Work: Where Rivers and Mountains Sing: Sound, Music, and Nomadism in Tuva and Beyond" *The World of Music* 49, no. 1, 195-199. 2002.

Unruh, W.G. "Tuva Throat Singing Spectrum." *Theory Physics*: University of British Columbia. Accessed November 20, 2015.