



The Music of Tuva

THE TINY REPUBLIC OF TUVA is a giant when it comes to mastery of the human voice. The ancient tradition of throat singing (*xöömei* in Tuvan) developed among the nomadic herdsmen of Central Asia, people who lived in yurts, rode horses, raised yaks, sheep and camels, and had a close spiritual relationship with nature.

WHERE IS TUVA? Tuva (sometimes spelled *Tyva*) sits at the southern edge of Siberia, with Mongolia to its south. Over the centuries, Tuva has been part of Chinese and Mongolian empires, and shares many cultural ties with Mongolia. Early in the 20th century it came under Russian influence, and in 1944 it became part of the Soviet Union. Tuva is now a member of the Russian Federation.

A UNIQUE CONCEPT OF SOUND. The Tuvan way of making music is based on appreciation of complex sounds with multiple layers. Whereas the western cellist aims to produce a focused, pure tone, the Tuvan *igil* player enjoys breaking the tone into a spray of sounds and textures. Absolute pitch is less important than richness of texture. Multiple sonorities are heard together as an inseparable whole. This idea may be illustrated by an anecdote about a respected Tuvan musician who was demonstrating the *igil*, a bowed instrument with two strings tuned a fifth apart. When asked to play each string separately, he refused, saying it wouldn't make any sense. The only meaningful sound was the combination of the two pitches played together.

TUVAN THROAT SINGING. Despite what the term might suggest, throat singing does not strain the singer's throat. The singer starts by singing a low drone pitch. Then, by subtle manipulations of his vocal tract and keen listening, he suppresses some overtones and amplifies others, allowing the amplified overtones to be heard as distinct pitches while the drone pitch continues at lower volume. The Tuvan listener enjoys the entire array of pitches, hums and buzzes as aspects of one sound, like facets of a diamond. To listen in this way, a newcomer to throat singing is advised not to focus on the highest pitch (which is the most prominent and often is manipulated to produce a little melody), but rather to listen to the low drone, then bring the middle into focus, then appreciate the entire surrounding sound.

First sixteen pitches of the overtone series (harmonic series) for C



The overtones heard most prominently in Tuvan throat singing are indicated in black. (Notice they form a pentatonic scale.) Try listening for more subtle overtones in the range of 2 through 5 in the series.



Styles of Tuvan Throat Singing

Name	Description	Corresponding Sound in Nature
Xöömei*	Middle-range style with an airy whistle floating above the fundamental pitch	Wind swirling among rocks
Sygyt	High-pitched style with a sharp, high whistle floating above the fundamental pitch	Gentle breezes of summer, bird song
Kargyraa	Low-pitched style with a growling undertone below the fundamental pitch, as well as higher overtones	Howling of winter winds, cries of a mother camel after losing her calf
Ezenggileer	Adds a pulsing rhythm	Horseback riding, tapping of silver stirrups
Borbangnadyr	Adds a trilling or rolling effect with rapidly changing harmonics	Bubbling stream, rolling rapids of a river

*The term *xöömei* refers to a particular style but also to throat singing in general. You may see the term spelled *khoomei*, *hoomei*, or *choomeij*.

DO WOMEN THROAT-SING? Throat singing is most commonly done by men. Although custom and superstition have discouraged women from throat singing, recently this taboo is breaking down, and there are now excellent female throat singers too.

COWBOYS OF THE EAST. In Tuvan songs, the rich textures of *xöömei* often alternate with a simpler melodic use of the voice. Rhythms frequently simulate the loping gait of a horse. Tuvans are great admirers of horses, and their songs are as likely to extol the virtues of fast horses as they are to express love for beautiful women. At the end of a song, musicians often exclaim “Shu-de!” which may be translated as “giddy-up” or “let’s go!” Just as western cowboys play guitar or banjo, Tuvan cowboys often accompany themselves with stringed instruments, either plucked or bowed. The instruments are traditionally decorated with carved horses’ heads.

Tuvan Instruments

TUVAN INSTRUMENTS may look simple, but they are designed and played to produce complex sonorities.

The strings of bowed instruments (*igil* and *byzaanchy*) are touched lightly, not pressed all the way to the neck. The player varies the bow tension to produce shifting textures in sound. In the case of the *byzaanchy*, the bow is threaded between the strings so that both the upper and lower surfaces of the horsehair are drawn across the strings.

Plucked string instruments include the *doshpuluur* and *chanzy*, similar to the western banjo, and the *chadagan*, a Tuvan zither.

The frame drum (*kengirge*) is tapped with the fingers or struck with a mallet. On top of the drum sits a set of bells (*shyngyrash*) whose jingling evokes the sound a trotting horse with bells tied to its head or



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neck. These bells can also be placed inside the *duyuglar*, a pair of horse hooves that are clapped together rhythmically to create the clop-clop sound of a trotting horse.

The jaw harp (*xomus*) is a one-pitch instrument consisting of a frame like a tuning fork that is held against the performer's teeth. Attached to the frame is a metal tongue that is plucked with a finger. By changing the shape of his mouth and the flow of air, the player can emphasize various overtones to create melodies.

Wind instruments are often made from fresh plant stalks, so they are fragile and impermanent. The *murgu* is an overtone flute, an end-blown tube with no holes; melodies are produced by adjusting the airflow and covering or uncovering the bottom end with a finger. The *shoor* is a long, end-blown flute. The *limbi* is a shorter, side-blown, open-ended flute. Both of these have holes for varying the pitch.

The Musicians of Alash

BADY-DORZHU ONDAR: vocals (esp. kargyraa), igil, guitar, bayan/accordion. Studied with Kongar-ool Ondar since age four. Named People's Throat Singer of Tuva in 2007.

KANG-KHÜLER SAAIA: vocals, byzaanchy, chadagan. Kyzyl Arts College, founding member of Tuvan National Orchestra.

AYAN-OOL SAM: vocals (esp. sygyt, enzengileer), doshpuluur, igil, xomus. Studied with Kongar-ool Ondar at the Republic School of the Arts. Named People's Throat Singer of Tuva in 2015.

AYAN SHIRIZHIK: vocals (esp. xöömei, borbangnadyr), kengirge, xomus, shoor. Studied with Andrei Mongush of Huun-Huur-Tu. Named People's Throat Singer of Tuva in 2021.

SEAN QUIRK: interpreter and manager. Studied music in Tuva on a Fulbright fellowship. Named Merited Artist of Tuva in 2008.

Alash Albums

Alash (2007) features new and old Tuvan songs. The CD insert contains background on Tuvan music and culture, as well as Tuvan lyrics with English translations.

Buura (2011) features more newly arranged songs, new instrumental textures, a solo by each Alash musician, and a guest appearance by bass guitarist Victor Wooten on the title track.

Achai (2015) means "father" and is dedicated to Alash's musical father, Kongar-ool Ondar. The album includes new songs and old favorites, and features beatboxer Shodekeh as guest artist.

Meni Mana (2020), meaning "Wait for Me," continues Alash's artistic evolution, building on its traditional foundation while adding modern effects by sound producer Shamil Gainetdinov.

Embodiments (2022) is a live recording of original Tuvan songs filtered through the creative artistry of hip hop musicians, a collaborative project of Bady-Dorzhu Ondar with beatboxer Shodekeh.

Learn More

Deep in the Heart of Tuva: Cowboy Music from the Wild East by Ralph Leighton (Musical Expedition series, Ellipsis Arts, 1996), a delightful introduction to Tuvan culture and music. Includes CD.

Where Rivers and Mountains Sing: Sound, Music, and Nomadism in Tuva and Beyond, by Theodore Levin with Valentina Suzukei (Indiana University Press, 2006), a readable and thorough account of Tuvan music and culture. Includes CD/DVD.

Tuva or Bust! by Ralph Leighton (W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), an entertaining account of physicist Richard Feynman's quest to travel to Tuva.