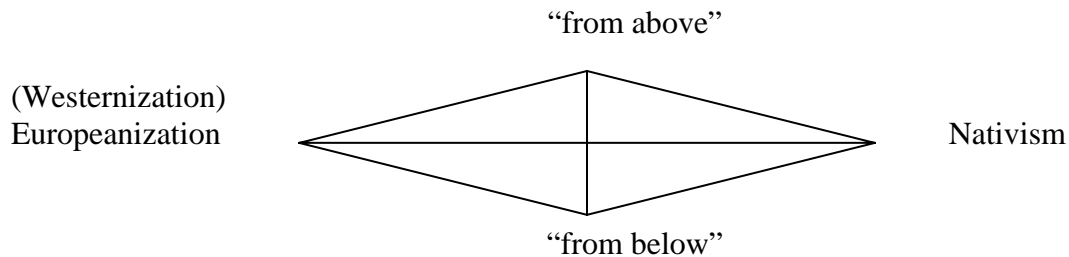


**Aida Huseynova**

**Baku Music Academy, Azerbaijan**

**CONTEMPORARY MUSIC OF AZERBAIJAN:  
RESTRUCTURING “EURASIAN” PHENOMENON**

My paper examines the dynamics of European and Asian factors in contemporary music of Azerbaijan in the historical perspective. The four-fold model suggested by American musicologist Theodore Levin in his study of Uzbek music<sup>1</sup> is borrowed to reveal common and distinctive features of Azerbaijani music in comparison with other former Soviet republics of Central Asia:



The “nativism from below” part features numerous similarities by default, due to ethnic, language, religious and cultural links between Azerbaijanis and other peoples of Central Asia. In the field of music these nations share common genres, such as the art of *makam* (*mugham*, *makom*, *mukam* etc.), a huge phenomenon of traditional music heritage based on improvisation, *dastan*, which is epic performed by minstrel musicians (*ashig*, *bakhshi*, *akin*), as well as some musical instruments and performing practices. The “nativism from above” also contains visible commonalities, due to national and cultural goals of the Russian Empire and further the Soviet Union, under the rule of which Azerbaijan and other Central Asian countries had stayed for the most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The field of “Europeanization” also contains a principal feature shared by all former Soviet republics of Central Asia: the very synthesis of native music traditions with the Western musical forms and practices occurred due to Russian music that served as a facilitator and mediator of

---

<sup>1</sup> Theodore Levin, “The Reterritorialization of Culture in the New Central Asian States: A Report from Uzbekistan,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Vol.25, Musical Processes in Asia and Oceania (1993), 52.

this process. It is European part again that accumulates the most remarkable differences, both quality and quantitywise.

First, strong European component appeared in the music of Azerbaijan before the Soviet era, i.e. in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was due to geographic, historic and economic reasons. Located on the crossroads of Europe and Asia, neighboring Christian Russia, Georgia and Armenia as well as Muslim Iran and Turkey, and being for centuries a subject of territorial wars between huge Empires, both from the East and the West, Azerbaijan has obtained a unique culture juxtaposing Eastern and Western features. However, the remarkable impetus to the “Westernization” emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when huge oil resources were discovered in the country. This caused an obvious increase of Western presence in Baku and consequently, growing demand for the forms of Western music and culture. As such, distinctively from the republics of the Central Asia where forms of art music were exclusive creation of the Soviet era and resulted of the cultural policy of communists, Azerbaijan obtained the art music tradition in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For this reason, in case of Azerbaijani music Levin’s model applied by him to the Soviet and post-Soviet periods can be expanded to the pre-Soviet era as well.

Another distinctive quality is that in Azerbaijan, in contradiction with the priorities of the Soviet ideology the notion of “Europeanization” has been extended to “Westernization.”<sup>2</sup> This point is proved by the presence of jazz as an important part of Azerbaijani culture that has earned international recognition. For comparison, jazz has never been among highlights of musical culture in other Central Asian countries.

Now let us move to the more detailed analysis of the topic. During the pre-Soviet era the “nativism” part had remained stable and in many senses similar throughout all Central Asian region. What instantly differed music and culture of Azerbaijan from the rest of Central Asia was strong “Western” component, both “from above” and “below” and its fast juxtaposition with the “Eastern” part. Unfortunately, this remains mostly unacknowledged in the works by Western scholars, which is expected, considering the limited availability of the sources on Azerbaijani music in the West. For instance, in the article by musicologist Marina Frolova-Walker Azerbaijan is presented as the “more backward than its Christian neighbors, Georgia and Armenia”<sup>3</sup> and as “largely neglected by Moscow during the previous hundred years of Russian

---

<sup>2</sup> As Levin mentions, “I use the term “Europeanization” rather than “Westernization” or “Modernization” because it was specifically European models that Soviet ideologists had in mind as they planned the cultural future of Central Asia.” (Theodore Levin, “The Reterritorialization of Culture in the New Central Asian States: A Report from Uzbekistan,” p. 52)

<sup>3</sup> Marina Frolova-Walker, “National in Form, Socialist in Content”: Musical Nation-Building in the Soviet Union,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol.51 No.2 (1998), 340.

government.”<sup>4</sup> Consequently, all accomplishments of pre-Soviet period of Azerbaijani music remain underestimated, and Azerbaijan is placed in the category of Central Asian republics that owe the mastering of the European musical forms to the national and cultural policy of communists. However, the factual data, particularly that contained in the recently published archive sources,<sup>5</sup> proves the status of Baku, the capital city of Azerbaijan as one of the cultural centers of the Russian Empire. It was due to the combination of the governmental patronage and oil money that Baku audience enjoyed performances of outstanding musicians, such as Russian composer and pianist Sergey Rakhmaninov or singer Fedor Shaliapin, Polish clavisinist Wanda Landowska, American ballerina Isedora Dulkan, Austrian pianist Emil Sauer, Italian opera singers, such as Desire Arto. Famous music ensembles such as Viennese operetta, Czech Quartet visited Azerbaijan. Operas by Tchaikovsky, Meyerber, Puccini and Saint-Sans, Berlioz’s symphonies, Wagner’s overtures and Schumann’s quartets were performed in Baku’s music venues. Among them were the splendid Hall of Public Forum (now Azerbaijan Philharmonic) erected in 1912, or the Opera and Ballet Theater that opened in 1910 and happened to be the first Opera House in the entire Muslim East. In the 1901, the Music Classes under the *Russkoe Muzykal’noe Obschestvo* (Russian Music Society) opened in Baku, later reorganized as the Music College. Jazz music was performed in Baku’s cafes and restaurants.<sup>6</sup>

As such, since early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “Western” component has occupied the significant niche in Azerbaijani music and culture. Eventually, a new cohort of young intellectuals had emerged in the country that strived to see Azerbaijanis as a “Euroasian” rather than pure “Asian” nation. Composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov (1885-1948) was one of those enthusiasts. In 1908, he created “Leyli and Majnun,” the first ever opera not only in Azerbaijan but also in the entire Muslim East. This work marked the birth of art music tradition in the country and featured a unique hybrid genre called “*mugham* opera.” Here all classical operatic forms were replaced with *mughams*, included in the work in their original form: unwritten and improvised.<sup>7</sup>

However, Azerbaijani music had not remained on the stage of “*mugham* opera” up to the Soviet era. In 1913, after two years of study in Moscow and Petersburg, Hajibeyov wrote comic opera “Arshin Mal Alan” (The Cloth Peddler) where he accomplished mature synthesis between

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> See Farah Aliyeva (Ed.) *XX asr Azerbaijan musigi madaniyyati tarixi uzra gaynaghlar* Vol.1,2. (Baku: Nurlan, 2005); Vol.3. (Baku: Nurlan, 2006)

<sup>6</sup> All these references are based on historical evidences, such as articles, posters and other archive sources published in Farah Aliyeva (Ed.) *XX asr Azerbaijan musigi madaniyyati tarixi uzra gaynaghlar*.

<sup>7</sup> See Aida Huseynova, “Azerbaijani mugham opera: challenge of the East,” in Pavel Sysoev (Ed.) *Identity, Culture, and Language Teaching*. (University of Iowa: Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies, 2002), pp. 60-67.

traditional music idioms and advanced European operatic style. This work has been demonstrated in 117 theatres in 70 countries and translated into 86 languages. In September 2006, Hajibeyov's "Arshin Mal Alan" got its premiere in the West, being produced at the Viennese *Cammeroper* Theatre.

There was another model of the synthesis, now based on the forms of traditional music that emerged in Azerbaijan before the Soviet era. In 1902-03 the challenging project called "Eastern concerts" was introduced to Baku audience. For the first time, Azerbaijani *mugham* was performed not in a narrow circle of music and art lovers, but on a stage of the European theater.

The strong "nativism from below" continued into the Soviet era. As being recognized "among the least russified of all Muslim Turkic peoples of the USSR,"<sup>8</sup> Azerbaijanis succeeded in preserving many forms of the national musical and cultural heritage. All works penned by the national composers featured deep links with the traditional music heritage. Even avant-garde techniques that entered the orbit of Azerbaijani music in the 1960s were applied through the prism of the traditional music idioms.

As a result of the resonance between the "nativism from below" and the "Europeanization from below," Azerbaijan has obtained an "excellent school of composers,"<sup>9</sup> using Shostakovich's expression. Many of Azerbaijani composers entered the elite of the Soviet music, such as Gara Garayev (1918-82), who is credited for an expansion of the artistic space of Azerbaijani music towards the West. He incorporated in his music voices of jazz, blues, African and Spanish music. Garayev's words "We are also a part of the world" has become a motto for the next generations of the national composers.

It is important that the line of succession in Azerbaijani music has never been broken. Symptomatically, two more hybrid genre similar to Hajibeyov's "*mugham* opera" appeared in Azerbaijani music during the Soviet period: "symphonic *mugham*" and "jazz *mugham*." In 1948 by Fikrat Amirov put *mugham* composition in a format of a large symphonic orchestra and created two symphonic *mughams* "Shur" and "Kurd Ovshari" that were later performed under world-reputed conductors, such as Leopold Stokowsky, Charles Munch or Walter Abendroth. In the 1960s, "jazz *mugham*" was created by pianist and composer Vagif Mustafazade (1940-79). Vagif fused the two ways of improvisation that emerged in different parts of the world. His experience has also got the international recognition: in 1979 Vagif won the first prize at the International competition of jazz themes in Monaco.

---

<sup>8</sup> Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, "Islam and Identity in Azerbaijan," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol.3, No.2 (1984), 44.

<sup>9</sup> Dmitry Shostakovich, "Otlichnaia kompozitorskaia shkola" *Drujba Narodov*, No.11 (1957), 242-45.

An important revelation of the strong “Europeanization from below” was that the building of Azerbaijani composed music has been erected by native composers, whereas all republics of Central Asia pay credit to Russian composers who were sent there from Moscow and Petersburg to establish a new trend. Such a precedent may occur in the history of Azerbaijani music as well: in the 1920s composer Reinhold Gliere arrived in Baku with the task to write opera. However, despite Gliere’s outstanding gift and high professionalism, his opera “Shahsnam” (1927) was totally alien to the main stream of Azerbaijani music already set by Uzeyir Hajibeyov being written in a style of Russian orientalism, that of Glinka, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov format. As mentioned in the first review of “Shahsnam”’s premiere authored by Igor Ledogorov, “it would be a great mistake to assume that Gliere could accomplish a national style. [...] The national opera must be created by the national composers themselves. This is an axiom.”<sup>10</sup> In 1959, Sergey Skrebkov, one of leading Russian-Soviet musicologists, expressed this idea more confidently: “Can we define the national style of “Shahsnam” as Azerbaijani? Obviously no, since this opera features Russian style having been written in traditions of Glinka and “Mighty Handful.” This is why it is natural that Azerbaijani Soviet composers followed their original national path.”<sup>11</sup> Gliere is still revered in Azerbaijan as an outstanding musician and individual who generously shared his knowledge, experience and professionalism with local musicians thus catalyzing the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century Azerbaijani music. However, his “Shahsnam” remains as the fact of Azerbaijan’s musical and cultural history rather than the artistic work of a stagy importance for the development of the new forms of the national music.

In the field of traditional music, the “Europeanization from below” resulted in the new, concert-like, virtuoso performances on the traditional instruments intended for big concert halls rather than a narrow circle of *mugham* lovers. This was, indeed, amazing correlation with the “Eastern Concerts” that took place in Baku in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Now to the “above” trends. Both “nativism” and “Westernization” were applied from an angle of a “socialist realism” with its postulate of creating music “national in form and socialist in contents.” This inevitably caused serious distortions in the areas of traditional and composed music.

The first dangerous campaign on behalf of the “nativism” and “Europeanization,” both “from above” occurred in Azerbaijan in the 1920s under the ideology of *Proletkul’t* (Culture of Proletariat). Two phenomena of the national culture that existed before the Soviet era were

---

<sup>10</sup> Igor Ledogorov, quoted in Naila Mekhdieva, “Opera R.M.Gliera “Shahsnam”: istoriia sozdaniia i nekotorye voprosy stilia,” *Uchenye Zapiski Azerbaidzhanskoi Gosudarstvennoi Konservatorii*, No.3 (1966), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Sergei Skrebkov, “O natsional’nom svoeobrazii v sovetskoi muzyke” *Sovetskaia Muzyka*, No.5 (1959), 19.

proclaimed as relics of the past: the *tar*, the centuries-old instrument of the Azerbaijanis, and *mugham* opera. *Mugham* operas were excluded from the repertoire of the theaters. *Tars* were publicly burned or broken; people even feared to keep them at home. Fortunately, the ideology of *Proletkult* had soon disappeared from stage, and the *tar* and *mugham* opera, as significant markers of the national culture, returned to the musical life in the country in the early 1930s.

Still, the loyalty to the native music roots could be interpreted as a sign of “*panislamism*” or “*panturkism*”<sup>12</sup> and result in severe prosecuting measures. For instance, in 1920 Khadija Gaibova (1893-1938), gifted pianist and teacher advanced the idea of “Eastern conservatory” with the primary focus on Azerbaijani and overall Eastern music. This project was immediately rejected by Narkompros (short for *Narodnyi Komissariat Prosvesheniia*: “People’s Commissariat of Enlightening”) as being too nationalistic. Two distinguished Azerbaijani *tar* performers, Ahmadkhan Bakikhanov and Mammadkhan Bakikhanov, spent one year in a jail for playing Iranian *mughams*, which was interpreted as a sign of pro-Iranian political orientation.

More delicate – or rather less visible mechanism of guiding art and culture was established in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Some forms of traditional and folk music were prohibited or severely discriminated, such as *meykhana*, an improvised poetic and musical form. Its free literary content allowed the expression of any idea, including anti-Soviet ones. As such, Soviets labeled *meykhana* as a “primitive” genre, not worthy of being performed in public.

All forms of religious music were totally forbidden, particularly “*Shabih*”, a religious mystery with a weighty dose of choral music. Anti-religious campaign comprised all massive of traditional music of Azerbaijan. All appeals to religious matters were eliminated from the lyrics of *mughams* or folk songs being replaced with neutral terms or even politicized statements: the way it happens in the folk song “*Bari Bakh*” (Look at Me):

(Folk version)

If you are allowed to marry me,  
Hey, look at me, look at me,  
**Allah** will like it, too,  
Hey, look at me, look at me.

(Censored version during Soviet era)

If you are allowed to marry me,

---

<sup>12</sup> *Panturkism* and *panislamism* are ideologies based on ethnic and religious similarities with neighboring Turkey and Muslim countries that arose in the region in the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Hey, look at me, look at me,

**People** will like it.

Hey, look at me, look at me

Certain decisions were undertaken that aimed to change the nature of Azerbaijani *mugham*. Performers were urged to focus on the verses by contemporary authors, rather than classical poetry of the 12<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. What also disturbed the Soviets about *mugham* was its use of typical motifs of sadness and melancholy. As such, *mughams* distinguished by optimism and courage, such as “Heyrati” or “Simayi Shams” were elevated to the top of traditional music hierarchy in the Soviet Azerbaijan. Conversely, *mughams* which evoked sad feelings were more or less vetoed, such as “Shushtar,” “Khumayun,” “Mahur,” or “Kasma Shikasta.” This “Segregation Law” resulted in non-equal development of the art of *mugham* in the Soviet Azerbaijan. Performers more elaborated on cheerful *mughams*, so that musicwise they are now on a more advanced level comparing to what they had been like a century ago. Contrarily, discriminated Azerbaijani *mughams* both in regard to intonation and structure remain on the same relatively simpler level that they had been during the early 1920s.

In the field of composed music the main requirement of the “nativism from above”, such as the direct revelation of the folk music roots was the least disturbing, since it coincided with the main inclination of the most Azerbaijani composers. As for the “Europeanization from above,” it applied serious restrictions on the assortment of music means, which caused the isolation of the Soviet music from the rest of the world. However, in the 1960s, all previously forbidden modern styles of Western music entered the orbit of the Soviet music. Gara Garayev, and later his students Faraj Garayev (b.1943) and Franghiz Alizade (b.1947) led the process of updating the style of Azerbaijani music. Franghiz Alizade who is also a brilliant pianist was the first who introduced works by John Cage, Olivier Messiaen, Arnold Schoenberg and other contemporary composers to the audiences in Azerbaijan and elsewhere in the Soviet Union. Such a large scope of avant garde music in Azerbaijan also marks remarkable difference from the composed music in Central Asia.

In the field of Azerbaijani traditional and folk music, similarly to other Central Asian republics, the most crucial impact of the “Europeanization from above” referred to the “academization” of oral heritage which Soviets viewed as a perfect way to keep it under control. Several measures were undertaken, such as the placing traditional music under umbrella of the academic institutions, incorporating in conservatory and college instruction, notating folk samples or modifying performing practices. Traditional instruments were tempered, i.e. tunewise

equalized to the European ones; as such, a huge advantage of the Eastern musical instruments, such as microtonic consequences, was eliminated. The orchestras of traditional music were established – analogous to the European symphony orchestra – that existed along with the traditional music groups of a small format.

Nowadays, in all Central Asian cultures the “nativism from below” fully resonates with the “nativism from above.” Previously discriminated forms of traditional heritage enjoy their revival. “*Mugham*” project that supports performing, recording, broadcasting and studying this genre has been carried out under the patronage of the First lady of Azerbaijan, UNESCO’s Goodwill Ambassador, Mrs. Mehriban Aliyeva. Contests and festivals of traditional music are regularly held in the country. The national music has occupied more significant place in curricula of all music schools in the country. The new educational institution entirely focused on traditional music called the Azerbaijan National Conservatory was established in 2002. Composers incorporate less known layers of traditional heritage in their music. Even radical apologists of the new music in Azerbaijan, demonstrate their loyalty to the nation’s cultural heritage. Faraj Karaev known as one of the “less nationalistic” Azerbaijani composers, in his most recent work “Sermon, *mugham* and prayer” includes *mugham* as a quote, performed on the traditional instrument *tar* and sounding as a response to the newest experiments.

The increased “nativism” also encourages contemporary Azerbaijani composers to comprehend regional roots of their native culture. Two Azerbaijani composers, Franghiz Alizade and Javanshir Guliyev (b.1950), have become a part of “Silk Road” project led by world-reputed American cellist Yo Yo Ma, and Alizade’s “Dervish” was recognized as one of the top accomplishments of the project. As before, strong “nativism” part is juxtaposed with the powerful “Western” component, now without mediating party, being directly catalyzed by the processes of globalization. How symptomatic is the collaboration of Franghiz Alizade with America’s famous Kronos Quartet that resulted in the disc of Kronos called “*Mughamsayaghi*” (In the style of *Mugham*) released in 2005,<sup>13</sup> and the portrait concert of Franghiz Alizade with Kronos Quartet that took place in world-reputed Carnegie Hall in March 2006.

Strong “Westernization”, with equally powerful “above” and “below” parts remains as a distinctive feature of the contemporary Azerbaijani music and culture. Azerbaijan’s adopting Latin alphabet in 1991 and current strive to join European Union clearly reveals respective priorities in the country’s overall policy.<sup>14</sup> Apparently, Azerbaijani musicians tend to create

---

<sup>13</sup> Kronos Quartet. *Mugam Sayagi*. Music of Franghiz Ali-Zadeh. Nonesuch 79804-2, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Symptomatic example: on one of the banknotes of Azerbaijan’s currency the country is featured as a part of Europe.

works in all genres of Western music. However, the huge governmental shelter that music had during the Soviet era, is now gone, whereas the system of management has not been established yet. This, obviously, serves as a discouraging factor reducing the level of composers' creativity in genres of academic music. Instead, the growing commercialization of the culture stimulates the flourishing of popular music. However, today the situation looks much more promising than a decade ago: during last five years one opera ("Natavan" by Vasif Adygozalov, 2005), one symphony (The Eighth Symphony by Arif Malikov, 2004) and two ballet works ("Journey to the Caucasus" by Agshin Alizade, 2002, and "Love and Death" by Polad Bulbuloghlu, 2005) have been premiered in Baku.

Symptomatically, traditional music has not rejected "Western" features earned during the Soviet era. Even new forms that resulted of the intensified "nativism" during post-Soviet era still contain weighty "Western" component. For instance, the orchestras of traditional instruments are still dearly loved in the country. Students of the Azerbaijan National Conservatory are required to learn History of Western Music, or Western harmony and counterpoint, even though in a relative simple mode.

After a short period of decline, jazz is back in the orbit of contemporary music of Azerbaijan. Jazz magazines and radio broadcasts have been established in the country, jazz program has opened at the Baku Music Academy, and international festivals of jazz music, with presence of world-reputed musicians such as Herbie Hancock or Al Jearrau are held in Baku. New generation of Azerbaijani musicians continue to explore the stream of "jazz *mugham*."

As such, contemporary Azerbaijani music remains as a "Eurasian" or, more precisely "Eastern-Western" phenomenon, with the strengthened "Eastern" and "Western" parts as compared to the Soviet era. The two models of this synthesis, based on the Eastern and the Western traditions continue to exist. The new trend is that the contact between them is now less obvious. The musicians, educators, researchers in both fields tend to keep their areas apart, although without rejecting the features earned from the "opposite" side. The researcher working on the music by any Azerbaijani composer is supposed to possess thorough knowledge of *mugham*, and the musician playing the *tar* should be aware of the genre of concerto. Indeed, the synthesis of the East and the West has already obtained status of tradition in Azerbaijani music and culture.