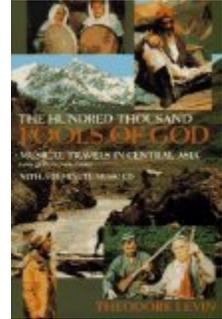


Theodore Levin. *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God: Musical Travels in Central Asia (and Queens, New York)*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996. xvi + 318 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33206-6.

Reviewed by Robin Bisha (University of Texas at El Paso)
Published on H-Russia (May, 1998)



Music and Politics in Central Asia

In this engaging scholarly travelogue, Levin explores the history, politics, and artistry of music in a variety of regions of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and among emigre Bukharan Jews in Queens, New York. Levin explores several threads of investigation in his travels through Uzbekistan and northern Tajikistan. One of those themes is the existence of a unified musical culture throughout the Central Asian region, which he terms Transoxania. In demonstrating the similarities in musical culture among the Uzbek and Tajik Muslim populations and between the Muslims and the Bukharan Jews, he also analyzes the Soviet cultural policies which attempted to build ethnic (or national in Soviet parlance) identities to correspond with the borders of the Union Republics of the region. He also deals with outside influences on the culture of the region, particularly Persian, European, and more recently, Soviet.

The effect of politics on musicians and musical culture is another important theme of Levin's narrative. Levin finds that Soviet nationality and antireligious policies chipped away at musical traditions and that post-Soviet ethnic antagonism is further eroding traditional musical practice; however, one tradition remains intact in Transoxanian musical practice—adaptability. Musicians here have adapted to the customs and needs of occupying powers for centuries. Virtuosos of Transoxanian music who perform pop songs at weddings in Uzbekistan (or Queens) carry on this tradition.

Levin examines his subject broadly, including art mu-

sic, ritual music, and folk music. He begins with his early experiences in Tashkent as a musicology graduate student who was assigned the topic of investigating the Bukharan *shash maqam*, “a large compendium of instrumental and vocal pieces that embody classical Central Asian aesthetic ideals in music and poetry” (p. 10). The *shash maqam* shares the musical theory and terminology of classical Islamic music and provides a link between Turkish, Persian, and Transoxanian musical culture. Levin found the performance of the *maqam* to be moribund: a dead tradition kept alive by conservatory study and wooden reproduction from texts. In the 1970s, when he began his study of Central Asian music, he was unable to conduct a search for more lively *maqam* performance tradition because of the restrictions placed on foreign researchers. His later ethnomusicological work was facilitated by his Uzbek colleague Otanazar Matyakubov and the collapse of Soviet mechanisms of control in the 1990s.

Levin's insights into Central Asian music and history are most often contained in portraits of the lives of musicians. For example, he examines the parallel influences of Transoxania on Russians and of European music on the musicians of Transoxania through the lives of Alexei Fedorovich Kozlovsky and Mutavaqqil Burxanov. Kozlovsky, a composer trained at the Kiev and Moscow Conservatories in the early years after the Bolshevik Revolution, was exiled to Tashkent in 1934. He had been fascinated by the “intentional mystery” of the East and had explored theosophy, so he set to work to discover the se-

crets of Asia through the study of the music he heard in Tashkent. He transcribed the music of the streets, of tea rooms, of dervishes, and even of the children next door. He continued to write music in the European manner he had studied, but he now included Central Asian musical influences in his pieces. He wrote an opera, *Ulugbek*, on an Uzbek historical subject. Through the years this opera has been transformed from a Russian opera on an Uzbek theme into an Uzbek national opera that happens to be sung in Russian (p. 22). Burxanov went from Uzbekistan to study music in Moscow in the 1930s. Levin describes him as “an Uzbek clone of the nineteenth-century Russian composers...who served as models for Soviet composers charged with the creation of ‘national’ music inspired by indigenous folk songs” (p. 25). In 1991 his historical opera *Nawa’i* premiered in Tashkent’s opera house.

The work of these two composers and the preservation of the *shash maqam* clearly illustrate Soviet cultural policy in this region. This policy aimed at creating both a recognizable Soviet culture and ethnic identities that would bolster the Union Republics. The *shash maqam* had become moribund, at least in part, because of the necessity in the Soviet Union to link it with one of the nationalities of the Central Asia Republics. The *maqam* was performed by both Uzbek and Tajik speakers and by Muslims and Bukharan Jews. While the *maqam* has both an instrumental and a vocal component, the Tajik-language lyrics were not published in Uzbekistan along with the music. Uzbek music simply could not be sung in Tajik. Thus, the classical music of the courts of the khans, deeply influenced by Persian culture, was inconvenient for Soviet purposes and had to be manipulated to fit current political needs.

In contrast, opera was part of the currency of Soviet culture. Each Soviet nationality had to have its own “national” opera whether opera was a part of the indigenous musical practice or not. Conservatories trained professionals to build a musical bureaucracy and singers to perform the international and newly created national opera repertory. Opera houses were constructed in the Union Republics, Tashkent’s in 1947, to house this “national” art. Levin’s comment on the audience for opera in Tashkent illustrates the lack of success of this policy: “Attendance has been declining steadily over the years; these days, what audience there is consists mostly of organized groups of tourists, students, and workers who receive their tickets for free” (p. 27).

The work of Yulduz Usmanova illustrates an aspect

of Soviet culture that has been much more successful in Central Asia: pop music. Usmanova, from a collective farm in the Fergana Valley, trained in classical Central Asian music including *maqam*, before embarking on a career as a pop singer. She combines the Euro/Soviet pop style with traditional melodies and poetic themes. She hopes to use her influence as Uzbekistan’s leading pop singer to encourage people to explore the local musical instruments and performance styles by incorporating them into her pop songs. Her work fits with a trend in pop music in Europe and America, world music, to look for influences in the instrumentation and vocal styles of Asia, Africa, and indigenous America. While she is perhaps the most “modern” of the performers Levin interviewed, Usmanova leads a life that differs little from that of female performers throughout the Central Asian past and present.

This is one of the great strengths of Levin’s work: he does not dwell exclusively on the music of men. Many works on Islamic music, both by Muslims and outside observers, have presented a musical world that seems to be populated only by men. This is, at least in part, a result of a separation between the male and female world in general which did not allow men to witness female performance. Levin’s work was perhaps aided by Soviet secularism and the impact of years of rhetoric about women’s emancipation, but while these assisted him in gaining opportunities to hear women musicians, they did not necessarily improve the lot of women performers in Central Asia. Usmanova and Munajat Yulchieva, a famous performer of Uzbek classical music, earn their living almost exclusively from performing at weddings. Other gatherings at which music is performed (the *ash* and *gap*, for example) are off limits to women as they remain all-male gatherings.

Levin’s travels beyond Tashkent are essentially a search for a musical world he fears has been lost due to twentieth-century politics. He follows his own instincts and the advice of his friend OM, looking for the musical world that Kozlovsky and early Soviet ethnographers described in the 1920s. Each time he thinks he is about to find the oasis, something gets in the way, most often disastrously heavy drinking. He finds the Soviet effort to destroy traditional musical performance opportunities not surprising because musical performance and religion were intimately tied in the regions he visited. By the 1990s, he finds some evidence of the religious connections with performance in the *ash* (the morning men’s gathering before a wedding) at some *toys* (gatherings for music and conversation), and also in the work of healers.

For the most part, however, performers with a deep spiritual component to their music, the fools of God of the title, lament that they are the last of their breed, that people have become secular in their desires and that music as Turgun Alimatov and Tohfaxan Pinkhasova, for example, have practiced it is dying.

Tohfaxan Pinkhasova is one of the Bukharan Jewish musicians Levin follows from Bukhara to Queens. Bukharan Jews and *chalis* (coerced converts to Islam) created and performed much of Transoxania's music. Performing, particularly for women, was considered a profession of dubious morality by Muslims, but music was necessary at weddings and other gatherings. Although "Uzbek" music has often been performed by Bukharan Jews, the Jews have been largely ignored in accounts of Uzbek musical history. In the post-Soviet period, the strict identification of Uzbek nationality with Islam has caused great difficulties for Jewish performers. Many of the musicians Levin studied in Bukhara have now emigrated and live in Queens, New York. In Queens they are caught between new dominant cultural currents—Orthodox Judaism and U.S. popular culture—and are adapting to these new influences while also attempting to preserve traditional Bukharan musical culture. In this they are aided by the world music industry which offers opportunities to record music played on traditional instruments.

Levin's travelogue approach works well to introduce the non-specialist reader to an exotic subject. Levin arrived almost as untutored in Uzbek history and culture as the educated American reader (or even Russian specialist) who might pick up this book, and we learn along with him as he deepens his knowledge and experience of the culture of Transoxania. Readers can share his surprise at some of the local traditions and his chagrin at the consequences of violating rules of local culture. It is also through Levin's personal observations that readers learn of the difficulty of life for Central Asian women. Through the biographical sketches, Levin tells the sad history of

political persecution that Central Asian cultural leaders have experienced from Soviet institutions and the anti-semitism toward Bukharan Jews. His tales of dealings with Soviet bureaucrats will ring a familiar tune for anyone who has spent time in any part of the former Soviet Union, and they illustrate the difficulty of transition from Soviet rule to a post-colonial, local rule in Central Asia. The travelogue approach also supports Levin's contention that Central Asia is not a collection of individual cultures, but is, rather, unified by a Transoxanian cultural base. I am quite convinced that this is the case for the regions Levin visited, but I would like to know if the thesis hold up under study of the musical culture of the Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and Kazaks.

Levin and Indiana University Press should be commended for including a CD of recordings of the music discussed in the book. The recordings bring the subject to life in a way mere text could never do. The CD covers the full range of songs and performers discussed in the book. He includes performance of what he calls the frozen *shash maqam*, the contemporary classical Uzbek music of Turgun Alimatov and Munajat Yulchieva, and the Bukharan performers, as well as the songs of girls at work in Dargh (in the Yagnab valley in Tajikistan) and a ritual healing in northern Tajikistan. Unfortunately, the Europeanness of Kozlovsky's "Night in a Ferghana Garden" jars. Kozlovsky's work is obviously the product of a composer trained in a very different aesthetic than that which guides the Uzbek performers, whether they were trained in European music or not. Perhaps the absence of even traces of European musical aesthetics in the music Levin recorded is the most telling evidence of the failure of Soviet policy both to eradicate the old musical/religious tradition and to replace it with a pan-Soviet culture.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Robin Bisha. Review of Levin, Theodore, *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God: Musical Travels in Central Asia (and Queens, New York)*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. May, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2024>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.