

Inna Naroditskaya. *Song from the Land of Fire: Continuity and Change in Azerbaijanian Mugham*. London: Routledge, 2003. xxiii + 263 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-94021-4.

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Mugham: The Melodious Story Azerbaijanis Tell Themselves about Themselves

In *Song from the Land of Fire: Continuity and Change in Azerbaijanian Mugham*, Inna Naroditskaya explains a phenomenon I noticed early in researching Azerbaijan—that music is central to Azerbaijani society. When I started to learn Azeri for a new ethnographic project, my language teacher continuously played recordings of Alim Gasimov, a famous *khanande* (*mugham* singer), so that we students could better grasp the spirit of the Azeri language, culture, and people. Once I arrived in Azerbaijan, I saw how *mughams* featured prominently in receptions for foreign visitors and local celebrations. It was thus with great anticipation that I opened Naroditskaya’s book. I hoped it would explain this central idiom of Azerbaijani life, and I was not disappointed. In the text and accompanying CD, Naroditskaya takes her readers on an exploration of Azerbaijani history, politics, and current social transformations through the monodic sounds of the *tar* (plucked string instrument), *gaval* (hand-held drum), *kamancha* (spiked fiddle), and the piercingly dramatic and emotional voice of the *khanande*. All of these elements go into creating the *mugham*—“the modal system serving as the foundation for diverse types of Azerbaijanian music including folk and art traditions, composed pieces, and pop music” (p. 3). Its verses come from classical Persian poetry; although Azerbaijanis, since the beginning of the twentieth century, have scored their musical compositions, they continue to teach *mugham* through master-disciple relationships. While this musical form has a specific seventeen-tone system, its structure relies on improvisation. This is because each composition has its own set of *gushes*. Naroditskaya describes

the *gushe* as a “theme-thesis, an identity card usually introduced at the beginning of a section, and developed in the course of endless repetition, modification, and ornamentation” (p. 42). To illustrate this point, she focuses on various renditions of one particular piece called the “Bayati Shiraz.” Because she approaches *mugham* “as a form of music and a mechanism of human relations,” Naroditskaya is able to explore the expansive interconnections between song and identity.

Naroditskaya is uniquely placed to explain this national musical phenomenon that she says is “understood by every insider, but unreadable to outsiders” (p. 200). “Born in Azerbaijan but not of Azerbaijanian ethnicity,” she lived in Baku and pursued a career in music, immigrating to America only because of “incidents of ethnic cleansing in the eighties” (p. xx). When she returned to the capital in 1997 and 2002 to conduct fieldwork in musicology, she found that “the cultural layer” to which she had belonged had vanished (p. xxi). However, she managed to regain ties with Azerbaijani musicians through her research methodology that included learning how to play *mugham* on the piano, interviewing *mugham* musicians and vocalists, and attending *mugham* performances both in Azerbaijan and other countries. Beginning with a history of how Azerbaijani language, literature, and poetry reflect “the same complex cultural identity that underlies the diverse native music traditions” (p. 13), Naroditskaya writes that Azerbaijanis have a “split identity” based on three major linguistic influences: Arabic in science and philosophy, Persian in literature and courtly

etiquette, and Turkic in everyday language. She contends that *mugham* symbolizes and synthesizes these influences, bringing poetic performance and interpretation into current cultural context. For example, lyrics are based on the *ghazal*, the classic poetic form that consists of four to fifteen *beits*, where each *beit* (meaning “house” in Arabic) is an independent image and idea. The *ghazal* strings together these *beits* into a “poetic necklace in which every piece is complete in itself and is also connected with the one preceding and the one following” (p. 18). So while they no longer understand the Persian language of the classic poets, most Azerbaijanis comprehend its rendition in *mugham* since *khanandes* sing in Azeri. Naroditskaya writes that each performance creates a specific emotional atmosphere and shared feelings among musicians and listeners.

Naroditskaya argues that changes in the form and content of *mugham* were directly related to national consolidation and cultural unification, and she thus links up various *mugham* styles with certain periods of political and social transformation. She explains how *mugham* fits well into Soviet and Islamic ideologies and was thus “essential in negotiating, preserving, and conveying Azerbaijanian musical identity” in the twentieth century (p. 27). Today, devout Muslims in Azerbaijan continue to see *mugham* as a category of chanted poetry that exemplifies their beloved tradition of hearing the “spoken Word” (the Azeri word for both reading and singing is “ohumag”) (p. 21). She provides a recording of hajji Jabrail Mikail oglu, the imam of the Taza Pir in Baku, “reading” for her a sorrowful and emotionally intense version of a *mugham* typically performed by dervishes (p. 22).

In turn, the Soviets took advantage of *mugham* as a “national” form of culture that they could fill with “socialist” content. Azerbaijanis adapted *mugham* to patriotic songs, symphonies, and operas. Naroditskaya investigates the modernization and westernization of *mugham* through an in-depth study of Uzemir Hajibeyov, the founder of modern Azerbaijani music theory. His many great works include the first *mugham* opera, based on the *mugham* “Bayati Shiraz” and Fizuli’s “Leili and Majnun.” She contends that Hajibeyov’s opera “Keroglu,” produced some thirty years after the former, laid the groundwork for the national orchestra. Later in the book, she analyzes Suleiman Aleskerov’s *mugham* symphony “Bayati Shiraz” (1948), and her concluding chapter mentions the latest post-Soviet transmutation? Vagif Mustafa-Zadeh’s piano jazz composition “Bayati Shiraz.”

While I appreciated her detailed theoretical examina-

tion of *mugham* composers and compositions, I found these sections to be a bit confusing due to her providing several definitions for each term (despite the handy glossary!) and my lack of knowledge about music theory and notation. As an ethnographer, I consider chapters 4, 6, and 8 to contribute the most to our understanding of social relations in the region. In chapter 4, I listened with great pleasure to Alim Gasimov’s rendition of “Bayati Shiraz,” while reading Azeri text of the song (with corresponding English translation). Naroditskaya fully explores each set of lyrics to reveal symbolic and social meanings within Fizuli’s poetic metaphors and Gasimov’s rich and expansive vocals. This simultaneous activity made me feel that I was better able to comprehend Naroditskaya’s point that each *dastagh* (complete *mugham* composition) has its own interdependent internal sense of time (rhythm) and musical space (tonal range and melodic pattern).

Naroditskaya discusses the foundation of conservatories in Baku on the Russian/European model, but, in chapter 6, she touches on the consolidation of *mugham* lineages? -a more interesting phenomenon. She writes that the Soviet system of education replicated the local *mugham* tradition of fathers teaching their sons. So, while today certain families lay claim to the finest *mugham* players, Azerbaijani musical academies promote teacher-disciple relationships that have produced some of the best *mugham* masters and are responsible for including women in this national tradition. Naroditskaya thus argues that unlike Uzbek maqam, that became “frozen music” due to its formalization in the conservatory (p. 123), *mugham* continues to stay vibrant, as teachers encourage students to collect, learn, and transcribe its performances all over the country. She writes, “if there is a degree of uniformity in Azerbaijanian *mugham*, it might be related not so much to teaching and notation as to the fact that the conservatory and music college have brought performers of *mugham* together, creating a unified *mugham* community, and overturned the localization of *mugham* centers and schools” (p. 123). What is missing from this section is a comparison between *mugham* networks and the ubiquitous Soviet practice of *blat* (which, briefly stated, is ways of obtaining or arranging something using connections).[1] I am curious as to how unique these Azerbaijani *mugham* associations are in comparison to other patron-client relationships in Soviet Azerbaijan.

Finally, I found her analysis of women’s place in *mugham* to be quite comprehensive, as she charts the movement of women from performing traditional

mourning and wedding songs at home to playing *mugham* professionally on stage and teaching it in the academy. Women had to confront several symbolic and structural difficulties in this transition. “In the classical love poetry that associates love with spring, gardens, and the first blossom of flowers, the *gül* (flower, specifically the rose) often symbolizes a woman, and the *bül-bül* (nightingale) is allied with a man” (p. 163). Because the former is seen as passive and the latter active, most female *mugham* musicians play in public with very little body movement, so as not to upset gender stereotypes. In addition, the text of these classic poems is almost always from a male’s point of view. Some female singers change the words, while the majority translate the love for a woman as their devotion to the *Vatan* (homeland). And it is this linking of *mugham* with *Vatan* that I see as the most problematic aspect of Naroditskaya’s work. Drawing on Benedict Anderson, Naroditskaya claims that *mugham* is a “language of ‘continuity’—a very real (as opposed to ‘imaginary’) embodiment of communal/national identity” (p. 192). For her, Azerbaijani national awareness is a positive and documentable occurrence; the inherently improvisatory aspect of *mugham* gives Azerbaijani culture the flexibility to survive intrusion and adjust to domination (p. 197). It seems to me that such statements naturalize Azerbaijani nationhood, and there is a fine line, as Anderson says, between nations and nationalism. Naroditskaya refers to how, during the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict in the early 1990s, “musicians did not need to create new text or change the musical model. The listener’s patri-

tism was aroused by the traditional metaphors connecting womanly beauty an innocence with the motherland” (p. 49). I believe that Naroditskaya’s analysis could have benefited from a more critical evaluation of Azerbaijani nationhood in the context of regional politics.[2]

This brings me to my final point. Naroditskaya never addresses whether *mugham*, as a narrative about who Azerbaijanis are, silences ethnic and religious differences in the country or allows minority groups to express their own musical traditions. For example, while Mountain Jews in Azerbaijan adapted *mugham* to their own repertoire of songs, how willing are Azeris to do the same for “ethnic” tunes within the borders of their country? [3] All in all, though, *Song from the Land of Fire: Continuity and Change in Azerbaijanian Mugham* is a must read for anyone? -academics or others? -interested in better comprehending Azerbaijani culture and society.

Notes

[1]. Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia’s Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 12.

[2]. Nora Dudwick, “The Cultural Construction of Political Violence in Armenia and Azerbaijan” *Problems of Post-Communism* (July/August 1995): pp. 18-23.

[3]. *The Music of the Mountain Jews: Recording and Commentaries by Pirus Eliyahu* (Jerusalem: The Jewish Music Research Centre, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1998).

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