

PRESENTING AZERBAIJANI MUGHAM TO WESTERNERS

The following is an outline of a course in mugham music appreciation. Mugham belongs to the ancient East and has certain characteristics unique to that genre. Western compositions are based on polyphonic harmony, which is music based on chords. Traditional Eastern music is monophonic and does not use chords. Instead, each note is played in relation to one tone, often the tonic, or first note in the scale.

Eastern music is also modal, a system of scales composed of a select number of notes – usually seven - which are relatively evenly distributed across the octave. Early music from Europe is also modal, but whereas European modal music is metered, mugham is meter-less. The rhythms of mugham are flexible, often speeding up and slowing down in a wave-like manner. Additionally, the notes in mugham are clustered together in asymmetrical phrases which make them difficult to predict, and which have the effect of postponing the rhythmic resolution, sometimes for whole minutes until the drawn out melody gradually winds down and concludes at the originating tone.

Mugham makes use of the 12 semitones associated with Western music although not equal tempered, and in addition it makes use of the many dozens of microtones, audibly flat and sharp pitches which are found in between the 12 semitones of Western music. Furthermore, mugham is densely ornamented in a manner which calls to mind the sounds of nature, such as birds chirping, horses neighing, brooks burbling, and so on.

Mugham is improvisational. Fans of jazz will most certainly recognize the art of theme and variation in mugham. Mugham, being monophonic modal music, is somewhat more restrictive than jazz in the choice of pitches, but being microtonal and meter-less gives mugham equal if not even greater improvisational possibilities.

In brief, mugham is:

- Monophonic
- Modal
- Microtonal
- Meter-less
- Densely ornamented
- Improvisational (theme and variation)

The above also applies to many forms of music related to mugham such as maqqam from North Africa, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor (Turkey), and North and South Central Asia where it goes by a variety of names.

Mugham melodies have a unique 'phraseology'. They appear to be governed by a hidden formula analogous to the algorithm of a computer program, a formula which determines how the notes are clustered together into musical phrases. These phrases are made ever more complex by fractalization, a mathematical concept in which the details of the contours or the edges of fields are micro-versions of the larger form.

To better appreciate mugham - which can be quite complex – first we should listen to the playing of a simple scale, perhaps several times, to register its effect. When we hear the sequence of notes on a scale composed in “staircase construction,” it evokes a unique effect, which is the feeling of being transported. Mugham almost exclusively employs “staircase construction” modal melodies. Only ‘staircase’ modal melodies can impart the mysterious sense of transport, the sensation of going 'up' when we hear an increase in frequency of pitch, and 'down' when we hear a decrease in frequency of pitch. Mugham music exploits this property of ‘staircase’ tones in modal scales to great effect.

Furthermore, by deliberately delaying the last note in a series of pitches in a given mode (the major scale is ideal to demonstrate this effect) we can feel the power of modal staircase melodies to induce the wish to hear the anticipated note. For those particularly sensitive to music, the delay can cause real anguish. It is an extraordinary phenomenon, this power to make us wish to hear a specific note. But we cannot just delay the playing of the last note in that sequence as it will only frustrate and annoy listeners. The postponement of the resolution of the melody must be executed in an artful way in order to garner the positive regard of an audience. Without that positive regard, there can be no meaningful effect.

Once we have registered and confirmed to our satisfaction that staircase modal melodies indeed impart a mystical sense of transport, and we sustain that inexplicable feeling by artfully postponing resolution, then we can listen carefully to the effects of various intervals, paying special attention to the differences in the feelings of major and minor intervals, and comparing their respective strengths relative to the feeling of closure. Different intervals not only impart different degrees of suspension and resolution, they impart a stronger or weaker sense of impelling us to move on in the direction the melody began with. The minor 3rd in the series of increasing frequency of pitches in a staircase modal scale, for example, seems to induce a mysterious yearning for something ineffable whereas the major 3rd does not seem to have that yearning quality. By focusing our listening attention on the intervals created by the staircase sequence of notes in a modal scale paired with the initial note, the tonic in that scale, we become sensitive to the power of each and every note to carry us further along the way toward resolution.

To sum: mugham derives much of its power to transport the listener by:

- Modal ‘staircase’ melodies which impart the mysterious sense of transport
- The need for a sense of closure induced by postponing the concluding note
- The convoluted path of the modal staircase melody working its way 'up' and 'down' the scales postpones the resolving octave / tonic note in a way which has a profound effect on listening attention
- Mugham notes are clustered together in asymmetrical phrases to prolong a sense of suspension postponing rhythmic resolution

After this demonstration of the phraseology of mugham and the varied effects of listening to major and minor intervals, we can examine the effect of microtones, and experience

how microtones are in their own way like minor intervals in how they evoke the wish for harmonious resolution, but with even greater intensity. The key to the effect of microtones is in realizing they are being played intentionally, an awareness which changes our receptivity to the energy in the dissonance of what we Westerners are likely to regard as notes which seem to be out of tune, notes which are flat or sharp of the harmonious intervals we are accustomed to hearing in Western music.

When we consider the purpose of this kind of music, we can understand it is for the transformation of human consciousness from the ordinary everyday modality of earthly concerns, to what could be characterized as a more 'cosmic' frame of mind. This appears to come about from the power of mugham to pull our attention into the present moment in which one no longer is thinking about the future, the source of nearly all our anxieties. In place of the anxious, concerned state of mind, there is a sense of peace and the electrifying feeling of a heightened state of awareness.

The effects described above appear in virtually all people who have some degree of sensitivity to music without regard to which culture they come from. This aspect of mugham could be classified as "objective" in the sense that it affects virtually everyone the same. The more "subjective" side of mugham is found in the folkloric aspects; the lyrics of the poetry recited when singing mugham, the specific type of ornamentation typically used in mugham, the signature set of microtones typically used in Azerbaijani mugham, and of course the unique sound of traditional indigenous Azerbaijani folk instruments, namely, the Azerbaijani versions of: tar, kamancha, oud, saz, balaban, tutek, zurna, etc.

There is another feature of mugham which seems to affect virtually everyone the same, which is the sense of being told a story even when it is instrumental mugham and there are no words. Not only are the notes clustered in asymmetrical phrases all the while the tempo is slowing down and speeding up, they are grouped in such a fashion which conveys the distinct impression that a story is unfolding, but about what is indeterminate.

The story-like phraseology of mugham melodies most likely owes its origins to the bardic tradition of Caucasus Azerbaijan known as Ashikh. There are many passages in the exposition of mugham in which the structure of the melodies appears to resemble the structure of declamatory speech, which is typically used to regale audiences with epic legends. The effect of this kind of melodic structure imparts a sense of propulsion forward in time which, applied to staircase modal melodies, lends a sense of urgency to the delivery of the 'story'.

There is no story being told of course, but one can clearly feel as if one is listening to something structured like a story. It's basically an attention grabbing musical structure which draws the listener into the power of staircase modal melodies and their intervals, set to the cadence of meter-less convoluted phrases. Mugham is an exposition upon the intent to convey that power in music.