

Колыбельная богини Умай



Lullaby of the goddess Umay

Shalginova, Tat'yana, 2001. Solnechniy chatkhan: Al'bom fortepiannikh p'es [Sun chatkhan: Piano pieces]. Abakan: privately published, pp. 24-26.

# Shamanism in contemporary Siberian music

Composition > Siberia

Allusions to Khakas traditional culture resonate in the music of many composers from this southern Siberian region. Other musical works, such as the musical sketches for piano that Tatiana Shalginova has been composing since 1995, draw inspiration from Khakas animism and its view of man's place in the world.

Larissa Burnakova and Liesbet Nyssen

In the 1950s, Aleksandr Kenel, a Leningrad composer who had studied the musical traditions of the Khakas region, started a Khakas composing movement with his songs, chorals and instrumental compositions. In 1970, he set the tone for generations to come with an opera based on a Khakas epic, in which he combined the structure of Western classical music, harmony, polyphonic devices and other Western composition techniques with Khakas heroic themes and melodies. Drawing on elements of traditional vocal music and Western form, this composition style lives on today through the work of composers such as Georgiy Chelborakov, Nina Kataeva, and Pavel Borgoyakov. Alongside this mainstream style, the national school since the 1980s has been developing a composition style that more substantially incorporates elements of Khakas culture, including its traditional instruments, folk songs and epics, as well as religious notions and practices.<sup>1</sup>

Until the 1980s, most compositions at the school were consistent with the mainly vocal Khakas musical tradition - the easiest way to infuse them with a 'national flavour'. Over the last decade, however, Khakas composers such as Yuriy Kish-teev, Anatoliy Tokmashov, and Tatiana Shalginova have concentrated on composing instrumental, though still Khakas, music. Particularly interesting are their piano miniatures in which they adopt musical elements from Khakas epic tradition.<sup>2</sup> Features such as rhythm and elasticity in Kish-teev's sketches, and instrumental recitation over a long, sustained tone in Shalginova's pieces recall the nomadic past for Khakas audiences.

## Shamanic inspiration

In addition to conveying her love for the land and history, Shalginova, herself a descendant of shamans, incorporates shamanic practices and the animistic worldview in her music. According to the Khakas, everything in the world is infused with spirits. This is expressed through symbols representing the spirits, and ritual practices like prayers, offerings, and shamanic sessions. In such a shamanic ritual, word, sound, and body movement fuse into a whole, its sound component incorporating drum beating, sound imitation, recitation, incantation, singing, whispering and a range of throaty sounds.

A shamanic performance reflects the shaman's journey between the visible and invisible worlds. The shaman first calls helping-spirits by beating a drum and imitating the voices of birds and wild animals. Next, in the longest and most important phase, she or he transforms into a supernatural being to travel to these other realms. Here the shaman beats the drum,

dances, and utters sounds from whispers and mumbles to deep aspirations and shouts. Finally, the shaman returns to 'reality,' and ends with a chant.

While chanting, the shaman alternates from mumbling to chant, recitation, and throat singing with exclamations. There is no strict repetition but improvisation on basic themes. As in the performance as a whole, rhythm plays a major role - flexible, with a steady beat that pulses continuously. Repeated monotonously, together with a melody based on several pitches and small intervals, it induces the trance state the shaman needs to travel and heal. A dense sound texture is formed when alternating throaty vocal techniques are added.

Shalginova uses these religious practices and notions in her music in three ways. She incorporates the entire shamanic ritual and makes the compositions unfold as condensed shamanic sessions, a concept also explored by other composers. She also uses musical elements of the shaman's song. Finally, she refers to the underlying animistic worldview through the ideas she represents in her music. Her cycle for piano 'Sun Symbol' expresses such animistic notions, besides using musical elements from epic and shamanic practices: she includes a sustained fifth stemming from the instrumental accompaniment of storytelling, and uses the hypnotic rhythms and melodic repetition of a few tones to create the mesmerising beat of a shamanic ritual. The animistic notions Shalginova expresses in this cycle are the spirits of fire, water, and wind. She depicts them by imitating the sounds of the corresponding natural elements with modern composing techniques: crackling fire, running water and whooshing wind.

## Musical, miniature storytelling

Such expressions of animistic ideas abound in Shalginova's music and shape her compositions. According to Khakas tradition, the world consists of three layers: a lower layer of demonic power, a middle one with humans and animals with warm breath, and the divine world. When a shaman performs an incantation, she or he can sing themes from this middle world, as well as those on behalf of upper and under-world beings. The voices from the different realms are also musically differentiated, with beings from the middle and upper world singing in a natural style while those of the underworld sing in a non-human voice (reciting monotonously in a lower register, with shifts in voice and unexpected leaps).

In her piano compositions, Shalginova transforms this tripartite worldview into a temporal one. Consistent with the shaman's choice of voice, a composition may start melodiously (evoking the human world), followed by speech-like intonation (the underworld) and ending with a celestial hymn (the

upper world). In other miniatures such as the 'Sun Chatkhan' and 'Lullaby of the Goddess Umay', the composition creates an emotional, impressionist narrative that reflects on present reality (the middle world). This is gradually subsumed to evoke benevolent spirits and natural elements such as water and mountains. Finally, the last tones sound and fade in harmony with clear chords.

By adapting the musical features of shaman's songs and representing spirits and other notions about the world in her instrumental work, Shalginova challenges the idea of music as an autonomous aesthetic piece of art. Whether her music indeed evokes spirits and forces from the upper and under-worlds is left for the listener to decide. <

## Notes

1. In Russian, the term 'national' (*natsional'niy*) refers to an ethnic group, not to a nation in the sense of nation-state.
2. For instance in Tokmashov's 'Shaman,' Shalginova's 'Shaman's dream' and Tuvan composer Khuresh-Ool's 'Shaman's way.'

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