Contemporary trends in the Mongolian folksong tradition of urtyn duu

In 2009, three young singers, who had met at the conservatory and had studied a traditional folksong genre called urtyn duu (long-song), created a folk pop-group. Like the pictures provided in the liner notes, which were unusually commercialized for a traditional genre music, their music was unexpected and provocative for the majority of the Mongolian folk music audience. This new direction was unusual not so much because of the melding of Western instruments such as piano and synthesizer with a traditional vocal genre, but rather because of their unique acoustic ‘harmonizing’ of independent, ornamented and melismatic vocal solos, while retaining the traditional singing style and improvisation, and using mostly traditional songs.

New tradition, new identity

It seems now that the new Mongolia requires, in terms of culture, not only the ‘old’ tradition, but also a tradition which can attract audiences both inside and outside Mongolia. In response, fusion groups such as the long-song group Shurankhai have experimented with introducing new elements into the traditional music. Altan Urag, most likely the first folk-pop group in Mongolia, and later groups such as Doding, Borte, Hoomu, and Khosugtun, came from a younger generation of folk musicians, and were academically trained in Mongolian traditional music as well as in Western musical theory and history, by either Russian teachers or Mongolian teachers who had studied in the Soviet Union. They therefore easily cross the boundaries between traditional and non-traditional music.

Some songs have been particularly successful in their ability to merge traditional and modern elements. For example, the group Sunmin Yoon and Fabian Grosser’s album “The Long Song: Mongolia’s Love Song” features a blend of traditional and contemporary sounds, creating a unique listening experience. The album includes both traditional long-songs and modern pop elements, such as electric guitars and electronic drums. The result is a fusion that is both respectful of the past and accessible to a contemporary audience.

Continuity as cultural heritage

Back in 2000, I met a singer named Dadasuren, who lived in the remote countryside of Dundgovi province. He was a nomad, and I had to track him down, with the help of other herders and friends on the way. He was one of those singers who had been left behind, yet who carried an immense amount of knowledge of the long-song and who sang these songs so beautifully in his very (yurt). At that time, Dadasuren and other ‘old’ countryside singers maintained their nomadic ways and still lived as herders; as a result, they were not regarded in the same light as urban singers and received neither respect nor recognition as skilled and professional musicians. However, when I returned to Mongolia in 2012, Dadasuren had been designated, ahead of the urban singers, as a cultural intangible heritage asset. Not all the countryside singers will be promoted in this way, but it certainly shows Mongolia’s change of heart toward what remains and how Mongolians now understand their own tradition.

Notes