

The Culture and Teaching of Tuvan Vocal Music

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Abstract

This study is looking into the teaching and technique of Tuvan vocal music. Tuva is a republic of Russia on the southern tip of Siberia. This place is inhabited by nomadic tribes traditionally, but has been recently acquiring and using technology of the modern era. Through their nomadic culture, they developed an art known as Tuvan vocal music, or more commonly known as “throat singing.” However, this is a unique art that should not be put under the umbrella of similar cultural techniques around the globe. That is why it is referred to as Tuvan vocal music rather than “throat singing.” The development of this art came from the mimicking of sounds heard within nature such as a bird’s song, a thunderstorm, rushing water, or just the sound of wind rushing through the mountains. A lot of the older songs were sung mostly within the comforts of their own homes amongst family members or when they traveled somewhere to visit others. Usually, one learns this art form by listening and mimicking the sounds being produced, which can take years and years of practice.

Introduction

Tuvan vocal music is an art developed in a republic of Russia known as Tuva. This art started out simply as something that would be performed in houses and would be used for general jovial living. Now, it has developed into an ensemble-esque art form that has its performers travel globally to provide for themselves and even their families (Stone, 2019). This will be expanded upon further into the article.

The methodology used for this study was an oral history methodology. Oral history is defined as a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of

people, communities, and participants in past events (Oral History Assoc., 2019). Over the course of this process, six narrators were interviewed: Sean Quirk, Damon Postle, Guillem Codern, Mikko Heikenopoika, Robert McLaughlin, and Eliot Stone.

Literature Review

Tuva is a republic of Russia on the southern tip of Siberia. The people of the republic traditionally live in houses called Yurts, which is a type of tent covered in animal skins. Some of the pastimes of their culture include horseback riding, Khuresh, a form of wrestling, and livestock breeding.

They are known for cultivating reindeer, yaks, and camels (Leighton, 2000).

Through their nomadic culture, they developed an art known as Tuvan vocal music, or “throat singing.” However, this is a unique art that should not be put under the umbrella of similar cultural techniques around the globe. That is why it is referred to as Tuvan vocal music rather than “throat singing.” Many of the narrators that were interviewed also stated this very passionately within their interviews. The development of this art came from the mimicking of sounds heard within nature such as a bird’s song, a thunderstorm, rushing water, or just the sound of wind rushing through the mountains. There are three main styles of Tuvan vocal music. The first is known as Khoomei, or resting in the low to mid-range of the voice. This is the most popular style of this art form due to where it rests within the vocal range. The sound normally produced by this style is very drone-like and causes two or three harmonics to be produced. The second style is called Sygyt, which uses the midrange to great almost flute and whistle-like harmonics. This style is said to mimic bird songs and the breezes of summer. Then, there’s Kargyraa, which uses a deeper almost growling sound. There are two types of Kargyraa, known as Dag and Xovu. Dag refers to the mountains and is the lower type, while Xovu refers to the step and is the higher type (Leighton, 2000).

When studying this on a spectrograph, there was a noticeable difference between the sound waves of a modal singing voice and that of a “throat singer” when sung in their own respective styles. A large difference was that the pulse was much more shallow and there was a decrease in sound flow in the voice as someone was “throat singing.” This means that when someone is performing this, they

causing their voice to react in a completely different way on an extreme harmonic level (Lindestad, 2001).

Main Themes

In a traditional sense, Tuvans would not be taught this way of vocalizing through direct instruction, but rather they would listen to their family members perform it and learn to mimic them as anyone would learn to speak or whistle. The act of doing something like Tuvan vocal music seems so exotic to us and seems so mysterious, but in reality, it can be a skill taught and learned as any other art is. This style of singing should be seen as what it is, a truly unique art form, and it should be respected as such, along with the Tuvan performers that have cultivated it.

Tuvan vocal music is deeply rooted within the culture of Tuva. As mentioned prior, people learned these different styles to mimic the sounds of nature around them. The songs written and performed from Tuva deal with a lot of pastimes within Tuvan culture, horseback riding, farming, etc. All of this has to do with the art performed within this republic. This art can only be truly understood for what it is when one goes to Tuva and experiences the nature, culture, and people. That’s not saying that Tuva is this magical place with this overarching ancient, mystical feel, it has its own problems like anywhere else in the world. But, from the oral histories that I conducted, many of the overarching themes pointed to the only way you can truly understand this art form is by going to Tuva. Living and breathing the nature and the culture around will give you the best perspective of the music that comes from here.

A few of the narrators I interviewed, such as Guillem Codern, Damon Postle, and Mikko Heikenpökl, teach lessons on this art form. It is possible to be taught this, although, the overarching starting point of diving into this is simply listening to the music that has been produced and mimic from there.

However, like any muscle, one needs to build strength when learning Tuvan vocal music. When mimicking this starts to feel painful, that's when someone should immediately stop for the day. The goal is not to strain the focal folds, but rather, to strengthen them. Another common issue that starts to unfold if the art is overly performed is high blood pressure and heart problems. Since there is so much strain being put on the body through pressure, someone who is learning this needs to constantly keep their body and throat relaxed. This can be said for anyone, even the most experienced artists of these styles.

Conclusion

Overall, This art should be respected for what it truly is, a distinguished and unique way of singing. Learning this is something that could positively affect a person, but it should be done in a vocally healthy manner, it'll take time, so the voice needs to be relaxed at all times. All in all, this craft has a very deep connection with the culture it stems from. The best way to really be taught this and to learn it is to simply listen and mimic; similar to how a child learns to speak or whistle from their parents.

References

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