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BAKU IN THE MEMORIES AND WORKS OF MUSICIANS AND MEN OF LETTERS

Abstract

Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, left its trace in the works and memories of a number of the outstanding people of the XIXth and XXth centuries, such as French writer Alexandre Dumas, father, Russian artist Grigoriy Gagarin, composer Pyotr Tchaikovsky, poet Sergey Yesenin, etc. The latter, besides the other works inspired by his several visits to Baku, wrote the poem Farewell, Baku! (1925). The author of the present article provides, for the first time, its English poetic translation.

Key words: *Baku, literature, musicians, Khurshudbanu Natavan, A.Dumas, S.Yesenin, memories, P. Tchaikovsky, Caucasus, Azerbaijani traditional musical instruments.*

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Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, has been visited by many outstanding figures of music, literature and fine arts. Some of them just visited this city, while others lived and worked here. Among those who visited Baku in the XIXth century were French writer Alexandre Dumas, père; Russian artist count Grigoriy Gagarin, and composer Pyotr Ilyich **Tchaikovsky**. These visits were recounted in their memoirs (Dumas), works (Gagarin), and letters (Tchaikovsky).

Dumas spent three months in 1858 in the Caucasus. During his travel to Azerbaijan, in November 1858, Dumas visited the Azerbaijani cities of Guba, Baku, Shamakha, and Nukha (modern Sheki). He saw many historical, cultural and fascinating places: the Caucasian Wall in Derbent, the Fire Temple, Bakinian Khans' Palace, Fatima's Mosque, the sea fires in Baku, and the Khans' Palace in Nukha. In Shamakha Dumas saw the famous Shamakha dancers (bayaderes).

In Baku, the writer met poetess Khurshudbanu Natavan, one of the most educated and talented Azerbaijani women of the XIXth century. Dumas was fascinated by the beauty of Azerbaijan, its rich culture and hospitality. He described them in his travel book, *A Journey to the Caucasus*. In April 1959 three volumes of his impressions of his Caucasian voyage were published in Paris. Being invited by the manager of one of the Baku quarters, Dumas became acquainted there with the wife of Mekhtigulu Khan, the last khan of Karabakh, her daughter and the daughter's husband.

“The Mother was about 40 years old, and the daughter about 20. They both were in traditional clothes. The daughter was charming in her dress, although it was more rich, than graceful... Prince Hasay Uzmiyev, a handsome, serious man of 35, spoke French as a real Parisian. He was in an excellent black suit, embroidered with gold, and a pointed cap. At his side he had the dagger with a handle of ivory hanging in a gilded sheath ... I admit that I shuddered, having heard so pure and correct French pronunciation” [1, p.243].

Dumas described in details his acquaintance with local peculiarities:

“...When the dinner was finished, our crews were ready. We were going to look at the well-known fires of Baku. The fires of Baku are world renowned, but naturally less to the French, the people traveling less than others. The well-known temple Ateshgyakh, where the eternal flares fire, is twenty six versts from Baku. This eternal flame is supported by crude oil. ... Many points of the earth generate oil, but in such abundance it exists only in Baku and its neighboring regions. Everywhere around the city, on the coast of the Caspian Sea, wells are dug from three to twenty metres in depth. One hundred of these wells emit black oil, fifteen – white oil. This oil goes to Persia, to Tiflis and to Astrakhan.

If you look at the map of the Caspian Sea and mark out a straight line along a parallel of Baku to the opposite coast, you will find near the coast Cheleken island, or Oil Island, settled by the nomad tribes of the Turkmen. On the opposite side of the sea, the peninsula Apsheron which is situated on the same line, is rich with a large number of oil

sources. Near the Apsheron in the sea, forming a channel with it, is the Sacred Island, called so by the guerbes or Parsis, because it is also rich with gas and oil.

...Zoroastr is the founder, or, more precisely, the transformer of the Parsi religion. He was born in Midia, or Atropatena, or what is now Azerbaijan presumably, during the reign of Gishtasp, father of Darius I. ... We went to see these people in their sacred place – the fire temple Ateshgah. ... When the ritual was over, we began to watch the wells outside. The deepest of them is about sixty feet deep”... [1, p.244-245].

Dumas wrote, that on the eve of his departure from France he had been given a revolver, which he presented to prince Hasay Uzmiyev:

“After an hour I received a short message from him, written in perfect French, with no mistakes. This is its text: ‘Monsignor, you possess too beautiful weapons, which does not permit me to add something to your collection. But here are a purse and two arkhaluks (pieces of Azerbaijani traditional costume – A.B.), which the princess asks you to accept. The purse was embroidered by the princess” [1, p.250].

History tells us that Natavan and Dumas played chess and she won. As a sign of respect to her wit, beauty and talent, Dumas presented her with a mother-of-pearl chess set, brought from Paris, and a small bust of Napoleon.

In Shamakha Dumas was invited to dinner with the bayaderes. The bayaderes were still famous in the Caucasus. Many advised Dumas not to forget to see their art in Shamakha.

“The bayaderes were the remainings of the khan’s reign. They were court dancers. Unfortunately, as the Parsis disappeared, so did the bayaderes – only three of them (two women and one boy) existed by that time [1, p.280]. ... We entered the hall, decorated in the Eastern style. It is difficult to describe its simple, but rich decorations. All the guests were sitting on satin pillows with golden flowers, covered with tulle cases, which gave a tenderness to the extremely bright colors. Near the huge window there were sitting three dancers and five musicians.... The orchestra consisted of a drum on iron legs like a gigantic egg cut in half, a tambourine, which has similarities to ours; a flute, similar to the ancient tibicina; a mandolin with metal strings, which is played with a plectrum, and finally, a chonguri on an iron leg. Its neck was being moved by the

musician's left hand, so that the musical instrument itself was moving with its strings along the bow, and not vice versa..." [1, p.283].

It is remarkable, that not being a musician, Dumas described musical instruments and even the way of playing the last one very precisely, although he called it mistakenly a *chonguri*, which is not bowed, but a plucked musical instrument in Georgia, where Dumas also traveled during his visit to the Caucasus. The above-described instrument is known in Azerbaijan as a *chagane*, and is depicted, together with the other musical instruments, on the *The Shamakha Bayaderes*, the work by Grigoriy Gagarin, who had visited Azerbaijan a decade before Alexandre Dumas – in 1847. Dumas noted the tiny but very special peculiarity - the slight turning movements of the instrument towards the bow, what is different from the way of playing the cello, where the bow moves around the neck.

As Dumas wrote, Eastern dance was similar everywhere, and he had seen it in Algeria, Tunis, and Tripoli, but the dance of the gorgeous Nisa was distinct with her perfect movements [1, p.284].

Dr. Aygun Eyubova notes, that although Dumas communicated with the Azerbaijani through the interpreter and received information presented to him by the representatives of the Russian imperial authorities, he, due to his keen eye, benevolence, open mind and wit, could get an adequate idea about Azerbaijan. Presenting his thoughts through his travel book in Europe, he, unconsciously, became one of Azerbaijan's friends and good will ambassadors there [3, p.24].

Inspired by the story of Dumas's visit to Azerbaijan and his meeting with the prominent poetess Natavan, Azerbaijani composer Vasif Adigezalov incorporated fragments of the meeting of these two representatives of French and Azerbaijani literatures into his opera, *Khan's Daughter Natavan* (2003). Another composer Aqshin Alizade's ballet, *Dumas at the Caucasus* (2000) is dedicated to his visit here, as seen in the title. Also Dumas's visit to Baku found its reflection in the Azerbaijani film, *Haribulbuls* (2006), by Arif Kaziyev. In the autumn of 2012 work on another film about Dumas in Azerbaijan was undertaken by Azerbaijani film makers, with the famous French actor, now a Russian citizen, Gerard Depardieu, in the role of Alexandre Dumas.

Pyotr Tchaikovsky visited Baku in 1887 on his way to Tiflis (Tbilisi). From here he wrote to Nadezhda von Mekh:

"My dear Friend,
...This city, surprisingly for me, has been charming in all the senses, i.e. managed correctly and nice, clean, and at the same time very special, as an Eastern (namely Persian) element

has been dominating there, and therefore you feel as you are somewhere at the opposite side of the Caspian sea. The only trouble is the lack of the green and verdure. Because of permanent drought and stony soil the brilliantly planned Mikhaylov Garden has become a sad view of withered trees and absolutely yellow grass. Swimming is wonderful. The next day I went to see areas where oil is produced and where hundreds of oil wells and fountains throw out hundreds of barrels of oil every minute. This is a grand, though grim spectacle. On the eve of my arrival a huge new gusher began to beat on the land owned by Rothschild...”[2]

In the first half of the XXth century Baku was visited by: the outstanding Russian opera singer **Feodor Chaliapin**; **the father of modern ballet Michel Fokine**, and his wife Vera, a ballerina; one of the greatest pianists of the XXth century, Vladimir Horowitz; the Russian writer and the founder of the [Socialist Realism method, Maxim Gorky](#); the [Russian](#) and [Soviet](#) poet and playwright and one of the foremost representatives of early 20th century [Russian Futurism](#), Vladimir Mayakovsky; one of the most popular Russian poets, Sergei Yesenin; and many more.

Yesenin visited Baku several times, stayed here and wrote his famous series of poems, *Persian Motives*, there. When he departed from Baku in May 1925, he thought that he was deadly ill with tuberculosis and would never return (yet he visited Baku once more in July 1925 together with Sofia Tolstaya, his future and last wife, granddaughter of Leo Tolstoy). Before departing, he wrote the poem *Farewell, Baku*:

[Прощай, Баку! Тебя я не увижу.](#)

Теперь в душе печаль, теперь в душе испуг.
И сердце под рукой теперь больней и ближе,
И чувствую сильней простое слово: друг.

[Прощай, Баку!](#) Синь тюркская, прощай!

Хладееет кровь, ослабевают силы.
Но донесу, как счастье, до могилы
И волны Каспия, и [балаханский май](#).

Прощай, Баку! Прощай, как песнь простая!

В последний раз я друга обниму...
Чтоб голова его, как роза золотая,
Кивала нежно мне в сиреневом дыму.

Май 1925

Farewell, Baku! I'll see you no more
Sorrow and fright are now in my soul.
Beneath my hand, I feel, my heart with pain will roar,
For now I grasp the simple word - "friend"'s role.

Farewell, Baku! Turquoiseness, fare thee well!
My strength has been exhausted, blood grows cold,
But Balakhani May and Caspian waves
I'll keep, as blessings, till the grave foretold.

Farewell, Baku! Simple song, fare thee well!
Let me embrace my friend a final time...
Let his head nod to me farewell,
Through lilac mist, a golden rose of mine.

(translated from Russian by me – A.B.)

Azerbaijani composer Musa Mirzoyev wrote a circle of romances, *Persian Motives*, to the lyrics by Yesenin. The house, where Yesenin stayed in Mardakyan, a Baku suburb, has become The Yesenin Museum, which is a branch of the State Museum of Azerbaijani Literature named after Nizami Ganjavi.

In the middle and the second part of the XXth century Baku was visited by the great composer Dmitry Shostakovich; the outstanding American pianist, who achieved worldwide recognition, Van Cliburn; the noted [Peruvian](#) singer, Yma Sumak; and many others, who came to Baku once, twice or more times.

The greatest cellist of the second half of the XXth century, Mstislav Rostropovich, was born in Baku in 1927 and spent the first five years of his life here. Later he performed concerts there together with Azerbaijani conductor Niyazi. In 1997, he was invited to Baku for the celebration of his 70th birthday by Heydar Aliyev, then President of the Republic of Azerbaijan. From that time till the end of his life M. Rostropovich came to Baku every year to conduct concerts and give master classes. The Rostropovichs Museum was established and opened its doors for visitors in 2001.

Baku streets and museums keep the memory of these famous people and many others, who were representatives of different cultures. In particular, the collections of The State Museum of Musical Culture of Baku include documents (photographs, programmes, posters, letters, manuscripts, autographs) related to a number of the above-mentioned musicians.

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