

Polina DESSIATNITCHENKO

**EXPLORING INTERSECTIONS OF THE HISTORICAL,
MUSICAL, AND POETICAL JOURNEYS OF
AZERBAIJANI MUGHAM**

Polina Dessiatnitchenko is a PhD candidate in Ethnomusicology at the University of Toronto in Canada. Her thesis centers on the improvisatory musical journey of the Azerbaijani mugham dastgah. She is currently taking tar lessons and conducting archival research in Azerbaijan as a W. Garfield Weston Doctoral Fellow.

What would taking a walk through the winding streets of Baku's Old City have been like a century ago? Strolling past the ancient Maiden's Tower and the revered Juma Mosque, suddenly you would have been rooted to the spot, mesmerized by the sounds of music: sounds so powerful and resonant that the houses on the streets would seem to be reverberating in harmony. You would quite certainly have known that this music emanated from the house of Meshedi Suleyman Bey Mansurov (1872-1955), an influential figure in the early-twentieth-century Absheron region and beyond. His dynasty had long been at the center of Baku's intelligentsia, famed as a family of wealthy landlords and philanthropists as well as enthusiastic promoters and lovers of *mugham*: traditional Azerbaijani art music. Indeed, every Bakuvian knew when another *mugham majlis* or "mugham gathering" was taking place at Meshedi Suleyman's abode. Not only were members of the Mansurov dynasty avid supporters of *mugham* but also they were master performers on many traditional Azerbaijani instruments. The *mugham majlises* that they hosted were special gatherings for *mugham* devotees: musicians, poets and poetesses, writers, musicologists, philosophers, scientists, and connoisseurs of this art form. In addition to *mugham* aficionados from Baku, one

would encounter interested visitors from other cities in Azerbaijan and even from neighbouring countries.

Historical accounts of Mansurov's *mugham majlises* (Mansurov and Dadashov 2005) depict them as rather intense sessions filled as much with rigour as with merriment and aesthetic pleasure. For one thing, etiquette demanded that all attendees had to sit in utter silence while listening to *mugham* or poetry. For many musicians a display of breathtaking virtuosity was a must: for example, some players of the *tar* (a long-necked, fretted, waisted lute) would throw away their plectrum and embark on lengthy sections without them; and there are reports of incidents where performers broke off the frets and played the *tar* fretless. Often performances were in the form of competitions: sometimes, vicious fights would take place, and at other times, generous rewards and gifts (such as luxurious ships!) were bestowed. In addition to experiencing the sounds of *mugham*, all the attendees—musicians, musicologists, poets, philosophers, and religious figures—would engage in debates about its history and its relation to similar modal musical systems such as those found in Iran, Turkey, and Central Asia. They would also discuss topics such as the musical structure of certain *mugham* segments and their placement within *mugham dastgah*: the overarching form in which *mugham* is usually presented. In other words, these *majlises* served as “laboratories” for live collaborative research.

The *majlis*'s collective intellectual inquiries, along with performances that were discussed and judged, resulted in the cultivation and propagation of a particular manner of *mugham* performance that can rightfully be identified as a “school”. Although there were other private and more modest *mugham majlises* in the Absheron region, those were scarce by comparison and not nearly as popular as the ones organized by the Mansurov lineage. Most distinguished musicians and poets attended Mansurov's sessions thus confirming this “school” as the musical center of the Absheron area at the time. Other urban centers in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Azerbaijan also hosted similar gatherings for *mugham* lovers: in Shusha, scientist and artist Mir Mohsun Navvab (1833-1918), and in Shemakhi, wealthy landowner Mahmud Aga (1826-1896), held their own *mugham majlises* that also involved heated theoretical discussions, entertaining competitions, and fascinating performances.

While walking around in a bazaar in late-nineteenth century Shemakhi, Alexandre Dumas received an invitation from Mahmud Aga to attend a dinner and witness a musical performance by *bayadères* (female dancers). A vivid description of this musical soirée has been preserved in Dumas's travel journals, offering us a glimpse of the music culture of Shemakhi at the time (Shushinsky 1979: 16).

Upon arrival, Dumas exclaims about the charm of the host's palace, more beautiful than any he had seen from Derbent to Tbilisi! ... "We entered the parlor, designed in absolute Eastern style. Simple but expensive decorations cannot be adequately described on paper! All the guests sat on satin pillows with golden flowers which were covered with laced pillowslips, imbuing these most flamboyant flowers with extraordinary pleasantness and tenderness. In the depth of the room, along the entire length of a large window, sat three female dancers and five musicians.

The music gave a signal. It was comprised of a drum on metal stands, resembling a gigantic egg, cut in half, as well as a tambourine, similar to ours, a flute that looked like ancient tibicina, a mandolin with metal strings, on which one plays with a feather, and finally, a choghur on a metal stand, due to which the choghur moves its strings across the bow, and not the other way around.

All of this creates wild music, not very melodic, but in fact, very original."

A very competitive but friendly spirit prevailed among these three centers of *mugham* in the Absheron, Shirvan, and Qarabakh regions. On the one hand, musicians and scholars were welcomed at musical gatherings in all three localities; yet, on the other hand, each region upheld its own ideas about the history of *mugham* and developed its own idiosyncratic style, choosing to prioritize specific elements of performance practice. So what was peculiar to the kind of *mugham* promoted at the Mansurov *majlises* in Absheron, the kind that would have transfixed and mesmerized were you suddenly to find yourself transported to an enchanting early-twentieth century soirée in Baku's Old City?

Mansurov *mugham majlises* focussed on historical issues related to *mugham*, and many esoteric and ancient components of *mugham* were heard and discussed. Even more so, these musical gatherings in particular sought to illuminate and stress the importance of the relationship between music and poetry in *mugham* (Imrani 2005:14). The proper pronunciation of poetry, correct delivery of its meters in performance, effective choosing of poetry in relation to music, and appropriate instrumental accompaniment to enhance the meaning of the poetry were all principal themes.

Travelling forward in time to 2014, we can no longer revel in the evocative sounds of *mugham* emanating from *majlises* at the home of Meshedi Suleyman. Instead we find ourselves in an age where the grand urban *majlis* tradition has become extinct. In its place, we can now turn on the television and enjoy *mugham* performances in the comfort of our homes, and we can even experience *mugham* performances as far afield as Tokyo or Toronto. Indeed, the art of *mugham* has ascended to the international stage, becoming a globally recognized phenomenon. At present, *mugham* is being preserved and propagated as never before through international festivals,

presentations, and concerts dedicated to this art form. *Mugham* also conquers hearts of listeners who are not native Azerbaijanis and, speaking from experience, its effects can cause one to want to devote much time and energy to its mastery. When I first started to learn *mugham* on the *tar*, one of my teachers warned: “*Mugham* is a path of no return....” It’s true.

Transported into a magical world created by this music, many non-Azerbaijanis who have never heard *mugham* before find themselves listening to concerts in tears of awe and inspiration without having a clue as to the meaning of the words being sung. Throughout the main genre of *mugham*, called *mugham dastgah*, the continuous and varied repetition of a small number of notes dazzles and hypnotizes while launching the listener on a upwardly spiralling journey as the musical patterns progress higher and higher in pitch. This genre is comprised of multiple sections performed by a trio of a singer with instrumentalists on the *tar* and *kemancha* (fretless, spike fiddle), or as an instrumental solo. Musicians weave their musical journeys through the continuous embellishment of a main tone that ascends in each successive section, *shoebe*, towards a climax that usually lies an octave above the *meye* (“tonic” or principal tone of the whole *dastgah*) and features the most intense musical and affective activity. For example, the first main *shoebe* of one prominent *mugham dastgah* called *shur* centers on the note G, which is also the *meye* of the entire *mugham dastgah*. The singer and the instrumentalists perform musical phrases that explore a few particular notes that surround G, and always end these phrases with a cadence on G. Once this main tone is established via these musical sentences, the musicians move onto the next *shoebe* called *shur shahnaz* in which similar imaginative variations take place around the note C above G, C being the main tone of *shur shahnaz*. Afterwards D is accentuated in the following *shoebe* called *bayati turk*, leading to the climactic part of *shur mugham dastgah* called *semayi shams*, whose main tone is G, but this time an octave above the original principal tone G.

So what about the poetry sung in *mugham*, and why would the relationship between poetry and music be of utmost importance in discussions and performances that took place at the Mansurov *majlises*? Perhaps the poetical dimension of *mugham* is just another layer that adds to the subjective experience of performers and listeners, drawing them further into the oceanic depths of *mugham*? Perhaps the poetry used in *mugham* expresses in words what the music does in sounds, and this is why the harmony between them reinforces their mutual effect on the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual processes that enraptured performers and audiences undergo?

The text sung to *mugham* music belongs to a classical poetic genre called *ghazal* which expresses longing, suffering, and pleasure associated with love; but there is a freedom to interpret this love as secular or divine based on knowledge of metaphors and symbols rooted in mysticism.

*Hər lələ-rüxün şəm kimi eşqinə yandım,
Bir ləhzə xəbər tutmadı pervanəliyimdən.*

*Divanəyi eşq olmağa hər kim həvəs etsə,
Əvvəlcə gerək dərslə ala rindanəliyimdən.*

*Because of each tulip-like face, as a candle I burned with love,
Not even for a moment did anyone know that I was a moth.
Whoever has the desire to love with madness,
At first must seek instruction from the Rind path.*

Excerpt from a *ghazal* by Azerbaijani poet Aliagha Vahid (1895-1965)

*Eşq sərgeştəsiyəm, seyli-sirişik içrə yərim,
Bir hübabəm ki, havadan doludur pinəhənim.*

*Bülbüli-gəməzadəyəm, bağü baharım sənsən,
Dəhənü geddi rüxün qöncəvü sərvü səmənim.*

*I am a lovestruck vagrant, my only place is within tears,
I am as a bubble, my garments filled only with the air of love.*

*I am a tortured nightingale, and you are my spring garden,
Your mouth, body, and face are the buds of cypresses in my garden.*

Excerpt from a *ghazal* by Azerbaijani poet Fizuli (1494-1556)

These examples of classical Azerbaijani poetry sung as part of *mugham* performances are essentially expressions of what the Lover feels for the Beloved. On the one hand, these lines could be interpreted as conveying powerful emotions that arise in the instance of love between humans; on the other hand, the presence of dominant symbols of love for the Divine used in Sufism suggests multiple layers of meaning. For instance, the relationship between Sufi and God—understood as that of Lover and Beloved—is portrayed through the moth-candle or nightingale-

flower dyad in which the former experiences incessant, all-encompassing yearning for the latter. There are also direct references to Sufism in *ghazals* such as the mention above by Vahid of “Rind”, which designates a type of Sufi who seeks Truth in pleasure instead of in observance of religious dogmas and societal norms.

Similar to the structure of the music, wherein a core melodic unit made up of several notes is varied continuously through a string of phrases, the lines of *ghazals* offer a series of vivid imagery that dwells on the sole protagonist’s feelings of love. Importantly, the musical accompaniment of the instrumentalists mirrors closely the meters and form of *ghazal* poetry, and therefore the musicians must know very well the meaning of the words used as well as the poetical metres specific to the *ghazal* genre, called *aruz*. As such, even music that sounds “unmetered” is actually highly structured based on intrinsic poetical meters, also pointing to the important connection between poetry and music in *mugham*.

Aruz is an ancient system of prosody that forms the basis of classical Arabic, Turkic, and Persian poetry. Azerbaijani *aruz* meters number eleven main types, each identifying a particular pattern of long (L) and short (S) syllables that structures each line of the *ghazal*. For example, the second excerpt from Fizuli’s *ghazal* has the pattern...

fAilAtun	fAilAtun	fAilAtun	fAilun
L S L L	L S L L	L S L L	L S L

...and so the line scans thus:

<i>Eşq sər-</i>	<i>geş-</i>	<i>tə-</i>	<i>si-</i>	<i>yəm,</i>	<i>sey-</i>	<i>li-</i>	<i>si-</i>	<i>ri-</i>	<i>şik</i>	<i>i-</i>	<i>çrə</i>	<i>yə-</i>	<i>rim,</i>	
L	S	L	L	L	S	L	L	L	S	L	L	L	S	L

Length, ornamentation, stress of each syllable is dependent on the *aruz* meter. In addition, knowledge of *aruz* meters facilitates improvisation because the musician can vary musical fragments correctly in accordance with a particular *aruz* pattern. Many musicians also speak of a particular effect on consciousness that results from proper and continuous employment of *aruz* throughout the *mugham dastgah*, perhaps because it allows one to tap into musical creation within a particular repetitive temporal ordering.

Performances by renowned *tar* player Bahram Mansurov (1911-1985), son of Meshedi Suleyman and doyen of the Mansurov tradition, still retained sections structured with *aruz* meters. At the end of this article I suggest links to videos online in which Bahram Mansurov performs instrumental *shur mugham* and vocal *shur mugham dastgah*.

There are a few musicians today who were disciples of Bahram Mansurov and who continue to transmit his style. Interestingly, they continue to stress the relationship between music

and poetry in *mugham* that would have been such an important topic of discussion at the Mansurov *majlises*. They teach the Mansurov manner of playing, know the secrets of poetical *aruz* meters, meanings within *ghazal* poetry, and proper musical accompaniment throughout the *mugham dastgah*. They transmit knowledge about the link between poetry and music that is necessary to create the journey of *mugham dastgah*: a time-space leading the musicians on an ecstatic flight of the imagination, and enrapturing listeners, whether a century ago in Baku's Old City, or today, on international stages across the globe.

References:

- Imrani, R.G. 2000 Bahram Mansurov. Baku: Elm.
- Mansurov, Eldar and İsmayil Dadaşov
2005 Məşədi Süleyman Bəy Mansurov. Recollections (*Xatirələr*). Baku.
- Shushinsky, F. 1979 Folk Singers and Musicians in Azerbaijan (*Narodny'e Pevcy' I Muzy'kanty' Azerbajjana*). Moscow: Sovetskij Kompozitor.

Suggested viewing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LVKr1rnk5k8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6WSv9xZU1s&list=UUJEteJEkPORqwZh4TdkxED>

[A](#)