

RECORDING REVIEWS

Music of the Golden Sands: Songs and Melodies from Karakalpak Bards. G'ayrat O'temuratov' and Azat Seyilxanov. 2012. Compact Disc. Pan Ethnic Series 2117.

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Frédéric Léotar has contributed an important addition to the body of available commercial recordings of Central Asian music. Karakalpak music can be understood within the broader soundscape of Turkic Central Asian music, and it connects to other Turkic cultures with epic traditions (including Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uzbek and Uygur musics). This recording fills an important gap, since Karakalpak contributions are seldom heard in discussions of Central Asian music, or even in more focused treatment of epic song. The Karakalpak people provide the namesake for the Karakalpak Autonomous Region that is currently part of Uzbekistan. Perhaps because they are not one of the ethnic groups who had a former-Soviet Republic named for them, they are often overlooked in surveys of Central Asia and its music. As a result, Léotar's recording provides an important sonic introduction to one of their musical traditions, specifically *baqshi* (bard) songs and epics performed on the *duwtar* (two-stringed lute). The Karakalpak *duwtar* features metal strings with a somewhat shorter neck (and fewer frets) than its Uzbek/Tajik equivalent (*dutor/dutar*). Its pear-shaped body was formerly made entirely of one piece of

wood, which contrasts with the "ribbed" or pieced-together versions common in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (and which have become standard in other contexts within Karakalpakstan as well).

Léotar's CD presents G'ayrat O'temuratov, who performs solo *duwtar* on the first ten tracks of the album, and Azat Seyilxanov, a self-taught bard who accompanies his voice with the *duwtar*. Although recorded in an "improvised recording studio" at an institute in the regional capital of Nukus, the recording is of remarkably high quality and does an admirable job answering the challenges that recording the *duwtar* presents, challenges that are further complicated when recording a *duwtarist* accompanying himself while singing. Generally the resonance of the instrument is very hard to capture through microphones in field recording settings, and it is especially hard to balance a strident vocal style with the *duwtar's* melodic accompaniment in the same pitch range as the vocals. Léotar's recordings maintain a pleasing and clear balance between *duwtar* and voice in Seyilxanov's tracks, and, even if some of the resonance provided in the recordings of solo *duwtar* is lost, they still present the listener with an excellent sense of the *baqshi* sound.

As Léotar explains in the liner notes, the album is constructed to flow somewhat like a *baqshi* performance, starting with instrumental tunes to warm up and "loosen" the bard's fingers (tracks 1-10), then it proceeds to songs based on poetry by famous poets (tracks 11-14) and culminates with a performance of an epic (track 15). Since the album com-

prises performances by two bards, one of whom does not sing, it is understandable that a larger number of non-vocal pieces appear on the recording. However, this results in listeners only hearing a single track of sung epic with a three-minute excerpt of the *Qirmanda'li*, an epic poem centered around the woman for whom the poem is named. Even with relatively few examples of vocal music, the progression is interesting to hear, and Seyilxanov's voice seems to change and open up in the epic performance itself, when contrasted with the previous four tracks.

Seyilxanov provides five stunning examples of vocal music on the album. Most notable are track 11, "Jaqsiraq" (Better), a song that gives advice about how to live a moral life through metaphors. The *duwtar* provides driving accompaniment that moves with a hitching dotted rhythmic feel, while Seyilxanov's voice soars along with a smooth legato ornamented by vocal pulsations. The excerpt of the *Qirmanda'li* epic is also worthy of attention—the selection is sung from the perspective of a defeated foe, *G'o'ro'g'li*, who has fallen in love with *Qirmanda'li* and recites love poetry expressing his fear of being betrayed by her. It is sung with *duwtar* accompaniment that features rhythmic accents to propel the melody along. Although the vocal phrases in this excerpt seem abbreviated at the start, Seyilxanov's voice shows its true strength in the second half of the track, pushing out impressive extended melismas.

The instrumental pieces performed by O'temuratov provide a survey of various rhythmic techniques. Track 10, "Gu'lzar" (Flower Garden), is especially

interesting, as it has a hitching 7-beat meter that is ornamented with interchanging accents, melisma and grace notes. According to the liner notes, this piece is rarely heard today and O'temuratov resurrected it from archival recordings. Perhaps this is why it includes so many stylistic differences from the other nine tracks he performs on the album.

The condensed liner notes included with the CD are brief but informative and provide an overview of bardic traditions in the region, photos and a description of the *duwtar*, and a biographical account of Seyilxanov that culminates with a description of his non-stop 90-minute singing session that was part of the recording process for the album. They also present short descriptions of each track with translations of the song titles (but not lyrics). The liner notes mention that further information can be found at two websites, one for Léotar's research center (where one can find more information about his work) and one general URL for PAN Records, where full liner notes are supposed to be available. Unfortunately, when accessed, I could find no links to the full liner notes and had to obtain them through other means. There was also no mention of Léotar's work on the opening page of his research center's website and the research summary in .pdf form promised in the liner notes wasn't listed either. Providing more specific, dedicated and stable URLs for each of these would be extremely helpful for interested listeners. The high cost of producing scholarly recordings renders the necessity of condensed liner notes completely understandable, but it is important to also

provide consistent access to online supplements.

The supplementary materials are worth seeking out to fully appreciate Seyilxanov's and O'temuratov's work, since they include the full song texts with English translations and a more thorough discussion of Karakalpak bardic traditions and aesthetic nuances. Léotar's recordings are high quality and present an important entry point into a little-studied area of the Turkic musical world. Avid listeners and scholars of Central Asian music should find the album and its accompanying materials enjoyable and intellectually engaging. 🌟

Notes on pronunciation: the Karakalpak titles and names listed in the liner notes are written in Latin script that seems to follow the conventions of Uzbek Latin script that was adopted throughout the country in 1995. As a result, the sounds of most consonants correspond to their usual pronunciation in English. The two major exceptions are “q,” which is pronounced like a guttural “k” in the back of the throat and “x,” which is pronounced like a raspy “kh,” similar to the “ch” in “loch.” The apostrophe in this script generally implies a slight pause, except for when used after the letters “g” and “o” (g' and o'). “g'” is pronounced like a soft, guttural “g” (sometimes transliterated as “gh”) and “o'” is pronounced between the vowels “o” and “u.” In terms of vowels, “a” sounds “ah” as in the word “car;” “e” sounds “eh” as in the word “bed;” “ı” usually sounds “ih” as in the word “swim,” except when it is accented and becomes a long “ee;” “o” sounds like a flat “oh” as in “plot;” and “u” sounds “oo” as in “you.”