

Asia Society in association with the Aga Khan Music Initiative present

Alim and Fargana Qasimov: Spiritual Music from the World of Islam



Alim and Fargana Qasimov

Photo courtesy of Sebastian Schuyser/Aga Khan Trust for Culture

Featuring: **Alim Qasimov**, vocal and *daf*
Fargana Qasimova, vocal and *daf*
Rafael Asgarov, *balaban*
Rauf Islamov, *kamancha*
Zaki Valiyev, *tar*
Javidan Nabiyev, *naghara*

Friday, March 12, 2010 at 8:00 PM
Pre-performance lecture at 7:00 PM
with ethnomusicologist **Theodore Levin**, Dartmouth College

Program

Pre-Performance Lecture

Lecture: "Alim Qasimov: Innovator in Tradition," by **Theodore Levin**

The lecture will explore some of the many ways in which Azerbaijani master musician Alim Qasimov has linked traditional musical forms and styles with contemporary languages of art.

About the Speaker

Theodore Levin is an Arthur R. Virgin Professor of Music at Dartmouth College and studies music and culture in Central Asia and Siberia. His two books, *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God: Musical Travels in Central Asia (and Queens, New York)* and *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing: Sound, Music, and Nomadism in Tuva and Beyond* are both published by Indiana University Press. As an advocate for music and musicians from other cultures, he has produced recordings, curated concerts and festivals, and contributed to international arts initiatives. During an extended leave from Dartmouth, he served as the first executive director of the Silk Road Project, founded by cellist Yo-Yo Ma. He currently serves as Senior Project Consultant to the Aga Khan Music Initiative in Central Asia, a program of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, and as a chair of the Arts and Culture sub-board of the Soros Foundations' Open Society Institute.



About the program

Short Documentary Film screening: “Alim and Fargana Qasimov: Spiritual Music from Azerbaijan”

Part I: Composed Songs

The first half of the concert draws on the Qasimovs’ rich repertoire of traditional popular music. This repertoire includes songs written by conservatory-trained Azerbaijani composers as well as songs created by *ashiqs*—oral tradition singer-songwriters whose lyrical texts portray, often with wry humor and searing irony, the power of love and the pain of separation.

Mahur Tasnifleri (Songs in *mugham* Mahur)
Composer: Unattributed

Durnalar (Cranes)
Composer: Jahangir Jahangirov (1921-1992)

Part II: Traditional Classical Music of Azerbaijan

Mugham Shur
Music: Traditional, arr. Alim Qasimov
Text: Muhammad Füzüli (1495-1556)

Mugham Shur is one of the seven principal suite forms of Azerbaijani classical music. Each *mugham* suite consists of a conventional sequence of pieces (*shu'be*) that take listeners on a journey through varied musical and emotional terrain. Mugham Shur (from Persian "emotion") has a lyrical, meditative quality tinged with feelings of melancholy. Throughout the suite, contemplative moods interact with sorrowful feelings and moments of intense yearning and distant hopes. The poetic texts are drawn from the works of Füzüli (1495-1556), one of the leading representatives of the *Divan* tradition of Azerbaijani Turkic literature. Although the texts are fixed, melodic elaboration of the text contains a strong improvisational element.

About the Artists

Alim Qasimov and his daughter **Fargana** exemplify the explosive artistic energy that results when a powerful musical model ignites the spark of young talent. “To be a musician, there has to be a fire burning in you,” explained the elder Qasimov. “It’s either there or it isn’t. I’m convinced that if young people have this spark – call it inspiration, call it spiritual fire – they can perform any kind of music. It could be pop, folk, or classical, but whatever it is, they’ll stand out.”

Fargana Qasimova’s talent gravitated naturally toward the music she heard from her father: Azerbaijani classical music, known as *mugham*, and the repertoire of popular bardic songs sung by *ashiqs* -- singer-songwriters who might be considered modern-day troubadours. *Mugham* may be performed in a purely instrumental form, but the performance medium most favored among Azerbaijanis is the voice. Vocalists typically perform the lead role in a trio that also includes *tar* and *kamancha* as well as a frame drum (*daf*) played by the vocalist. This trio style of performance provided the starting point for Alim Qasimov’s innovative treatment of *mugham*.

“It was never our aim to sing *mugham* as a duet in order to reform the tradition,” said Alim Qasimov of the sinuous vocal arrangements he performs with Fargana. “Rather, what we do happens spontaneously. We can sing one way in a rehearsal, and then in a concert, it will turn out completely differently. When I meet with the musicians in my ensemble, there’s an atmosphere that starts to nourish us which comes from beyond our own will, and that’s the source of the unpredictability in our music. It’s almost a feeling of ecstasy that leads to a kind of meditation.”

“*Mugham* is an elite art,” says Alim Qasimov. “It’s for a select group—for people who have some kind of inner spirituality, who have their own inner world. These days ‘elite’ refers to something more commercial than spiritual, but that’s not what I have in mind. An elite person is one who knows how to experience, how to endure, how to feel, how to listen to *mugham* and begin to cry. This ability doesn’t depend on education, upbringing, or on one’s roots. It’s something else. It’s an elite of feeling, an elite of inspiration. I think there will always be an attraction to this music until the end of humanity.”

Alim and Fargana are accompanied by a quartet of young instrumentalists whose formidable skill and talent speak to the vitality of tradition-based music in contemporary Azerbaijan. **Rauf Islamov** (*kamancha*) has performed with Alim Qasimov since 1998. He graduated from Baku Conservatory, a lively crossroads of Eastern and Western musical pedagogy and performance, where he studied *kamancha* with Fahreddin Dadashov. **Rafael Asgarov** (*balaban*) performs a range of popular musical styles as well as classical *mugham* on both *balaban* and clarinet. **Zaki Valiyev** (*tar*) is currently in the second year of his studies at Baku Conservatory, where he is a student of Malik Mansurov, a member of one of Azerbaijan’s most distinguished musical families. **Javidan Nabiye**v is the newest member of the Alim Qasimov Ensemble, and was selected for his great promise as an up-and-coming percussionist. He is currently a first-year student in a music college in Baku.

About the Instruments



Balaban: A cylindrical oboe made from apricot, mulberry, or nut wood played with a large double reed that produces a soft, breathy, and, often, mournful sound.



Daf: Frame drum, also called *qaval*, widely used in Azerbaijani folk music as well as in the classical *mugham*. Fish, goat skin, or nowadays, plastic provides the playing surface. Jingling metal rings are sometimes attached to the inside of the frame.



Kamancha: Spherical spike fiddle with a cylindrical neck fitted with four steel strings. The resonating chamber is traditionally covered with catfish skin. To play different strings, performers turn the instrument left or right on its spike rather than change the angle of the bow. A similar spike fiddle, sometimes fitted with three strings instead of four, is played in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, where it is called *ghijak*.



Naghara: Cylindrical double-sided frame drum held under the arm and played with hands rather than sticks. *Naghara* is typically played at festive celebrations, especially weddings.



Tar: Double-chested plucked lute used in urban music from the Caucasus and Iran. In Azerbaijan, the *tar* is widely considered the national instrument. Iranian and Azeri *tars* are distinguished by number of strings, quantity and position of frets, playing position, and type of plectrum. The skin-like cover of the resonating chamber is traditionally made from the pericardial membrane that englobes a cow heart.

About the Aga Khan Music Initiative

The Aga Khan Music Initiative was launched in 2000 by His Highness the Aga Khan to respond to a critical social need in post-Soviet Central Asia: the lack of resources and knowledge to develop indigenous artistic traditions that validate local identities and cultural heritage while at the same time forging an internationally recognized Central Asian artistic modernity. The Music Initiative identifies and supports outstanding musical talent, cultivates new approaches to musical performance and pedagogy, documents and disseminates the work of leading musical tradition-bearers, and nurtures collaborations among musicians from different parts of Central Eurasia and beyond. In recent years, the Music Initiative's mandate has expanded to embrace South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. The Music Initiative is a program of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, an agency of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). The AKDN is a group of development agencies with mandates that include the environment, health, education, architecture, culture, microfinance, rural development, disaster reduction, the promotion of private-sector enterprise, and the revitalization of historic cities. AKDN agencies are active in over 25 countries around the world and conduct their programs without regard to faith, origin, or gender.

For more information, see <http://www.akdn.org/Music>

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Azerbaijan: Musical Crossroads of Turkic and Iranian Civilizations



Music in Azerbaijan reflects the long history of contact between Turkic and Iranian peoples in Transcaucasia, the region lying south of the Caucasus Mountains between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. In antiquity, the territory of present-day Azerbaijan was part of a succession of Iranian empires—notably the Achaemenian and Sasanian, that was eventually infiltrated and conquered by Turkic and Mongol groups from the east: Ghaznavids, Seljuqs, Ilkhanids, and Timurids. These conquests forged cultural connections among Iran, Transcaucasia, and Central Asia that, notwithstanding periodic ruptures, still resonate strongly in music, literature, philosophy, and art.

During the 16th-18th centuries, control of Transcaucasia passed back and forth between two imperial rivals: the Ottoman Empire, with its capital in Istanbul, and the Safavid Empire, centered in Iran. At the end of the 18th century, the Qajars, an Iranian dynasty of Turkic origin, emerged as rulers of the formerly Safavid lands, but in 1828, the Qajars were forced to cede their northern provinces, including a part of Azerbaijan, to Russia. Parts of these provinces later became the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan, and, following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the independent nation of Azerbaijan. Southern regions of Azerbaijan remained under Qajar control, and today the number of Iranians who speak Azeri (a Turkic language) or identify themselves as ethnically Azeri is thought to be two to three times the population of Azerbaijan itself, currently around eight million.

In traditional Azeri music, Turkic elements are felt most strongly in folksong and epic traditions rooted in the countryside while Iranian influence has shaped urban court music and art song. Musical instruments in Azerbaijan reflect this division: the instrument par excellence of folk musicians is the *saz*, a fretted, long-necked lute that, in a number of variant forms, is also common in Turkey. By contrast, urban musicians tend to favor the *kamancha*, a four-string spike fiddle, and the *tar* – a long-necked lute with a membrane-covered resonating chamber that is regarded as Azerbaijan's national instrument. In the 20th century, the *tar* became popular in Uzbekistan, across the Caspian Sea, where it played an important role in the development of urban popular music (*estrada*). Spike fiddles are also prominent in many styles of traditional music in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, where they are known as *ghijak* or *ghirjak*.

Mugham, the indigenous classical music of Azerbaijan, belongs to a transnational tradition of urban classical or court music that flourished in the great cultural centers of North Africa, the Middle East, West Asia, and Central Asia beginning more than a millennium ago. *Mugham* and its cognate repertoires are all regionally specific, but represent what is at root a common musical language. Azerbaijani *mugham* shares broad features of musical form and structure with the Central Asian art song suites known as *shash maqâm* (six *maqâms*) but is closest in performance style, instrumentation, and modal organization to the Persian classical repertory, *dastgâh*.