Musical Traditions of Tengrianism

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This paper examines the musical tradition, widespread in the giant habitat of the northern hemisphere—from the Urals in the east to the Pacific and even capturing the regions of North America. The author considers music as a reflection of worldview and religion. For this purpose the author uses a method of comparison of a mythological picture of the world and properties of musical language. An important element linking the two areas is vertical. In mythology, this is turning the world on several floors in which the world of people occupies the middle one. At the level of music—it is the vertical of overtone sound row. The initial timbre ideal of this tradition are the sounds of throat singing which are associated with the vertical of the universe and consciousness used as an important formative structure of the World Model. In the article the author considers a materialization of musical consciousness in musical instruments. For this purpose, eight instruments under different names are selected and presented in musical cultures of people. This allows the author to create the card of geographical distribution of tengri consciousness.

Keywords: musical language, vertical of overtone sound row, worldview of Tengry, throat singing

Introduction

Our time is marked by unprecedented population growth and after this—an aggravation balance between human and environment. The ways of solving the problems lie not only in the sphere of scientific technology, but also in the spiritual one—in comprehending the ethnic traditions which contain the centuries-old experience of oneness with nature. This is one of the major reasons of great scientific, cultural, and educational interest in the spiritual content of folk traditions today. One of the world outlook traditions, being an ancient source of modern world religions became the subject of study of the author of this article. The author approached the problem through the research study of music as a language opening the worldview information containing in it.

It was promoted by openings in the field of musicology and psychology of the last decades. In particular, the researches of brain languages done by American neuropsychologist Pribram (1971) who has come to a conclusion that consciousness generally operates with spatial concepts, also the work of the Kazakh musicologist Amanov (1985) who has found a language sign of music—the vertical. He connects psycho-physiology (the vertical structure of the human body), mythology (the vertical structure of the World), acoustics (the vertical structure of the harmonic series—overtones), musicology (the vertical structure of the musical tissue), and organology (the vertical structure of the string instrument). This has allowed considering music as a language on the analytical level, also, in the similar line of work—the research of Russian

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musicologist Matsievsky (2007), who introduced the term “contonation”¹. There are also other researches, among which, the work of the author of this paper, who developed the system of musical analysis (“Sacral-spacial analysis”) (2010), in the scope of which lies also the research of ideological spatial structures with musical essence.

This approach allows examining the whole musical styles and traditions as an expression of worldview that underlies them. One of the directions devoted by the author is to study the ancient musical tradition the worldview of which is fundamentally ecological in nature. It has long been on the periphery of scientific attention², although it’s an integral part of today’s world religions and cultures of many nations.

The Spiritual Tradition of Tengri

In the second half of the 20th century scholars started to talk about a new world religion—Tengrianism, or the worship of the Sky deity Tengri deity, the Cosmic Breath (Tan is sky in Japanese, tjan—in Chinese, *tanirlik*—in Kazakh which is the morning light rising, in the language of inuil it’s aniririk—the dreach, the polar lights of the died children’s owl in the sky). Many scientists believe that Tengrianism is more a worldview than a religion because it covers the entire system of communication between human and nature. In earlier works this religion had been known under other names, such as “Altaic shamanism” or “the cult of ancestor spirits”. Nowadays, we are only beginning to appreciate its significance for the spiritual culture of Eurasia and even beyond.

The historical roots of Tengrianism extend deep into history. The earliest references to Tengri date back to the fourth century B.C.: In ancient Mesopotamia the name of a king would be written with an honorific title, “Dingir” (God) (Oppenheim, 1990). By the 12th-13th century A.D. this form of worship had become a religion in its own right, with its own ontology, cosmology, mythology, and demonology (Tokarev, 2003). Variants of the word “tengri”, meaning “god”, are found in a wide range of Turkic languages, and there have been some hypothesis about its etymology. The Russian researcher of Tengrianism, Bezertinov (2000), conveys a sense of its meaning for Altaic worship by collating the Turkic word “tan” which means “sunrise”, with the ancient Egyptian word “ra” which means “sun”, and the Turkic, Altaic word “yang”, meaning “consciousness”.

Although the epicentre of Tengrianism is thought to have been Altai, original home of the Turkic people, manifestations of this ancient religion are found in the cultural traditions of the peoples inhabiting the area from the Ural mountains in the west to the Pacific in the east. Elements of the worship of Tengri were incorporated into Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, adding a distinctive cultural dimension to these later religions.

Music in Tengrianism as Spiritual Mediation

The role of music as a channel of religious communication has been known from earliest times in the cultures of many peoples. It can be seen in oral lore and mythology, for example in the myth about Orpheus, in the ancient Turkic legend about Qorqyt, and the Kyrgyz legend about Qambar.

What aspects of musical language provide the means for sacred mediation in the Tengrian tradition? The relationship of music with the system of worldviews here lies in the expression of the idea of vertical connection

¹ That is—the holographic-dimensional perception of sounds, in contrast to the linear-sequential in the “intonation”.

² Epicenter and geographically large part of this tradition is in the territory of the former Soviet Union totalitarian ideology that caused the blockade studies.

between different spheres of the universe: The lower sphere of the Earth, the upper sphere of the Sky and the human world in between. The ancient Turkic inscription on the Orkhon-Enisei monument to Kultegin found in northern Mongolia and dating back to the eighth century A.D. draws a picture of the creation of the universe: “When the blue Heaven above and the brown Earth beneath arose, between the twain Mankind arose” (The inscription on a stone stele from grave Kul’-Tegin. Orkhon-Yenisei monuments, ages VII-VIII) (Atabek, 2000, p. 36).

In the Tengrian musical tradition, various musical means convey this idea of a multi-layered organisation of the universe. These include the quality of sound and timbre, texture and form, and a propensity for improvisation and meditation. It is not incidental that in the timbral aesthetics of the peoples who have historically shared the Tengrian system of worldviews, preference is given to acoustically complex timbres and sounds, enriched with harmonics and extra sound effects. The resulting complex sonic structure serves as an analogy of a connection between dense matter and thin ether, body and soul or spirit.

The earliest historical prototype of this sonic structure is overtones of throat-singing. The sound of throat-singing represents a coexistence of the earthly and the heavenly world. Throat-singing is also characterised by imitation of the sounds of nature and animals which also has sacred connections inherent in animistic beliefs. Various forms of throat-singing or singing which highlight the acoustic complexity of sound are found across Central and Inner Asia, mainly in Siberia and Mongolia. A modified form of this singing is also found in the *mugham* tradition of the Caucasus, in Iran and Turkey. A form of singing analogous to throat-singing in Inner Asia is current among the North American Inuits, the aboriginal people, who migrated to the north of America from Asia around the second millenium B.C., and whose culture links them to the peoples of Siberia. All these forms of singing are characterised by prolonged tones embellished with a succession of accents. In throat-singing the production of such accents is achieved by means of palatal vibration.

Musical Instruments of Tengrianism Among the Kazakhs

The Tengrian worldview and its sonic image have also found expression in the sound of musical instruments and instrumental music. Musical instruments represent an interface of material and spiritual culture. The author shall now overview types of musical instrument that can be said to embody the Tengrian worldview. The author shall focus on Kazakh musical instruments, with which the author has the greatest familiarity.

Studies by the European musicologists Werner Bachmann and Slavi Donchev have argued that the *qobyz* (see Figure 1), the two-stringed bowed lute with horsehair strings, is an ancient prototype of the violin (Bachmann, 1969; Mukhambetova, 2002, pp. 513-519). The violin departed considerably from its predecessor, as it expresses a different sound aesthetic where purity of intonation and elimination of extra sound effects are most valued. The *qobyz*, on the contrary, is distinguished by a complex sound amplified by harmonics which are produced by the friction of a horsehair bow drawn across the horsehair strings. The resulting sound can be understood as a sonic representation of the picture of the universe in Tengrianism. The specific complexity of the *qobyz* sound distinguishes this instrument from other modifications of bowed stringed instruments which presumably developed later.

Figure 1. *Qobyz*.

Figure 2. *Sybyzghy*.

The sound aesthetic of the *sybyzghy* (see Figure 2), an open end-blown flute with six holes, is related to that of the *qobyz*. In the case of the *sybyzghy*, the tube serves as an amplifier for overtones from the low vocal drone produced by the performer. The resonating sound of the *sybyzghy* is accompanied by a hissing effect as an extra stream of air is expelled. Flutes of similar construction and sound are current across Central and Inner Asia, e.g., Altaic *shoor*, Tuvan *chuur*, Mongolian *tsuur*, Kyrgyz *choor*, Turkmen *gargy-tuiduk*, and Bashkir *kurai*.

Figure 3. *Shan-qobyz*.

The Kazakh *shan-qobyz* (see Figure 3) is a mouth harp. Instruments of this kind are found in many music cultures of the world. The specific sound of the mouth harp and the method of its sound production whereby the player's mouth becomes a resonating chamber for the creation of an overtone sound structure, have their origins in the shamanic, Tengrian tradition. Similar instruments among other peoples of Central and Inner Asia have had sacred connotations (Altaic *khomus*, Tuvan *sheler khomus*, Yakut *khomus*, Kyrgyz *temir ooz komuz* and *jigach ooz komuz*, Bashkir *kubyz*, Turkmen *gopuz*).

Figure 4. *Dombyra*.

On the two-stringed plucked lute, *dombyra* (see Figure 4), the idea of a multi-layered structure of the universe reveals itself not so much in the timbre or sound as such, as in the development of musical material within a composition. Many pieces for the *dombyra*, called *küi*, are structured according to the principle of melodic and modal progression from lower to higher registers with intermittent returns to the lower register. This corresponds to the movement of the *dombyra* player's hand from the upper part of the instrument's neck to the bottom, at its juncture with the soundboard. The Kazakh musicologist Amanov (1985) suggested that this principle of development resembles the trajectory of a shaman's movement in his journeys to the upper world during the healing and divination séances (pp. 39-48). Extra-musical analogies of this sound structure are also reflected in the customary names for the *dombyra* neck sections which correspond to particular register zones (*buyn*). These designations point to an association between the division of the *dombyra* neck, the structure of the human body and that of the universe. Thus, the *dombyra* neck is notionally divided into three main parts: the section close to the soundboard, known as *sagha* (source, foundation) or *ayaq* (leg, end, and bottom); middle section, called *orta* (middle) or *keude* (chest), and the section close to the pegboard, known as *bas* (head, beginning, and top).

Figure 5. *Zhetygen*.

Horizontally held zithers played by plucking or striking the strings with light beaters have been found among various peoples since old times. The zithers of the *zhetygen* (see Figure 5) type are played by plucking strings on the right side of the bridges and stopping them on the left side as they sound (e.g., Khakass *chatkhan*, Mongolian *yatga*, Chinese *zheng*, *guzheng*, Vietnamese *dan tranh*, Korean *kayagum*, Japanese *koto*). In Altai,

the zither has been mainly used to accompany throat-singing. Solo performance on this kind of instrument also reproduces the idea of a multi-layered structure of the universe: In a number of compositions, a low drone is combined with a high-pitched melody. In Chinese, Korean and Japanese performance traditions the zithers are no longer used as an accompaniment to singing, and their construction is different from that of the instruments of the *zhetygen* type, but the instrumental repertoire still depicts images of the natural world. In the history of Korean music the adoption of the zither, *kayagum*, dates, if not to the sixth century, at least to the time of close contacts with Turks in the seventh century and with the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.), which captured areas of Mongolia from the Turks and absorbed steppe nomads into its protectorate.

Figure 6. *Saz-syrnai*.

Saz-syrnai (see Figure 6) is a clay ocarina. Its timbre chimes with the imagery of the Tengrian worldview. In its sound one can feel the chill and mystic sound of the wind singing, and in the lower register it can imitate animal calls and cries, for instance, the howling of the wolf, totem animal among Turks. An early type of whistle was found during the archeological excavation of the ancient city of Otrar near Shymkent in the south of Kazakhstan. This whistle would hardly count as a musical instrument. But an early repertoire for the ocarina among the Chinese and Koreans which dates back to the second century A.D. suggests connections with the music of Turkic nomads. As evidence of this, perhaps, the author came across an early Chinese piece for the *xian* ocarina called “Tending Sheep” (*Su wu*) which tells of a hero-herdsman. It is a monodic piece performed in an improvisatory manner.

Figure 7. *Asatayaq*.

Percussion instruments, such as the frame drum and staff with metal pendants, known among Kazakhs as *asatayaq* (see Figure 7), have been used in shamanic practice both in and beyond Central Asia. In Siberia, Tibet, India, Japan, and Indonesia, the ritual use of these instruments reflects local sacred worldviews. The distinctive properties of the staff type of instrument are its vertical shape and metal pendants attached at the top which have cleansing properties. The practice of ringing bells for purification purposes in ancient Tibet was later adopted in Christianity and spread across the world. As for the Turkic-Mongolian staff of the *asatayaq* type, it was introduced into the military trappings of Chingiz Khan's armies shaped like a pikestaff or mace—a kind of loud-sounding amulet to ward off evil (*tumar*) (see Figure 8). Later, it became adopted in the Russian army. We are familiar with this kind of instrument from Soviet and post-Soviet military parades.

Figure 8. *Tumar*.

Three Geocultural Distribution Zones of Tengrianism in Music

Musical instruments associated with Tengrianism cover a wide geographical area (see Figure 9). It is possible to distinguish three geographical zones, in which they range from instruments of living music practice to museum artefacts: (1) The zone in which the Tengrian tradition is most strongly manifested; (2) The zone where it is manifested less obviously and constantly; and (3) The zone which preserves some historical traces of its influence.

The first zone (marked yellow on the map) stretches from the Caspian Sea to the Pacific, including Siberia, in the south—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tibet, Mongolia, and North China; in the south-east—Korea and Japan; as well as the areas inhabited by Inuits—Alaska, North Canada, and Greenland. In this zone three or more instruments of the types described earlier are current in music practice and are used in the way that corresponds to the Tengrian sound aesthetics and imagery, depicting images of nature, sacred animals, totems of ancestor-spirits.

The second zone (marked green) extends beyond the first zone, to the Caucasus in the west, to the south of Central Asia and North India. Here, three or fewer instruments of the above types are current in performance. The spiritual connotations of their use are less pronounced, and the musical traditions are influenced by more recent religions.

Figure 9. Tengrianism cover a wide geographical area.

Finally, the third zone (marked brown) encompasses cultures which have retained certain historical traces of the Tengrian musical tradition, or preserve the corresponding instruments merely as museum exhibits. This zone includes western Europe (mainly Germany and Italy), the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa, Ukraine, the Carpathian Mountains, North Russian, and to the south—South China, Vietnam and Indonesia.

Further studies may uncover new information about the spiritual and musical tradition of Tengrianism and give us a fuller picture of the distribution of this tradition.

Conclusions

As a result of research of musical language of a large range of people of Asia, as well as North American regions, the author draws a parallel between the worldview and the musical instruments. This allows the author to create the card of geographical distribution of Tengri consciousness.

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