

Asia Society and CEC Arts Link
Present

The Bandistan Ensemble, Music From Central Asia



Thursday, July 14, 7:00 P.M.

Asia Society
725 Park Avenue at 70th Street
New York City



Bandistan Ensemble

Music Leaders: Alibek Kabdurakhmanov, Jakhongir Shukur, Jeremy Thal

Kerez Berikova (Kyrgyzstan), viola, *kyl-kiyak*, *komuz*, metal and wooden jaw harps

Emilbek Ishenbek Uulu (Kyrgyzstan), *komuz*, *kyl-kiyak*

Alibek Kabdurakhmanov (Uzbekistan), *doira*, percussion

Tokzhan Karatai (Kazakhstan), *qyl-qobyz*

Sanjar Nafikov (Uzbekistan), piano, electric keyboard

Aisaana Omorova (Kyrgyzstan), *komuz*, metal and wooden jaw harps

Jakhongir Shukur (Uzbekistan), *tanbur*

Ravshan Tukhtamishev (Uzbekistan), *chang*, *santur*

Lemara Yakubova (Uzbekistan), violin

Askat Zhetigen Uulu (Kyrgyzstan), *komuz*, metal jaw harp

The Bandistan Ensemble is the most recent manifestation of an adventurous two-year project called *Playing Together: Sharing Central Asian Musical Heritage*, which supports training, artistic exchange, and career enhancement for talented young musicians from Central Asia who are seeking links between their own musical heritage and contemporary languages of art. The ensemble's creative search is inspired by one of the universal axioms of artistic avant-gardes: that tradition can serve as an invaluable compass for exploring new forms of artistic consciousness and creativity inspired, but not constrained, by the past. Generously supported by the United States Department of State's Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, *Playing Together* was established and has been directed by CEC ArtsLink in collaboration with the Omnibus Ensemble, a remarkable Tashkent-based collective devoted to performing and promoting contemporary music.

The first phase of *Playing Together* took place in summer 2015, when some twenty young musicians converged on Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan for the Central Asian Contemporary Music Academy, a two-week immersion in improvisational music making and musicianship designed and led by Omnibus co-founders Artyom Kim and Sukhrob Naziov in collaboration with trainers from the United States, Uzbekistan, and India. The academy's participants came from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and played European instruments such as violin, cello, bass, electric piano, and accordion as well as indigenous Central Asian instruments that included *dutar*—a long-necked lute with two gut strings; *qyl-qobyz* and *kyl-kiyak*—two-stringed fiddles whose strings are fabricated from horse hair; Afghan *rubab*, a plucked lute with multiple sympathetic strings; and different kinds of jaw harps (a.k.a. Jew's harps). This trans-Eurasian

instrumentarium was surely unique in the history of world music, for it represented not only a fusion of European and Central Asian instruments, but also a melding of two distinct musical traditions within Central Asia itself: that of settled peoples, or sedentary dwellers, and that of nomadic, or historically nomadic, peoples.

Music and musical instruments among nomads and sedentary dwellers developed along quite different trajectories, and present striking contrasts (for descriptions of Central Asian musical instruments, see the glossary, below). The challenge for *Playing Together* is to bring these two different axes of Central Asian music together with one another as well as with Western musical instruments in ways that make musical sense, however “musical sense” is defined. Doing so involves learning to approach familiar instruments, styles, and repertoires in entirely new ways—something like *shoshin*, or “beginner’s mind,” in Zen Buddhism.

In the Central Asian Contemporary Music Academy, musical compositions emerged from group exercises in improvisation facilitated by a “conductor,” who led the collective not by beating time to propel the performers through a pre-composed musical score, but by drawing on a vocabulary of gestural cues to sculpt an extemporized piece of sound art in real time using a technique known as soundpainting. In soundpainting, musical pitch and rhythm—the sonic elements indicated most precisely by conventional European music notation—are left up to performers while the soundpainter’s hand gestures indicate texture, sonority, dynamics, articulation, and tempo.

In these conditions of group improvisation, musicians trained in the European classical tradition, with its firm rooting in music notation, are at a disadvantage relative to musicians who learned by ear. Indeed, learning music by ear, through oral transmission from teacher to student, or master to disciple, is a well-established convention in Central Asia, both among nomads and sedentary dwellers. Traditionally, a master teacher (*ustod* or *ustat*) would take on apprentices or disciples (*shogird* or *shakirt*), instructing them individually or in small groups. Apprentices memorized songs or instrumental pieces performed by their teacher, rendering them exactly as learned. When apprentices reached a requisite level of mastery, they gained symbolic independence from their teacher—typically acknowledged in a ritualized ceremonial event—and subsequently had the right to perform their own versions of their teacher’s repertoire, or to compose entirely new pieces.

This traditional system of oral transmission, known as *ustod-shogird* (or *ustat-shakirt*), was ruptured by the Soviet Union’s imposition of Western-style music education in Central Asia as part of its campaign of “cultural enlightenment,” whose aim was to bring the “backward” peoples of Central Asia up to the cultural and educational level of Russia. Soviet cultural strategists created music schools and conservatories, altered traditional instruments to conform to the tuning systems and scales of European

instruments, and organized folk orchestras of these altered instruments to perform arrangements of European classical music as well as newly composed repertoires of folksong-based orchestral music.

In the immediate post-Soviet era, the new nations of Central Asia struggled to fill the cultural and economic void left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, international organizations arrived in the region with a broad spectrum of projects and initiatives to document, preserve, and revitalize traditional cultural heritage, support new directions in artistic creativity, and strengthen connections between musicians and artists in Central Asia and the West. CEC ArtsLink has been among the most active international NGOs in this regard, along with the Aga Khan Music Initiative, the Christensen Fund, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, and the Open Society Foundations.

The USA residency program of the Bandistan Ensemble builds on the work begun a year ago in the Central Asian Contemporary Music Academy, in Bishkek, and continued in fall 2015 during a tour that took academy participants to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Like the soundpainting exercises that provided the focus of the academy's work in Bishkek, the music performed this evening should be understood as embodying a process, not a product. This music was conceived, developed, and rehearsed during the week that the group has been together in New York City. It grew out of musical sketches provided by the three workshop leaders and fragments of folk music contributed by the performers. In transforming sketches and fragments into a public performance, however, the Bandistan Ensemble does not aim to produce a fixed musical work. Rather, this evening's program, alive in the moment of performance, will never—can never— be repeated. The performers' success should be measured in their ability to extemporize a composition that has something to say; a composition that fashions an original sonic landscape redolent of Central Asia, yet in a way that is neither literal nor simplistic. A demanding mission, to be sure, for which we should all be grateful to these intrepid young argonauts of Central Asian music.

—Theodore Levin,
Arthur R. Virgin Professor of Music,
Dartmouth College;
Senior Project Consultant, Aga Khan Music
Initiative

Glossary of Musical Instruments

Instruments from historically nomadic cultures:

Choor (also *kurai*, *tsuur*) End-blown flute made from reed or wood with 4 or 5 holes. Under various names and in various sizes, end-blown flutes—e.g., *tsuur* (Mongolian), *chuur* (Tuvan), *sybyzghy* (Kazakh), *kurai* (Bashkir)—are widespread among Inner Asian pastoralists.

Chopo choor: Clay ocarina with 3 to 6 holes found in southern Kyrgyzstan and most commonly played by children. There is evidence that horse herders used ocarinas as signaling instruments in thick forests, where they would often graze their horses at night.

Jaw harp (also *chang kobuz*, *jygach ooz komuz*, *shang qobyz*, *shyn qobyz*, *temir ooz komuz*): Called by a variety of local names, jaw harps belong to the traditional instrumentarium of pastoralists throughout Inner Asia. The specifics of instrument construction and performance styles vary, but jaw harps in Inner Asia are made either from wood or metal, the latter representing an early and sophisticated use of metallurgy by nomadic peoples. A magical or spiritual dimension has been attached to jaw harps in many cultures.

Komuz: Main folk instrument of the Kyrgyz—a 3-stringed long-necked fretless lute, typically made from apricot wood, nut wood, or juniper. Playing techniques include plucking, strumming, and striking strings with the fingernails, as well as the use of stylized hand and arm gestures, which add an additional narrative component to the *komuz*'s typically programmatic repertory.

Kyl-kiyak: Kyrgyz variant of an upright bowl fiddle, with 2 horsehair strings. Kazakhs call an almost identical instrument *qyl-qobyz*. The deck is usually made from the hide of a camel or a cow, and the body is carved from a single piece of wood, typically apricot. The instrument's repertory is programmatic; that is, melodies narrate stories and often imitate different sounds. In the past, the instrument had a strong connection to shamanism and the recitation of oral poetry.

Qyl-qobyz: Two-stringed bowed lute hollowed out from a whole piece of wood, played by Kazakhs and Karakalpaks. Known among Kyrgyz as *kyl-kiyak*.

Sybyzghy: Side-blown or end-blown flute that figures in nomadic musical traditions and can be made from wood, reed, or the wood of mountain bushes as well as from metal.

Instruments from historically settled (sedentary) cultures:

Chang: Trapezoidal zither whose strings are struck with light wooden mallets. The *chang* has ancient roots in Iranian culture, where it is known as *santur*. Struck zithers exist in many cultures under a variety of names, and with different numbers of strings configured in a variety of tuning systems. Well-known examples include the American hammer dulcimer, Hungarian *cimbalom*, and Chinese *yangqin*.

Doira: Frame drum with jingles commonly played by both men and women among sedentary (i.e., non-nomadic) populations in Central Asia.

Tanbur: Long-necked plucked lute with raised frets used in Uzbek-Tajik and Uyghur classical music traditions. The fundamental accompanying instrument for vocal performances of Shashmaqom. One string is plucked, while the others serve as drones.

Biographies of Music Leaders:

Alibek Kabdurakhmanov (Tashkent, Uzbekistan) is a percussionist. He performs with the Uzbek State Conservatory Music Studio Theater and is a percussion concert master at the Uzbek National Symphonic Orchestra. Mr. Kabdurakhmanov participated in the International Summer School of the Contemporary Academic Music in Germany, performed in a concert tour in China, and with the German Radio Symphonic Orchestra. He performed in numerous international music festivals including the World Youth Orchestra in Spain, Euro Orchestra in France, and Drums of the World in Russia. He received the Grand Prix at the international competition Shabyt in Kazakhstan as well as prestigious awards at the EMCY Art for Music Prize in Germany and at other international competitions.

Sukhrob Nazimov is co-founder and general manager of the Omnibus Ensemble and a co-creator of Playing Together. A graduate of the Uzbek State Conservatory of Music, Mr. Nazimov produced The International Black Box festival of Music and Visual Arts, in Tashkent. He is a CEC ArtsLink Global Art Lab 2013 Arts Leadership Fellowship Alumnus and participated in numerous international projects, including the 2009 annual prize award ceremony of the Prince Claus Foundation in the Netherlands, and the Competence Center for cultural managers in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which took place in Germany and Russia, in 2009. Mr. Nazimov is the author of many video art projects. His works “Sun Stroke” (2008); “Goodnight Spring” (2008); “Without Ceremony” (2008); “Submergence” (2008); “Kurultay” (2009); “The Cold Barren Way” (2009); “Die Wande”(2009); and “Ceremony” (2009) were shown at the videoART.uz mini-festival at the Tashkent Museum of Cinema, and were presented in festivals in Russia, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Jakhongir Shukur is a composer, conductor and co-founder of the Omnibus Ensemble. A graduate of the Uzbek State Conservatory of Music, Mr. Shukur participated in masterclasses of Klaus Huber, in Germany, and in workshops and masterclasses given by Steve Reich, Michael Gordon, David Lang and Julia Wolfe at the Bang on a Can Summer Institute in the USA. He conducted the Omnibus Ensemble's Central Asian premiere performances of Paul Hindemith's Chamber Concert No. 1, György Ligeti's Chamber Concert, and Sofia Gubaidulina's Concordanza and Detto II for cello and thirteen instruments. Mr. Shukur's compositions have been performed at numerous international music festivals by Delta Saxophone Quartet (Great Britain), Courage (Germany), Xenia String Quartet (Italy), Continuum (USA), New Juilliard Ensemble (USA), and Musique Nouvelles (Belgium). Mr. Shukur also writes music for theater and cinema.

Jeremy Thal is a horn player, composer, and educator. He studied horn, ethnomusicology, and Chinese at Northwestern University. Mr. Thal is co-founder and artistic director of Found Sound Nation (FSN). With Chris Marianetti, he designed FSN's approach to socially-engaged music creation and led projects in Haiti, Zimbabwe, New Orleans, Mexico, Indonesia, Italy, and Switzerland. He has also served as a lead teaching artist at the Weill Music Institute at Carnegie Hall, running innovative music production workshops with incarcerated youth in New York City. A founder of ZeroBit Music, Mr. Thal composes and produces music for film, theater, websites and video games. As a horn player, he has recorded and toured with Jeff Mangum and The National and leads his own band, Briars of North America.

Playing Together: Sharing Central Asian Musical Heritage is a two-year program of workshops, public events, and collaborations in traditional and contemporary music that brings together young musicians from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan under the leadership of Central Asian, American, and Indian music specialists. The program is fully supported by the United States Department of State's Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. During its two-week visit to the United States, members of the **Bandistan Ensemble** will participate in workshops with leading American musicians and composers; meet with professionals and organizations that support traditional and contemporary music; attend concerts of renowned musicians; and visit museums and cultural organizations in New York and Massachusetts. One of the most important components of the tour is a three-day residency at the Bang on a Can summer program at Mass MoCA. In addition to performing at Asia Society, the Bandistan Ensemble will perform in the Islamic galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and hold a public jam session with American musicians at Pioneer Works, in Brooklyn.

About Performing Arts at Asia Society

Asia Society's Performing Arts Program is an intrinsic component of Asia Society's commitment to sharing vital aspects of Asian culture by placing creative expression at the center of a more comprehensive understanding of culture. Whether it is experimental artists exploring new territory or traditional artists bringing to life the voices of a great legacy, the Performing Arts Program has created a powerful platform for connecting and engaging with Asian culture within a deeper cultural context. We have presented extraordinary artists from renowned names such as Lang Lang, Tan Dun, Abida Parveen, Shen Wei, David Henry Hwang, Sardono and Malavika Sarukkai, to the latest emerging voices. Beginning in 1957, with New York's first performance by Indian maestro Ravi Shankar, the Performing Arts Program has since presented over a thousand performances, including original commissioned work from Asian and Asian-American artists, as well as American artists influenced by Asia, such as Phillip Glass, DJ Spooky and Vijay Iyer. From Indonesian hip-hop to electronica from Shanghai; experimental dance to the deeply moving traditions of India's *Kuttiyatam*, Burmese *Zat Pwe*, we foster artistic exchange and provide creative opportunities for artists. For more information, please visit AsiaSociety.org

CEC ArtsLink promotes international communication and understanding through collaborative, innovative arts projects for mutual benefit. It supports and produces programs that encourage the exchange of visual and performing artists and cultural managers in the United States and 37 countries overseas. As an international organization, CEC ArtsLink believes that the arts are a society's most deliberate and complex means of communication and that the work of artists and arts administrators can help nations overcome long histories of reciprocal distrust, insularity and conflict. CEC ArtsLink was founded in 1962 to enable citizens of the United States and the Soviet Union to accomplish what their governments would not do: open doors, share ideas and build mutual trust. It continues that mission today, using longstanding partnerships to build and broaden citizen diplomacy initiatives—now more urgently needed than ever.

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