

Tengir-Too, Academy of Maqam, Homayun Sakhi
"Music of Central Asia"
(Smithsonian Folkways)

Concert Series 3/18, 3/20 & 3/21 at Columbia University (see details below)

There are a finite number of differences between music in the world; beyond that, endless similarities. The extravagantly gorgeous work on "Music of Central Asia," a new three-CD series, comes from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, but a Westerner can hear himself in it. It doesn't feel very foreign.

The musicians on these discs aren't shepherds but learned folklorists, students of their own formerly nomadic culture. And much of the music isn't entirely ancient. Some is from the 1920's and 30's, the early days of the Soviet occupation of the region, which reshaped its cultures partly by trying to impose European pedagogy. Who knows the extent of the musical cross-pollination that went on between the people of these territories and the rest of the world? And where are the lines between recreating different eras of folkloric music and creating an original modern style?

Vol. 1 , "Tengir-Too: Mountain Music of Kyrgyzstan," prompts these questions the most. It's rooted in the music of Kyrgystan's nomadic culture, but follows some rules of European-style counterpoint. Some of the music uses the ocarina, heard all through Central and South American music. Much of it is played by Tengir-Too, a rigorously balanced ensemble, but that's an innovation: nomads weren't known for playing in bands. On "Kara Ozgoi" (translation: "Impudent One"), the playing of the musician Ruslan Jumabaev on the komuz, a three-stringed fretless lute, prompts lots of possible comparisons: Malian guitar music, or the jazz-and-blues guitarist James Blood Ulmer, or Celtic reels, or the more virtuosic end of bluegrass. In any case, it's intense, pulsating music, centered by drones.

Similarly, consider "Talquin-I-Ushshaq," on Vol. 2 of the series, "Invisible Face of the Beloved." The ensemble is the Academy of Maqam, from Tajikistan; it has three lutelike stringed instruments, a single-frame drum and seven singers. The music is Shashmaqam, the Tajiks' prized classical form. And the drone of the lutes, the repeated riffs of irregular length, the warped feeling of the "limping" rhythm that slides the music between two different tempos — these can connect to devices we know from Indian music, from certain slow, meditative metal bands, from jazz, from rock.

The third volume is narrower, focusing on one musician, the rebab player Homayun Sakhi. But the music on all three discs is beautifully played and recorded, and each album package comes with a well-produced documentary disc on a separate DVD. Most of these musicians will perform in a package tour at the Miller Theater on March 21. Reserve your ticket. BEN RATLIFF