SHAMANISM AND MUSIC IN SIBERIA : DRUM AND SPACE

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Abstract:-

At the root of Siberian shamanic practice is the dungur – the shaman's drum. It is an instrument traditionally played only by shamans. This paper – by a musician who was instructed by shamans and who has played with shamans – examines the dungur, how it is constructed, how it is played, and the role it plays in shamanic practice. The paper also discusses the roll of spirit or spirit-energy in Siberian music.

Paper:-

John Coltrane used to say that every tune ends with Elvin Jones - the drummer in Coltrane's classic quartet which produced some of the most powerful and spiritual music in jazz in the 1960s. Gendos Chamzyryn - whom I play with in the trio K-Space - says that the dungur shaman drum is the basis for shamanic music.

I began my musical career as an aspiring jazz drummer in Dundee, Scotland in the 1960s, and 30-odd years later I found myself studying shamanism in Tuva, Siberia. Unlike my drumming teachers in Scotland and later in London, the shamans never said a word about how to hold the drumstick (the *orba*). They never talked about rhythm, nor tempi and hardly mentioned music at all. The rules and advice about the drum (*dungur*) were not about the playing. They were rules like – never place the dungur on the ground. And advice like – just listen to the drum. And like a lot of this kind of advice, it sounded simple, and obvious when it was given, and insightful when it was put into practice.

There was no doubt however, that the *dungur* was – alongside the *kuzungu* brass mirror – the most important instrument for shamanising. So before considering shamanism and music in Siberia, I want to examine the *dungur*. Initially, I'd like to consider the *dungur* not as a musical instrument. It's not used by shamans as a musical instrument, and shamans do not consider their playing to be musical – it's a spiritual practice. And they are similar in this approach to Tibetan Buddhist monks. I played several tours with different monks, and they all thought of their "music" as spiritual practice, not music.

Shaman drums vary in size and shape. Some are egg-shaped but most are round. Nearly all are single-headed frame drums. Some have "horns" on the shells, wooden bumps like knuckles over which the skin is stretched. In Sakha-Yakutia there are nine sets of these horns, representing the nine skies. In Tuva it's eight, representing points of the compass. Within regions there's a lot of variation, too. In Tuva, some have no horns at all. Also in Tuva, some may have two cross struts inside to allow the drum to be held, but some shamans say it's only correct to have just one upright handle.

Goatskin is most common in Tuva for the head. An average size of *dungur* in Tuva will be about 16 inches. Some shamans however have much larger drums. The head may be painted, either with animal figures or a coloured wash, but most are left natural. The pitch fluctuates widely according to the amount of moisture in the air. Shamans often leave their *dungurs* resting on the slope of a *yurta* facing the sun in the morning to warm up. Or they heat the heads over a fire, especially before doing a *kamlanie* open-air ritual. Inside the drum are bells, and again it's down to individual preference in terms of the number of bells and the size, and the ringing quality.

Then there's the *orba*. It's like a big wooden spoon. The handle might be an inch to an inch and a half thick. And the spoon part, maybe two or three inches wide and four to five inches long. The round surface is covered with fur – wild boar and reindeer deem to be the hardest-wearing. On the concave part of the spoon it's common to see three groups of three metal rings for rattling – sometimes they are made out of old coins.

To know what it all sounds like, you have to be there.

If you sit behind a drum kit and play, it sounds a lot different from the way someone else will hear it even in the front row of an audience. Between six and nine feet out the sound changes. Some frequencies will carry more than others, depending on the acoustics also. The cymbal sounds will merge. The drum overtones will decay more quickly than the cymbals. Within a second, say, you could hear four or more drums being hit and maybe four or five cymbals.

Please take my word for it. It sounds great. Recordings do not do justice to the complexity of the sounds.

When you play a *dungur*, you're nearer still. Maybe 12 inches. Or nearer. I know one shaman, Tepan, who plays with his ear about two or three inches from the drumhead. The sound is spectacular at that distance. There are other things happening too. Because of variations in tension in different parts of the head, and variations of the thickness of the skin, when you are up close, you hear microtonal differences very clearly.

These variations are heard when you play on different parts of the head, but there are also differences generated by pressure and the way the head moves up and down. These differences also generate subtones which the ear cannot hear, but which the body can feel.

I took two of my *dungurs* to a friend who is both a musician and an acoustic architect. He has equipment which can measure subtones, that is, tones below 20 Hz.

One drum with a 60 Hz main frequency, also generated a 10 Hz subtone. The other had a 70 Hz main frequency with an 8.5 Hz subtone. That was with a single hit. When played continuously the drums also generated subtones of 2 Hz and 5 Hz, and 2 Hz and 3 Hz respectively. These subtones will vary according to the tension of the head. Parts of the body resonate with tones from 3 Hz to 100 Hz. Occasionally when playing a *dungur*, you'll feel some of these effects in different parts of your body.

Another interesting fact is that more than most instruments, the *dungur* is highly directional. A trumpet is strongly directional too, with the sound blasting out of the bell. But a *dungur* is simultaneously bi-directional. If you hear the sound as you face the drumhead as it's being played, you'll hear a more toppy sound from the skin, and the rattling of the *orba* will be clearer. From the other side of the *dungur* the sound is more boomy and hollow. The sound of the bells inside the shell will sound different, too.

Shamans tend to move around a lot when they are playing, so a listener will hear a lot of changes in the sound…including a mini-Doppler effect. And if the shaman is singing at the same time, the voice will also change as its vibration plays on the drumhead. It will be reflected in one direction and modified on the inside of the drum.

Some anthropologists have talked about the sound appearing to come from different places – above/below/left/right – as shamans played, suggesting it was some kind of ventriloquism. I do not rule out ventriloquism, although none of the shamans I know practices it. It's likely that many of these perceptions arise from the particular

qualities arising from the construction of the *dungur* and the movement of the shaman.

Once, for a year, I hardly touched my drum kit. I played the *dungur*. I got inside the drum. When you play that closely, the minute variations in sound – and pitch – generated from different parts of the head are magnified. Then there is the variation in sound from the weight of each beat. And there's the rattle from the metal discs on the *orba*. Lots of tiny percussive episodes completely and irregularly out of synch with the beat, and with each other. Of course the *orba* rattles as it goes through the air, before it even lands on the *dungur*. And those percussive episodes are different each time according to how the beater is flicked, or held steady, or is travelling slowly, or quickly. The bells and bits of metal inside the drum add to the one-instrument universe of percussion. I have 13 bells on one of my *dungurs*. Some bells are bigger than others. The range is wide. The way they ring out also varies according to the way the *dungur* is being played by the *orba*. But also according to how it is being moved through the air. The bells will sound even if the *dungur* is not being played. You just need to move it. The response is not even.

When you're up close, the *dungur* is a big instrument. There's a lot going on. It's not just bang-bang-bang.

Before examining how it's used by shamans, it's worth remembering that in most parts of Siberia the shaman drum has not made the cross-over to folk instrument. It's only recently that musicians in Siberia have started using *dungur*-like drums in their music. The point is that there is no real history of *dungurs* being played with folk instruments, and therefore no generalised established style or technique of playing frame drums. Sakha-Yakutia is perhaps an exception.

The *dungur* – sometimes called the shaman's horse – is an instrument designed to be used to help the shaman reach an altered state where he or she can make spiritual connections. The drumming starts. Each shaman has his or her own song - an *algysh* – which is sung over the drumming. The drumming and the *algysh* are highly individual. The *algysh* is a proclamation to spirits – this is me…help me. The drumming becomes a part of the psychic state of the shaman. It is an audible reflection of the unseen psychic state. The whole thing is NOT intended for any human listening outside the shaman. The playing might get louder/quieter; faster/slower; more rhythmic/more non-rhythmic.

Shamans divide up the surface of the drum into regions. Sometimes these regions are determined by patterns on the drum head. A line across the head may indicate an upper-world/lower-world division. A shaman might beat on a certain part of the drum to access a particular spirit-helper. The sound of the drum feeds back into the shaman as a kind of loop indicating where they are psychically at that moment, and also where they might be wanting to go. The shamanic flight is not a mystery tour. The shaman needs to go somewhere to do something in particular and the drum is also a kind of guidance system.

On occasions when shamans might actually be playing together, they will each continue with their own way of playing, in their own time, and space. The way individual shamans play the *dungur* varies greatly. One of my teachers plays in a pronounced arrhythmic style with irregular accents and silences. He plays for a short period of time only. Another plays for much longer – maybe ten minutes or more. His playing is more regular, but it speeds up and slows down. There will occasionally be irregular accents. And I've noticed a style in Kyzyl, Tuva which is much more regular and driving with little variation.

A few shamans who were previously musicians make a strong distinction between shamanising with a *dungur* - and playing music. It is a different activity with a

different purpose. Of course that does not mean that there are aspects of shamanism which cannot inform musical performances.

What if?

What if we applied shamanic rules of performance to musical performance? As I pointed out earlier, my Siberian teachers did not tell me how to play, never mind how to hold the drumstick. The most important lessons for me were to do with freedom and individual freedom. The *dungur* itself leans toward the wayward. You play BANG-BANG-BANG, and you get krr-k-krr-tring-trrring-tonnng-k-k-krrr-BANG-trrrrring-tring-krr etc. The "one" is never precise. The tempo is unstable. The accents apparently haphazard. Of course they're NOT haphazard at all – they're just happening according to another system.

If you translate the way the *dungur* plays to the way musicians can play western instruments collectively, then you can start to imagine how shamanic music might sound. And if you listen to several shamans doing a ritual together, then the possibilities open out further. Now take three musicians, playing at the same time, but in their own time and space and tempo. Individually speeding up or slowing down. Placing accents where they individually feel them, rather than where musical rules might dictate where they should go. What might that sound like?

Tim Hodgkinson and I had that sort of realisation when we came back to Britain having spent much of the summer in Siberia. We went for a walk in the countryside. We listened to the birds – playing in different keys and different tempi. And the drone of the wind in the trees…and the motorway traffic about three miles away…and some people talking unintelligibly far down the hill….and a plane going overhead a long way away.

And to our ears it didn't sound wrong.

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In the early 1990s Tim Hodgkinson and I were sitting in the Moscow kitchen of Russian gypsy singer Valentina Ponomareva. Things were changing in Russia politically, culturally and economically, and changing fast. She asked us: "If we get to be like the West, will we lose our Russian soul?" Russians know what they mean by Russian soul. They also talk about the spiritual quality of Siberia whether they've been there or not. In Siberia people talk about the spirituality of Lake Baikal. All in all, there's a lot of talk about spirituality in everyday exchanges. A lot more that we're accustomed to in the West. This awareness of spirit, its desirability in life, and in musical performance is more apparent in Siberia.

Whenever we toured there as a duo in the early 1990s, it was common for people to talk to us after a performance and talk about how they connected with spirit. Sometimes it was specific. On one occasion, we played a piece where we tried to create a vortex of time. We called it "Time Well", and a woman presented us with a drawing of a vortex/well she made during the concert. In Yakutsk someone commented: "Here we have nine different energy levels and we noticed you going through them. And we noticed that you seemed to have some difficulty with energy level number three, is that right?" And in the Altai, an artist dashed off 20 spirit-drawings during a performance. Near Lake Baikal elderly Buryats put their hands together in prayer as we played, and later a local music instrument-maker explained that what we were doing wasn't some avant-garde music, but the same old spirit-music played on different instruments (saxophone and drum kit).

It seemed perfectly natural that this idea of spirit in music could be a way of connecting with musicians. The Yakutsk audience's nine levels of energy we later discovered corresponded with the shamanic cosmic structure of the Nine Skies which is also a central part of shamanism in Tuva. It opens up the idea of specific spirit or energy within a more general notion of spirituality.

From our very first trip to Siberia in 1990 we wanted to play with local musicians. We came from a background of improvisation. Both individually, and as a duo, we were accustomed to playing a concert completely off the cuff. Our experiences in Siberia however nudged us into finding ways of shaping that improvisation. Playing with local musicians we had to find common ground. There was no point in us trying to play like them, playing their music – because that's what they did well, already. Similarly it was pointless asking them to play like seasoned improvisers who'd spent a couple of decades on improvisation techniques.

Musicians who had come from shamanic cultures – even though their local shamanism was repressed by the soviet system – had an awareness of spirit and energy, and the possibility of connecting with spirit and playing in an energetic way. Indeed the importance of spirit in the indigenous folk musics become more and more apparent.

Throughout the last century a lot of folk music became more and more polished as individuals "learned" to play it from music teachers. Soviet performances presented a highly polished version of folk music. And the opportunity to play – and make money – in the West led a lot of musicians down a path of professionally played highly musical performances.

But even some of those new professionals admit that things were different in the old days. If you ask what was considered top-level folk music, they're likely to talk about some old person, sitting in a *yurta*, playing or singing about the spirit of the taiga, or the mountains of their locality. They'll describe a highly-energised, highly-spiritual performance where the emphasis was on these qualities. And they'll talk about how a line might be cut short, or extended according to how the performer felt at the moment.

When I asked one shaman how I should approach playing music, he replied: "You've got to get past caring. In fact, you've got to get past noticing that you're not caring." What he meant was that I should be so focussed on the spiritual intention, or the energy of what I was playing, to the point that musical considerations were minimal. If you consider a sliding scale of spiritual priority on one side to musical attention on the other, you'd find shamanic performance on the far left, and classical music on the far right. On the left, spirit rules. On the right music rules.

When we began playing with Siberian musicians, we found that focussing on the spirit or energy provided a common ground. The more the musicians were already appreciative of spirit in music, the easier it was to almost instantly create a bond which allowed the creation of a genuinely collaborative new music.

When the performer concentrates on the spiritual aspect of playing it allows the music to become very loose, and in that looseness is spontaneity, originality, freedom. When several musicians are playing within this aesthetic priority the music opens up considerably, the collective accumulated energy dictating the strength and impact of the performance rather than musical considerations.

When we asked Gendos Chamzyryn to contribute to the sleevenotes of the K-Space CD "Going Up" he said: "This music is improvisation, but fundamentally it's shamanic - shamanic not in the sense of ritual, but in the sense of K-Space. In Russian 'k' means towards and '*prostranstva'* would mean 'a space', so 'an opening up', here meaning 'opening connections to the cosmos'.

“This is not folkloric, it’s a completely different style; probably we can say experimental music. Here there are very many sounds, and sound is extremely important.”

“Each person must feel it with the heart, the mind, the head, the body. This is music that is not for itself but for people. That’s how it can be understood.”

“Of course the *dungur* (shaman’s drum) is our root; without it our music couldn’t be. The dungur without fail.”

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In the mid 1990s Tim Hodgkinson and I had an eight-minute encounter with Russian science which was as sharp, clear and impactful as a shamanic experience.

We were on the last part of a long Siberian trip where we had visited Lake Baikal, Tuva and the Altai. In the way that these things can happen, we were stuck in the capital of Siberia, Novosibirsk, our last concert in Omsk having fallen through. Then somebody suggested playing Akademgorodok, the science city set up in the 1950s to keep their top scientific brains out of the hands of American spies.

So after the concert, we asked people if there was anyone who had studied connections between shamanism, art and science. Of course there was, and next morning we were on a bus to the outskirts of town to see akademician Vlail Kaznacheev of the Russian Academy of Medical Sciences (Siberian Division). We were ushered into his laboratory where having heard our very general query, he improvised an hour-long lecture just for us, using blackboard and chalk. Somewhere near the beginning of his talk, he said: "Shamanism is not a religion. It's a special phenomenon of the intellect and spirit of the human being."

His line of argument was like this. In the beginning, humankind communicated with a different field of the brain but there were cosmological changes in the earth's magnetism. This made it difficult for people to continue communicating in this psychic way - except for shamans. His department had conducted experiments where they lowered the background level of magnetism so they could determine if it increases psychic communication. Then the name Nikolai Kozyrev came up.

This deceased Russian astrophysicist believed that time was a form of energy. It has varying degrees of density, and time itself can be altered by the mind. He said: **“**Time is a form of energy. It is to time’s properties that we should look in order to find the source that maintains the phenomenon of life in the world… time links us and all things to the universe.”

At the end of the lecture, Kaznacheev’s assistant, Professor Alexander Trofimov entered and asked if we wanted to see the hypo-magnetic chambers. There was a test there – to see if we could tell which one was actually switched on, and on passing the test we were allowed into Nikolai Kozyrev’s time machine deep in the basement of the building. It is sometimes called Kozyrev’s Mirrors or Kozyrev’s Space.

Our time in K-Space lasted just eight minutes. The effect was like floating in space. We were aware of seeing things – like early childhood flashbacks – and it added up to something very similar to shamans’ descriptions of going up to the Black Sky (one of the Nine Skies). Just before going into K-Space in Akademgorodok, I had been given my first *dungur*. And shortly after coming back from Siberia, Tim and I took that walk in the countryside and came to the conclusion that there was a way of

making music which relied on natural rules of co-existence, as opposed to Western musical rules which deny a lot of co-existence.

My approach to music making changed decisively following my experiences in Siberia. For me it starts with the *dungur* and the expanded possibilities of variation arising from its superficially apparent instability. And it continues to open up with other musicians being equally free in themselves and in the context of a group. That opening up has the capacity to expand and expand further making the playing fresh, different and spontaneous each time.

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KEN HYDER, drums, percussion, voice, has been playing and composing music for over 40 years. In that time he's produced over a couple of dozen albums of original material. He began playing jazz in Dundee, Scotland before moving south to London where he studied under John Stevens – himself a renowned workshop leader and innovator. Hyder formed Talisker and went on to make six albums with this pioneering Celtic jazz group.

In the 1970s he began moving away from jazz and into collaborations with musicians from different musical backgrounds including Irish, South African and South American players. Later, he became interested in exploring spiritual aspects of music with spiritual practitioners like Tibetan and Japanese Buddhist monks, and Siberian shamans.

In 1990 – with Tim Hodgkinson, a musical partner since 1978 – he began the first of several long playing/field-trips to Siberia. They played, performed and recorded with a wide range of musicians, and spent time with shamans and academics in the region. They include musicians Anatoly Kokov, Boris Tolstabakov, Borria Tomilov, Valentina Ponomareva, Sainkho Namtchylak, Bolot Biryshev, Sergei and Marfa Rastarguev, Albert Kouvezin, Alexei Saaya, Gendos Chamzyryn, Chyskyyrai, Radik Dulush; shamans Nicolai Michailov, Yeremi Hagayev, Kunga Tash-Ool Buu, Mongush Kenin-Lopsan, Kara-Ool Doptchun-Ool**,** Makar-Ool**,** Sergei Tumat; Sergei Ondar; Tepan Manzyrykchy; academicians Vlail Kaznacheev and Alexander Trofimov (of the Russian Academy of Medical Scientists - Siberian Branch).

He has conducted improvisation workshops, and also workshops dealing with improvisation and folk musics, and with spirit in music. In London he has worked at the Royal Academy of Music, Community Music and Music Works. Elsewhere he has run several workshops in Russian conservatoires (Moscow, Ekaterinburg, Novosibirsk and Kyzyl); France, Italy, Germany, Holland and Finland.

His current projects include K-Space with Tim Hodgkinson and Gendos Chamzyryn; Hoots and Roots with singer Maggie Nicols; a duo with Vladimir Miller, piano; Raz3 with Hodgkinson and Lu Edmonds; Real-Time with Z'ev and Andy Knight. See: www.hyder.demon.co.uk; myspace.com/kenhyderdrums; http://ken.hyder.googlepages.com/; myspace.com/kspacesiberia; http://www.myspace.com/raz3uk