

# Performing Arts of Asia

Presented by The Seattle Times and the University of Washington Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies outreach centers in partnership with the UW World Series and the UW Ethnic Cultural Center & Theater. For more information please visit online at [jsis.washington.edu/eacenter/exploringasia](http://jsis.washington.edu/eacenter/exploringasia).

**3** Every Wednesday, our in-paper series **Performing Arts of Asia** focuses on one style of performance art in a specific region of Asia, exploring the cultural context that continues to shape it. A complement to the *Exploring Asia: Performing Arts* project, our series runs through March 5.

## The Songs and Sounds of Tuva

by Stefan Kamola, M.A., University of Washington

In August of 2001, I began taking singing lessons from a 72-year-old man named Fedor Tau. I was 22 and had just finished my college degree in Greek and Latin literature. I had come to Tuva — a small republic in southern Siberia — to learn throat singing, a technique that allows a singer to sing as many as four notes at the same time. Since he didn't speak English and I hadn't started learning Tuvan, our first lesson was just a demonstration of the styles Tau expected me to learn. First he sang "kargyraa" (car-grr-ra), a gentle rumbling overlaid with a high, soft melody like the wind blowing over open fields. Then he switched to "sygyt" (su-guht), hiding his normal voice behind a pure whistling sound, like when you rub your finger over the edge of a wine glass. These, along with the soft, airy style of "höömei" (heu-mei), are the main styles of Tuvan throat singing. Tau's final style really amazed me: Pursing his lips and flaring his nostrils, he began singing "borbangnadyr" (bore-bong-nodr), a rhythmic, rolling sound that reminded me of a running horse or the flow of a large river.

It is hard to describe Tuvan throat singing without comparing it to wind, water, birdsong or animal calls. For centuries, the Tuvan people have lived as nomads on the great grasslands of Central Asia. While herding sheep and horses, the Tuvans became very skilled at recognizing and imitating the sounds of these animals and the environment. Their music, and especially throat singing, reflects this awareness of sound. In the past, young Tuvans learned from master singers and experimented on their own while herding or

hunting. Each singer developed a personal style, reflecting the environment and the range of his or her voice. About 75 years ago, Soviet musicologists made the first recordings of throat singing. Those early recordings, including some by Fedor Tau's teacher, demonstrate a wide range of personal styles, from deep, growling kargyraa to flute-like sygyt, and höömei so soft that it is almost impossible to hear.

Beginning in the 1970s and '80s, throat singers in Tuva began to sing in groups and perform at concerts, and the art of throat singing changed. The great singer Hunashtaar-ool Oorzhak opened a school to teach throat singing to children in the city. Instead of imitating the sounds of sheep and wind while herding, these students learned certain styles and songs to perform with other singers. Today, young throat singers in Tuva go to school to learn math and history as well as music; throat singing has become part of everyday city life.

By the time I left Tuva, I had met many singers, young and old. One of my young friends once told me, referring to my teacher, "Don't listen to Tau, he's an old man and can't sing very strong." After leaving Tuva, I went to France to meet the famous throat singing group Huun-Huur-Tu, who spend more time touring the world than living in Tuva. At dinner after one evening's concert, the group's lead singer, Kaygal-ool Hovalyg, sat across from me and we talked about throat singing. Leaning over the table, Kaygal-ool whispered, "You know who's a good singer? Fedor Tau. Young singers should listen to him." I felt fortunate to have learned



Photo by Andreas Laercher

Members of Tyva Kyzzy, Tuva's first all-women throat singing group, play traditional instruments inside a yurt, the mobile tent used by nomadic families in Central Asia for centuries. For more information, visit [www.tyvakyzy.com](http://www.tyvakyzy.com). Photo courtesy of The Tuva Trader and the UW World Series.

from a master singer and a little sad that my young friends didn't recognize the personal style he developed while herding sheep as a boy.

Like any art form, however, throat singing continues to change to fit modern tastes and technology. Today, many people in Tuva are poor and unemployed. Despite the bad economy and the harsh Siberian climate, throat singing has become a symbol of Tuvan national pride and hope. It is no longer just the music of the lonely shepherd, but a group activity to be shared in concerts and festivals. As Tuvan music changes to fit the modern age, it remains a valuable tool for Tuvans to reflect the world they live in.

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