Tuvan Singers Take Audience on Musical Journey Through Siberia

In the Siberian republic of Tuva, the air is so pure that brilliant, vertical shafts of sunlight come streaming through the clouds at sunrise and sunset. In Tuvan, a Turkic language, the phenomenon is known as "sun-shipper," which means "sun-propeller." Listening to the band of Tuvan throat singers who have taken that name as their own can make you almost hear those rays of sunlight dancing across the expansive steppes.

Huun-Huur-Tu visited the IUB campus in late February on their fourth North American tour. The singers were greeted by Scott Feickert (Inner Asian & Uralic National Resource Center), Larry Clark (Central Eurasian Studies), graduate student Talant Mawkhanuli (Central Eurasian Studies) and Mary Goetze (School of Music) at a reception sponsored by the Department of Central Eurasian Studies, the Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center and the School of Music.

After a short welcoming speech and gift presentation in Tuvan by graduate student Brian Donahoe (Anthropology), Huun-Huur-Tu regaled those at the reception with an unscheduled half-hour performance, in which they displayed their peculiar instruments and astounded the audience with a demonstration of their sometimes eerie, sometimes croaky, and always thrilling vocal gymnastics.

Huun-Huur-Tu's style of singing incorporates a technique known as khoomei, from the Mongolian word for throat. In this type of "throat-singing," a single singer produces two and sometimes three notes at once. The deeper note establishes a droning bassline, while the higher notes, somewhat akin to a flute or a jaw harp, trill and warble hypnotically blended his own dual overtones with the natural harmonics of running water.

Levin claims that the mimetic vocal techniques of Tuvan throat-singing create sonic maps of the physical landscape, somewhat akin to the "song-lines" of the Australian aborigines. "In short, Tuvan music is not abstract, like most Western music, but radically representational, the product of a cult of imitation that ties it to an animistic understanding of the world."

While similar vocal techniques are employed by Tibetan monks and Mongolian herders, only in Tuva has the technique been refined and elevated to the level of a national art. In fact, in addition to Tuva's location at or near the exact geographic center of the Asian continent and the peculiar triangular and diamond-shaped postcard stamps issued in the 1930s when Tuva was an independent nation, throat-singing is Tuva's claim to fame.

After the reception, Levin gave a slide show of Tuva's spectacular, expansive landscape to Mary Goetze's Methods for Teaching Choral Music class. The singers then made voice recordings of newspaper clippings for Larry Clark (Central Eurasian Studies), who is currently writing a Tuvan grammar and is teaching the only formal Tuvan language course in the United States.

In the evening, the vocal ensemble closed out their tour of Bloomington with a mesmerizing two-hour performance at the John Waldron Arts Center, sponsored by the Lotus Festival Concert Series.

— Brian Donahoe
Anthropology