

Applied experiments in collaboration along the Silk Road

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Abstract

This paper considers the nature of work done in performances that seek to “create bridges” across cultures and to highlight shared heritage across political borders. What agendas are privileged, and what forms of representation are entailed? I explore these issues via case studies in musical collaboration along the “Silk Road”, the ancient trade routes brought to life in the contemporary imagination to link cultures from Europe to East Asia. I privilege the perspectives of the various actors involved, arguing that careful attention to the experiences of participants serve to texture our understanding of cultural border-crossings. Music-making, as a form of embodied practice, may serve as a way of deconstructing conventional narratives but it may also serve to uphold established hierarchies. I argue that in cross-border encounters musicians draw on diverse imaginaries – learned aesthetic norms, bodily habitus and imaginative resources – casting their collaborators as musical and social others in their efforts to make sense of what they hear.

Bio

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Imagining the Other: classical or kungfu?

In December 2016, the UK’s Independent newspaper reviewed a series of concerts given in one of London’s prime classical music venues:

It was a bold move for the Wigmore Hall, in conjunction with the Aga Khan Music Initiative, to throw open its doors this year to the music of the Muslim world, and its three-concert series has been a triumphant success. It has vividly demonstrated that the music of the West has no monopoly on sophistication, and definitively knocked on the head the pernicious colonialist fallacy that while the West has classical music, the rest of the world has to make do with ‘folk’ music.¹

¹<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/classical/reviews/the-other-classical-musics-wigmore-hall-review-a7457411.html>.

The concert series was part of a project conceived by music critic Michael Church, and realized in collaboration with the Aga Khan Music Initiative (AKMI). It was intended to promote a newly published edited volume, *The Other Classical Musics* (Church 2015).² The review faithfully relayed Church's aims in producing the book and concert series: this was a beautifully packaged project aimed squarely at the prevailing values and prejudices of the contemporary UK classical music scene. In seeking to elevate certain other musics to the lofty status of western art music, however, it provided a resounding validation of the notion of "classical music" and perceptions of musical otherness.³

The final concert in the series, "New Music From The Ends Of The Silk Route", was performed by the American Chinese virtuoso pipa player Wu Man (veteran of the Silk Road Ensemble discussed below) with the Europe-based jazz ensemble Soriana led by exile Syrian saxophonist and composer Basel Rajoub. The performance was framed in terms of a creative encounter, promising "a repertoire of new compositions, improvisations and arrangements of contemporary music inspired by tradition",⁴ stated aims that already stretched the boundaries of the notion of "other classical musics". The programme was put together under some pressure—a common occurrence in such collaborations given the difficulties of obtaining visas for musicians—after one of the intended participants was unable to travel at the last minute. Perhaps for this reason, the programme consisted mainly of pieces already familiar to individual performers, realized in new arrangements for the group. This is a common solution to the problem of time-scarce collaborations, but one that strains the notion of new creativity born out of collaboration.⁵ Nonetheless, when Simon Broughton, editor of the *Songlines* world music magazine, interviewed Rajoub after the performance, he asked him how he had gone about composing for the Chinese pipa. Rajoub responded:

I couldn't find a way in! I worried about it for ages. I thought, how can I write for a pentatonic instrument, what can I do with only five notes? Then I thought about what united us, and I thought about heroism. I thought about those Hong Kong kungfu movies I used to watch when I was a kid, and then I started to compose. (interview, London, December 2016)

Rajoub is wonderfully off-message here, about as far away from Church's notion of alternative classical musics as one can conceive. He fertilizes his imagination with heroic images of Bruce Lee and the like, their action set to eclectic and supremely cosmopolitan soundtracks which pilfered shamelessly from the lush orchestral sounds of Spaghetti Westerns and the funk and free jazz of 1970s Blaxploitation films,⁶ and mixed them with synthesized pentatonic jingles straight out of nineteenth century orientalist musical theatre.⁷ This is definitely not the kind of thing one would expect to hear at the Wigmore Hall. It perfectly punctures the elitism of the venue and of the project, and yet it is an entirely valid and musically rich way of imagining the Silk Road.

² <http://www.theotherclassicalmusics.org/book.html>.

³ For further discussion of these issues, see Nooshin 2011.

⁴ <https://wigmore-hall.org.uk/whats-on/contemporary-music-from-the-ends-of-the-silk-road-201612021930>.

⁵ Clip from rehearsal posted on FaceBook by Basel Rajoub:

<https://www.facebook.com/basel.rajoub1/videos/547528855457938/>.

⁶ https://www.grindhousedatabase.com/index.php/Martial_Arts_Music_Madness!

⁷ See Scott 1997 for a discussion of the compositional styles of musical orientalism.

What do we mean by the Silk Road? How may we begin to make sense of these brief musical encounters with their multiple agendas and divergent interpretations? In this article I look at the work done in performances that seek to “create bridges” across cultures and to highlight shared heritage across political borders, with particular focus on case studies in musical collaboration along the “Silk Road”, a much-invoked imaginary route used to link music cultures from Europe to East Asia, passing through staging points in the Islamic world. I explore a series of cross-cultural collaboration projects along the Silk Road in which I have engaged either as a performer or as a facilitator. They include the high-profile *Borderlands* collaboration between Chinese pipa player Wu Man and musicians from northwest China and Central Asia produced by AKMI in 2010;⁸ the “Other Classical Musics” series at Wigmore Hall described above; and a series of Silk Road collaborations between Central Asian Uyghur, Uzbek and Turkish musicians based at SOAS, University of London.

The multivalent politics of the Silk Road

Although it points to ancient trade routes, the moniker “Silk Road(s)” or “Silk Route(s)” is relatively recent. It was coined in 1877 by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen, who used the term to describe a specific east-west overland trade route across the region now commonly known as Central Asia, in use during the period between 200BC and 200AD (Waugh 2007: 5). The term was later taken up by scholar-explorers like Sven Hedin, a student of Richthofen’s, and Aurel Stein, a figure vilified in China for his discovery/theft of Buddhist frescos and manuscripts from Dunhuang. These men were popular figures on the early twentieth century European lecture circuit; their adventures were reported in the press, and they were authors of best-selling travelogues. Hedin cemented the romantic use of the term with his 1936 Swedish language book *Sidenvägen*, later translated into English as *The Silk Road* (Hedin 1938).

From its early specific and limited usage, the concept expanded to encompass broad-brush historical narratives of trade and cultural contact across Asia and Europe: it might reference the pottery from Provence placed on the tables of rich Persians, the Indian spices that flavoured Roman cuisine, the Chinese silks that clothed fashionable Roman women, or the possible ancestry of the modern Chinese pipa in the ancient Persian barbat. Links through trade were supplemented by stories of other connections. Through Alexander’s campaigns in Asia, the forms of Greek sculpture were introduced into Buddhist art. Religion—both Christianity and Islam—philosophy and science spread along the “silk roads”, as did destruction and disease, from the violence of the Mongol conquests to the Black Death, which decimated Europe’s population but also led indirectly to the cultural flowering of the European Renaissance. All this, and much more, is rehearsed in Peter Frankopan’s global history *The Silk Roads* (2015). As with most appropriations of the term, Frankopan’s history does particular political work. While Richthofen, Hedin and Stein were engaged in late nineteenth-century colonialist projects of mapping the world, Frankopan writes against the Eurocentrism still prevalent in contemporary English language histories. The impossible geographical breadth and historical depth that the Silk Road has achieved in the popular

⁸ <http://www.folkways.si.edu/wu-man-and-master-musicians-from-the-silk-route/music-of-central-asia-vol10-borderlands/world/album/smithsonian>.

imagination makes it a hollow and resonant signifier, easily adapted to new projects and new meanings.

The modern discipline of “Silk Road Studies” refers to geopolitical and security studies of trans-Asian flows of energy, transport links and development projects, ethnic tensions and social unrest, and the Silk Road has been endlessly invoked in cultural diplomacy initiatives related to these issues. An early example of this was a ground-breaking 1980s Chinese-Japanese collaboration: a 30-part television spectacular born of a 1972 meeting between Japan’s then president Tanaka Kakuei and Chinese premier Zhou Enlai. Intended to reveal how ancient Japan was influenced by the exchange of goods and ideas along the Silk Road, it was described as the most fruitful Sino-Japanese cultural exchange in post-war history.⁹

Music has also played a prominent role in Silk Road diplomacy and commerce. As Theodore Levin, self-confessed “serial trafficker” in contemporary Silk Road music, and advisor on the AKMI projects discussed in this article, notes:

... englobed in legend and hyperbole amplified by metaphor and symbolism and routinely appropriated by high profile cultural, political, and business luminaries to brand initiatives ranging from road building to marketing vodka, “Silk Road music” has emerged as a potent metonym for myriad forms of cross-cultural musical fusion and hybridity. (Levin 2016: 110)

Levin has embraced the commercial and popularising potential of the Silk Road. He worked with Smithsonian Folklife in 2002 to produce “The Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust”: a festival which involved 400 musicians from 25 countries who introduced to some 1.5 million visitors the music, culture and history of regions then most commonly viewed in the US as the source of Islamic terror. Levin’s vision of the Silk Road is firmly grounded in cross-cultural conversations; he even wrote in the liner notes for the festival compilation CD, “It may well have been along the Silk Road that some of the first “world music” jam sessions took place”.¹⁰ Levin was also closely involved with the “Silk Road Project”, led by the French-born Chinese American cellist Yo-Yo Ma, probably the most prominent of the numerous musical Silk Road initiatives in the West. Established in 1998, its stated aim is “to explore how the arts can advance global understanding ... [how] music can bring us together in unexpected ways ... making connections that encourage empathy, trust, and joy”. At the heart of this multi-pronged initiative, which includes education, composition, performance and recording projects, is the Silk Road Ensemble, composed of artists from countries across Asia, whose stated aim is to “model new forms of cultural exchange”:

The artists of the Ensemble draw on the rich tapestry of traditions from around the world that make up our many-layered contemporary identities, weaving together the foreign and familiar to create a new musical language.¹¹

Founded shortly before the turning point in US policy following the 9/11 attack on New York, the Silk Road project is rooted in America’s twentieth century history of global cultural

⁹ http://www.nhk.or.jp/digitalmuseum/nhk50years_en/history/p20/index.html.

¹⁰ <https://folkways.si.edu/the-silk-road-a-musical-caravan/central-asia-islamica-world/music/album/smithsonian>

¹¹ <https://www.silkroadproject.org/about-us>.

diplomacy, but it also represents a conscious attempt to speak against the broad direction of political travel in the twenty-first century.

In the 2010s, as US global ambitions have retrenched, the Silk Road imaginary has come to be dominated by Chinese President Xi Jinping's "One Belt One Road" policy. This grand initiative encompasses plans to create a new network of railways, roads, pipelines, and utility grids reaching across Central and South Asia, and to create the world's largest platform for economic cooperation, including policy, trade and finance, social and cultural cooperation.¹² Langankamp describes the international tours of the spectacular dance show *Rain of Flowers along the Silk Road* – which is pitched as a touching story of peace and friendship between Chinese people and foreign merchants – as “one of the most lucrative assets of Beijing's soft power arsenal” (Langankamp 2014: 83). World leaders attending the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Shanghai in May 2017 were treated to a lavish and spectacular gala music and dance performance titled Millennial Road, which juxtaposed flying apsaras and Beijing opera acrobatics with excerpts from romantic Russian piano concertos and classical ballet.¹³

It is clear, then, that the Silk Road provides a fertile terrain for diverse contemporary sonic imaginations, in projects that are underpinned by particular contexts and political agendas. But musically and politically these Chinese spectacles are very different projects from the Silk Road jam sessions pioneered by Yo-Yo Ma and Ted Levin; they lack the core element of creativity forged in the moment of collaboration across borders. In this article I focus on these collaborative forms of Silk Road musical encounter.

I am of course interested in the political agendas, relationships of power and forms of representation out of which these projects arise, but in this article I am primarily concerned with the experience of the musicians who participate in them. How do musicians respond to the new demands of such projects? How do they imagine their own place on the Silk Road? How do they hear the sounds of social others, and how do they perform the musical connections demanded of them? I approach these musical collaborations as a kind of collaborative ethnography, drawing on my own present experiences of the collaborative process, engaging in detailed discussions with the other participants after the event about what went on in rehearsal and performance, and foregrounding their testimony in my account. In this way, this article does another kind of political work, seeking to disrupt conventional narrative and authority by foregrounding multiple voices and interpretations.

By considering the micro-processes involved in rehearsal, focusing on what happens musically when people who hail from different musical backgrounds are actually trying to play together, and how they make sense of what happens, this research is primarily a study of cultural encounter as performance and embodied experience. Perhaps as a result of the kinds of music that we performed, I have become especially interested in the work done by rhythm, in terms of metre and especially groove. What does our ability to embody particular rhythms—or conversely the sense of alienation we may feel when encountering unfamiliar rhythms—mean in terms of our sense of identity, and how does this impact on our ability to “cross borders” musically speaking?

¹² <http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/china/chinas-one-belt-one-road-will-it-reshape-global-trade>.

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/PeoplesDaily/videos/1534828093235669/>.

In the following sections, I turn to the experience of realising cross-cultural Silk Road collaborations in rehearsal and performance, drawing on a series of case studies to explore specific issues. These projects are particularly interesting because the ways in which they are musically realized do not always relate straightforwardly to the intended message. I consider the kinds of musicians who engage in Silk Road collaborations, their musical and social backgrounds, and the systems of musical knowledge they draw on. How do they imagine the music of the other and what points of convergence or divergence do they notice? What particular ways of listening do they bring to the encounter, and how do they hear difference, or hear connections?

In part, these questions are rooted in the concerns of 1980s and 1990s ethnomusicologists who sought to move the discipline away from the paradigms of “music in (or as) culture” towards a focus on musical experience and the “interpretive moves” (Feld 1984) we make in our encounters with music. In doing so, they questioned the insider-outsider binary, and placed greater emphasis on reflexive and dialogic approaches to ethnography (Rice 1994; Bakan 1998). In his influential monograph, *May It Fill Your Soul*, Timothy Rice writes of the long process of practice and experimentation he underwent to acquire the “gaidar fingers” necessary to perform the complex ornamentation of the Bulgarian bagpipe tradition. Following this breakthrough in embodied performance practice, Rice experiences a transformation in his relationships in the field; poised between insider and outsider he becomes privy to conversations linking fine details of musical style to questions of identity and politics (Rice 1994). Drawing on Ricoeur’s notion of the hermeneutic arc, Rice argues that performers, listeners, and researchers alike come to the musical “text” as interpreters of culture, each with their own pre-understandings of music, and each passing through particular structural explanations of music as sound or behaviour in order to arrive at their own individual interpretation (Rice 2008: 64).

In order to understand the socially-embedded particularities of the interpretive moves made (or the hermeneutic arcs traced) by different actors in the course of cross-cultural collaborations, and the embodied processes that underpin them, I have found it helpful to think of the series of relationships, and the “imaginaries” (Warner 2002: 90) that come into play during rehearsal. Byron Dueck brings this approach productively into the sphere of ethnomusicology, viewing imaginaries as social formations that come into being around the circulation of mass mediated performances and publications:

They come into existence as people perform and publish for unknown audiences, and especially as they acknowledge the previously circulating performances and publications of others – for instance by training their minds and bodies to make music in ways that respond to those previous performances. Imaginaries emerge as performances, broadcasts, publications, and acts of bodily discipline ... (Dueck 2013a: 6).

Imaginaries are always co-present in the rehearsal space of cross-cultural collaborations. They may be conceptualized as a series of relationships maintained by the participants, which might include relationships with notions of tradition; relationships between different styles or repertoires; gendered and ethnic relationships, and relationships between different styles of pedagogy. These various relationships are all played out through the relationships between

the individuals within the room, and they entail questions of competence, authority, and value.

A particular area of interest, both in Dueck's work and in this article, is the hierarchical nature of competing imaginaries. Here I am especially concerned with the relationship between conservatory trained musicians – musically literate, cosmopolitan, and highly networked – and “folk” musicians, inheritors of localized traditions, with limited access to communication technologies, and little experience of travel. The case studies I draw on involve several encounters between musicians who are well versed in dominant musical systems (staff notation, Turkish modal theory) and amateur musicians who are less likely to articulate their theoretical traditions.¹⁴ I consider the hierarchies that form in the encounter between musicians from such diverse backgrounds, asking if such “class” and educational differences are in practice more significant than geographical distance or specific stylistic differences between musical traditions.

The collaborator's tool kit

My first detailed case study is the *Borderlands* CD and DVD production that formed part of a series featuring Central Asian traditions and cross-cultural collaborations, master-minded by Ted Levin for AKMI and released on the Smithsonian Folkways label.¹⁵ It featured the Chinese pipa player Wu Man, alongside Uyghur, Kazakh and Hui Muslim minority musicians from northwest China. Among the group was Abdulla Majnun, my own teacher of the dutar two-stringed plucked lute, and an expert in Uyghur Muqam (Harris 2009). The group met in Beijing for five days' rehearsal, and I was involved in the preparatory work of selecting repertoire for the group to perform. This preparatory work—essential to the success of the kind of highly compressed encounters we were engaged in—was based on the assumption of high levels of connectivity (through email, social media, and the like), the technical wherewithall to exchange audio files, and the musical literacy needed to read transcriptions or scores. Abdulla possessed none of this, and so my role was to mediate between his inherited, embodied practice and the cosmopolitan domain of musical collaborations. It soon became clear that for busy professionals like Wu Man, notation was an essential tool. As much of the repertoire performed by her collaborators was not notated, I volunteered to provide some outline transcriptions on the basis of earlier field recordings. One of these was Abdulla's virtuosic rendition on the dutar of the instrumental piece ‘Shadiana’.¹⁶ The limits of this approach were reached on the first day of rehearsals in Beijing when Wu Man was caught on camera laughingly complaining, “He plays it differently every time!”

¹⁴ See Hugo Zemp's seminal (1979) article on musical theory in the Solomon Islands.

¹⁵ <http://www.folkways.si.edu/wu-man-and-master-musicians-from-the-silk-route/music-of-central-asia-vol10-borderlands/world/album/smithsonian>.

¹⁶ <https://folkways.si.edu/abdulla-majnun-wu-man/shadiana-celebration/central-asia-world/music/track/smithsonian>. Originally played by naghra-sunay drum and shawm bands for religious festivals and shrine festivals, the piece was adapted in the mid-20th century in a virtuoso solo version for rawap plucked lute. According to testimony from Uyghur rural performers (<http://www.soundislamchina.org/?p=1521>), the piece celebrated historical examples of *jihad* (holy war) fought between Muslim and Buddhist kingdoms in the region; in retrospect perhaps not the best repertoire to choose for a collaboration.

Time-sensitive collaborations require everyone to stick to the score. But Abdulla's performance does not work on that basis: my transcription could only capture a one-off realization of his practice, and it could not constrain him to repeat it exactly on demand. In this, of course, he is far from unique. The vast majority of musical traditions possess, to varying degrees, elements of flexibility and variation in performance. John Napier has described this as "a dialogue between the demands of reproduction and distinctiveness, intergenerational continuity and contemporary subjectivity" (2006).¹⁷ The generally unwritten rules governing this dialogue cannot be conveyed by a single transcription or audio recording, but must be absorbed over a period of time. Napier describes the process of learning to accompany a khayal singer on the sarangi bowed lute as a lengthy first stage on the road towards solo performance, in which he first learns how to be a musical servant: doubling the singer's lines with some degree of variation, and filling the gaps whilst the soloist is not singing. Napier acquires competence through a process of regular lessons to communicate the building blocks of individual pieces, transcribing actual performances, and practice. For Wu Man, such in-depth preparation was not feasible, and she resorted to playing a simple drone while Abdulla played the unmetred opening section of the piece, joining him in the melody for the relatively fixed melodic section.

Facilitating the Other

Abdulla was also doing preparatory work, and communicating with me via telephone. He proposed they record a section of Chebiyat Muqam, one of the Uyghur Twelve Muqam suites. In interview it became clear that he was actively looking for ways to facilitate the musical encounter:

In the history of our Muqam you can hear links to other peoples. Some Muqam are closer to other musical systems. Mushawrek, Rak, Chebiyat, these three Muqam sound closer to the Chinese style. They have no semitone intervals, hardly any; they're all whole tones. So, Wu Man is Chinese. Other Muqam, like Chahargah, they all use a sharpened fourth. She couldn't manage that; it's a long way from her national style. (Abdulla Majnun, Beijing 2010)

¹⁷ See also the chapter by David Hughes in Solis (2004), on students of the SOAS Silk and Bamboo ensemble asking 'can we improvise yet?'



Fig. 1. Abdulla Majnun holding Wu Man's pipa for comic effect

Here, like Basel Rajoub in the Wigmore Hall, Abdulla imagines Wu Man as ethnic other, and seeks to adapt himself to a stereotype. Once again the pentatonic scale dominates the imaginary, although the modern pipa's 24 frets are fixed at semitone intervals and fully capable of producing an augmented interval. Wu Man, who has performed complex atonal works by Tan Dun, Philip Glass and Ye Xiaogang, would no doubt be amused at the idea that she couldn't handle a sharpened fourth.¹⁸ In fact, when I later corresponded with Wu Man, it seemed that what Abdulla heard as "closer to the Chinese style", was something that she heard as an exotic and strange "Islamic music style". She, however, was thinking less about mode and more about tone colour:

Since the pipa was introduced to China from Central Asia 2000 years ago, it has developed its own unique musical language ... the most significant difference is the intonation ... When I played with Abdulla, I had to listen to his playing and singing over and over until I got my correct style. Also, I did quite a bit [of] study of pipa tone color. The modern pipa sound is often bright and high-pitched ... [so] I purposely

¹⁸ <http://www.wumanpipa.org/music.html>.

adjusted the pipa sound color to be close to the Islamic music style. (Wu Man, email correspondence, 2010)

The question of tone colour or timbre comes up repeatedly when musicians talk about adapting to new musical repertoires, working with new instruments or encountering new vocal styles. As with questions of “groove” that I discuss below, perceptions of timbre are hard to assimilate into narrative representations of musical practice, but timbre is a powerful index of belonging and otherness. Grant Olwage, for example, in a discussion of race and vocal timbre, recounts an uncomfortable tale of a childhood encounter in apartheid South Africa, and his discomfort at hearing the familiar sounds of Haydn’s *Creation* rendered “different” and “ugly” in a performance by a black choir (Olwage 2004: 205). Exploring the uncomfortable colonial history of attempts to “civilize” black voices, Olwage suggests that we should focus our attention not on the voice itself but rather on the colour of the listening ear (2017).

Listening across the Turkic world: hearing hicaz in Central Asia

My third case study comes from a 2016 collaboration between Turkish and Central Asian Uyghur musicians based at SOAS, University of London. This was a much less high-profile project than the Borderlands initiative, but it had the great advantage that we were all based in London, and could rehearse and develop repertoire together over a period of several months. Our Turkish collaborator was Erdem Ozdemir, an academic and excellent performer on the saz, whose mission to discover the musical links between Turkic cultures had led him to an active interest in Uyghur music. In this mission, he was following a nationalist tradition of literary scholarship in Turkey, which seeks the roots of Turkic literature in Central Asian oral traditions. This was a new envisioning of the Silk Road. Erdem was particularly enthusiastic about the song repertoire from the town of Kashgar, a famous historical “Silk Road” city in the contemporary Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of northwest China. These Kashgar songs sounded familiar to him; he found them easy to learn and easy to remember. This was in part because he heard them as being sung in hicaz makam, a mode familiar to him from modern Turkish practice (with its characteristic interval between a flattened second and sharpened third step of the scale) and he accompanied them accordingly on his saz. This created an unpleasant clash with the Uyghur instruments that—unlike the saz—are not fretted to play quartertones. Erdem was adamant that the standard Uyghur instrumental accompaniment for these songs—using a straightforward augmented interval—was simply wrong. For him, the fixed, chromatic fretting of the Central Asian Uyghur instruments was a deviation from proper modal practice. If they were not properly equipped to play hicaz, then that was evidence of the meddling of twentieth century Communist reformers in a shared (Turkic) historical tradition.



Fig. 2. Listening to Erdem Özdemir playing his bağlama saz

As Owen Wright reminds us, the history of modal theory and practice across the Islamic world is a complex one, and a shared modal profile, or indeed a shared name, does not necessarily prove or disprove any historical links (Wright 1992). Hicaz (hijaz), like most of the significant modes, varies across time and space. The modal core of hijaz—a tetrachord containing a larger than whole tone central interval—appears in the early fourteenth century, and different versions of it—with the second and third steps of the tetrachord variously pitched slightly higher or lower—appear in the subsequent historical record in Safavid, Ottoman, and modern Persian traditions. Wright suggests that the modern Turkish form of hijaz (hicaz) is essentially a nineteenth century development.¹⁹ It is entirely feasible then, that the Kashgar song tradition might partake of the hijaz tradition, but the term itself is not currently used in Uyghur music. The Uyghur performers in our collaboration were impressed with the idea that they were playing hicaz, but not terribly happy to learn that they were “playing it wrong”. For myself, I had often observed the way that Uyghur musicians utilise the space in between those fixed diatonic frets, sliding the finger up and down, using vibrato to enliven the melody on certain pitches, and I suggested we might use this as a bridging mechanism.



¹⁹ Owen Wright: unpublished manuscript ‘Some preliminary notes on *hijāz/hijāzī/hecaz*’.

Figure 3: Excerpt from the Uyghur song *Mirajihan*, disputed pitch (Eb) marked with a mordant, and at first occurrence with a lowered E shown on an ossia staff.

Discussing the collaboration with Erdem after the performance, we agreed on the significance of this aspect of Uyghur melodic style and tonality:

EO: Uyghur and Turkish instruments have some differences in the tuning system, especially in the quartertones. When we start to play together we can feel these differences ...

RH: When we listened to our singer, I think we heard the pitch in different ways. I would hear an E flat, but you would hear it a quartertone higher, and we would argue, and then make her sing again, and actually she was moving around somewhere in between ...

EO: When I listen to Uyghur singing, I hear vibrato, sometimes with very small interval, sometimes very large interval, a semitone or a whole tone ... this gives Uyghur musicians a lot of flexibility in pitch.

Thus, through our different perceptions of pitch, we arrived at some interesting insights into Uyghur melody. Although there is clearly nothing exclusively Turkic about this shared modal heritage, linking this song repertoire into the wider field of hijaz is certainly a valid proposition, given the historical links between the Uyghur region and the wider Islamic world of musical theory and practice. Indeed, Wright speculates that historically the second and third steps of hijaz may well have been essentially unstable pitches, and one might argue that Uyghur contemporary practice, with its preference for shifting pitches, reflects this deeper history of the mode. My point here is not to argue either for or against these links, but to point out that such “discoveries” in the course of musical encounters can be harnessed in the service of particular narratives, and there is a tendency (if musicians are “on-message”) to highlight narratives that suit the political imperatives of the collaboration.

This kind of productive (mis)hearing of mode was also a feature of the much bigger collaboration between Senegalese star singer Youssou N’Dour and Egyptian musician Fathy Salama on the album *Sant Yalla / Egypt*. Pitched both as a response to Western Islamophobia, and as an attempt to bring a vernacular Senegalese Sufism into dialogue with more mainstream Islamic culture, the album brought Youssou N’Dour’s Senegalese praise songs together with an Egyptian orchestral accompaniment. In media interviews, the participants highlighted the unexpected points of commonality discovered through the collaboration. Speaking about one of Youssou N’Dour’s songs, his Egyptian collaborator Fathy Salama commented:

[I]t starts with the scale itself, a scale called bayeti ... which has microtonal intervals ... when I listened to this tune in Dakar for the very first time I said ‘Does he [Youssou] really mean it?’ I asked Youssou and he said he didn’t know what this scale was called but he could sing it perfectly ... A funny thing about [the Egyptians] who recorded this song. They asked ‘Did you teach [Youssou] the scale or is this your melody?’ They were amazed because [bayeti] is a very old oriental scale. (Eyre and Barlow 2004: 3, cited in McLaughlin 2011)

This musical discovery of an “old oriental scale” at the heart of a Senegalese praise song fed into the grand narratives surrounding this high-profile collaboration, and—in a grand leap away from any reasonable history of mode—helped to provide support for the popular (but equally unsubstantiated) theory of a direct relationship between the peoples of Senegal and ancient Egypt; neat work for a microtonal interval.

This process of making sense of musical sound across borders, listening according to our own learned frameworks, and creating new stories about what we hear, may be likened to Hobsbawm’s theorizing of the invention of traditions. Here, however, the imagined histories are not linear narratives of national identity but (equally) invented connections and imaginary routes of encounter and exchange. Just as many scholars have noted music’s power to forge imagined communities through its abstract properties and affective power (Turino 2000; Regev & Seroussi 2004), for the same reasons, music also has the capacity to play a powerful role in naturalizing discourses of connection: different political work is being done, but the processes of invention or imagination are comparable.

Egg-shaped rhythms

My final case study comes from another London-based collaboration, *Sufis on the Silk Road: A Central Asian Reunion*, performed in London 2016.²⁰ This project brought together a group of Europe-based musicians to explore the repertoire and musical styles of two closely-related Central Asian peoples who were designated as the Uzbek and Uyghur nationalities under the Soviet nationality policies of the twentieth century (Roy 2000; Morrison 2017). These two peoples have much in common in terms of shared history, culture and language (arguably Uyghur and Uzbek are two dialects of the same Turkic language), but today this shared heritage is generally disregarded and downplayed in favour of discrete narratives of national identity.

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUUKNHuPURA>.



Fig. 4. Map of Central Asia (selection). University of Texas Libraries.

To be designated a minority nationality under the Soviet Union, or under the People’s Republic of China, entailed an intensive process of nation building: history writing, fixing of national language, creation of national canons of literature, art and music. These national canons, created according to socialist ideals, were largely stripped of their religious connotations. These processes of canon formation cut across the shared regional culture, and they selectively picked from diverse local traditions to create the national opus (Harris 2008; Khalid 2015; Levin 2002). While the Uzbeks achieved independent statehood in 1991 following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Uyghurs have remained a stateless nation, a designated ethnic minority within the People’s Republic of China.

The idea of *Central Asia Reunion* was to do musical work across the former Soviet-Chinese border, highlighting shared musical culture, and working against the grain of twentieth century nationalist ideologies. The programme focused on a particular aspect of the shared tradition: the poetic repertoire of Baba Rahim Mashrab, a major eighteenth century Central Asian mystic poet. The *Diwani-i Mashrab*, a popular collection of ecstatic poetry and tales from oral tradition, chronicles the wanderings of Mashrab as he travelled between Bukhara (in today’s Uzbekistan) and Yarkand (in today’s Xinjiang), urinating on the thrones of kings, defecating in mosques, and delighting in confounding the everyday morality of the time.²¹ In spite of his surprising behaviour, Mashrab is today claimed as a culture hero by both nations, and his lyrics are sung in all sorts of contexts: in the rituals of Sufi groups on both sides of the border, in popular songs, and in professional stage performances of the canonical (Tajik-Uzbek) Shashmaqam and (Uyghur) On Ikki Muqam repertoires (Light 2008; Harris 2017).

²¹ For a detailed discussion and annotated translation, see Papas 2010.

The project, then, was about rediscovering the heritage shared by two closely related peoples across a border drawn barely a hundred years ago. In the event, what it showed was that differences often come more sharply into focus when they are close to home. The project was led by Uyghur singer Rahima Mahmut, whose practice is rooted in the popular and folk song style of northern Xinjiang, and by the Uzbek singer and rubab player Sardor Mirzakhojaev, who was trained in the Uzbek national conservatory. My own involvement was to procure a small amount of financial support from the Association for Central Asian Civilizations & Silk Road Studies, and to play the dutar. We worked together over a period of several months, sharing and producing new arrangements of traditional repertoire based around the poetry of Mashrab. The BBC Uzbek service produced a short radio piece on the concert, which picked up the border-crossing notion of a shared Uyghur-Uzbek heritage. The presenter commented approvingly, “For the audience it was hard to tell who was Uyghur and which was Uzbek. Maybe there is no need to differentiate between these two people”. In his interview, however, our Uzbek collaborator chose to highlight the differences, as he had experienced them, between these two national repertoires:

They say that Uyghur and Uzbek maqam share a lot of history, but the Uzbek style is quite complicated. Myself, I learned the Uyghur style easily, but the Uyghurs needed a bit longer to learn Uzbek pieces ... (Sardor Mirzakhojaev, BBC Uzbek Service, January 2016).

Although framed in terms of ethnic difference, the process of othering that Sardor is engaged in here is actually about a different divide: the gulf between professional and amateur musicians that entails questions of musical skill and training, and learned aesthetics. Sardor, a conservatory trained professional, is expressing some of the frustrations of working with amateur musicians, who were perhaps technically less competent, and who possessed different habits of learning and different aesthetic preferences.

One particular point in rehearsal that highlighted the professional-amateur axis was the realization of a piece originally found in the core repertoire of Sufi sama’ rituals, which has more recently been incorporated into the modern canonical Uyghur Muqam repertoire as Chahargah Meshrep, that is as the concluding Meshrep section of Chahargah Muqam. I unearthed three different recordings of this piece, one recorded by the Xinjiang Muqam Ensemble, one recorded by my dutar teacher, the redoubtable Abdulla Majnun, and a third sourced from a CD produced in Turkey featuring the Uyghur folk singer Erkin Yunusoglu. The latter two versions drew directly on the ritual traditions maintained by Sufi groups in Southern Xinjiang. This was not home territory for any of our musicians, Uyghur or Uzbek. Our singer, Rahima, listening to the Yunusoglu recording for the first time, said with distinct unease, “These are qalandar! They’re beggars! You find them in the south of our region”. Our singer was here working across a gender divide (only male Sufi groups sing this particular repertoire), across an urban-rural divide, thus in some ways also a class divide, and a regional divide.

Our key difficulty in learning this piece was fitting the melody to the metric cycle, which is based on a type of limping rhythm.

men qe len der sha hi men a___ lem mang a wey ran e dur a lem mang a wey ran e dur men qe len der

sha hi men a___ lem mang a wey ran e dur a___ lem mang a wey ran e dur pay_ tekh_____ ti_____

gul khan_____ e or___ dam or dam qe len der khan e dur or___ dam qe len der khan e dur

I am the king of the dervishes, the world is desolate to me
My capital is the house of zikr, my court is the dervish lodge

Fig. 5. Chahargah Muqam, first meshrep, excerpt, performed by the Xinjiang Muqam Ensemble. The extended pause over the first two quavers of each bar denotes a slower beat, roughly equivalent to two quavers in the time of three.

Any attempt to transcribe this rhythm involves the imposition of a constraining framework that belies its flexibility. I have also provided three scans of the different versions of the piece, produced with Transcribe software, and marked with short lines above the read-out where the stronger drum strokes fall in the metric cycle. These scans reveal the uneven “limp” in the cycle, but also the subtle variation between each cycle. The limp is more strongly pronounced in the professionally produced version by the Muqam Ensemble, but it is also highly consistent, possibly fixed by metronome. In contrast, in the “folk” versions by Majnun and Yunusoglu, the limp is less pronounced and also quite variable across cycles:

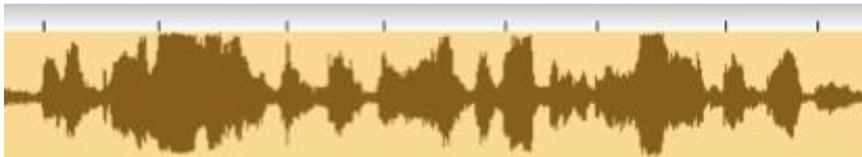


Fig 6a. Chahargah Muqam, first meshrep (excerpt): Erkin Yunusoglu



Fig 6b. Chahargah Muqam, first meshrep (excerpt): Abdulla Majnun

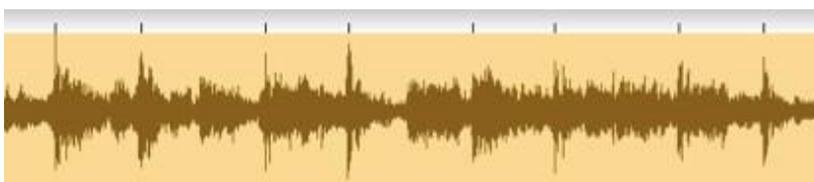


Fig. 6c. Chahargah Muqam, first meshrep (excerpt): Muqam Ensemble

Jean During provides detailed analytical investigation and discussion of these kinds of rhythms in Central Asian traditions (1997). He argues that there is a distinctive category of rhythmic cycles in which we find beats of two, or even three, different lengths within a single cycle; thus they go beyond the additive nature of our usual notion of “limping” or *aksak* rhythms. During proposes the term “ovoid” (egg-shaped rather than circular) rhythmic cycles to describe them. These egg-shaped cycles, which are systematized in the Central Asian *maqam* traditions, are drawn directly from the trance-inducing rhythms of Sufi *sama*’ rituals (Djumaev 2002; Harris 2017). Soviet musicologists understood these metric cycles in scientific but counter-intuitive ways, rendering them by means of hemiola over an underlying seven-beat pulse. Professional musicians on both sides of the border, both Uyghur and Uzbek, have inherited this way of thinking about limping rhythms.

In rehearsal, as we started trying to put this piece together, everything fell apart repeatedly as we failed to come together in a shared beat. Eventually Sardor exclaimed, “I know this rhythm. This is a seven-beat”. He stood up and tried to conduct the group, counting the seven “underlying pulses” aloud, and producing a very negative response from the other musicians in the room. Our singer Rahima, later reflecting on the rehearsal process, commented:

Actually the Chahargah wasn't so difficult, it was just those irregular beats! ... I sang Chahargah before, but the problem was I sang it just naturally, without musicians [instrumental accompaniment], so I didn't have to think about the beats, you know, where to come in. For me, I'm not used to structuring myself, thinking about 1-2-3, 1-2-3-4. I just do it naturally, it all comes natural, I'm used to doing it naturally. (interview, London, February 2016)

Groove across borders

Rahima situates herself as a “natural” singer, as opposed to the intellectualized professionals with their uncomfortable habit of counting the beats. For her, rhythm is something that is learned through absorption and imitation, and felt in performance—although she does not have this kind of vocabulary—as a shared groove. In Charles Keil’s notion of participatory discrepancies, music comes to be meaningful through the sounded, messy negotiations between participants including “getting in the groove” (1987). Keil defines groove as the *feeling* of coordination in performance. Groove is not about keeping to a rigid metrical beat, but rather the feeling of an organic coupling between performers, inflected by the metric and temporal models that they draw on. As Mark Doffman emphasizes, the experience of “being in the groove” is the bodily experience of shared timing. It is a relational phenomenon; something that occurs between musicians. Musicians talking about interactions in jazz sometimes describe groove as a romantic relationship, like the experience of walking arm in arm, listening to the drummer and bass player together and hearing wedding bells (Doffman 2013). In the case of Central Asian egg-shaped rhythmic cycles, this feeling of coordination is the only way to produce them.

What happens when musicians, attuned to different kinds of groove, attempt to develop this kind of embodied musical relationship, as it were, in a brief encounter, a one-night stand? As many studies in ethnomusicology have remarked, ways of hearing rhythm are culturally

conditioned. Henry Stobart and Ian Cross, for example, highlight the problems of rhythmic perception that occur when cultural outsiders listen to Andean music (2000). Outsiders typically misperceive Andean songs as beginning on an upbeat, confused by the unequal proportions (groove?) and accent placement in the charango accompaniment, and the stress patterns of the languages in which the songs are sung. Moving away from the insider-outsider binary, we might reformulate this as a question of conflicting learned modes of listening. When such conflicting hearings form the basis of a collaboration, things may become problematic. As Clayton, Dueck and Leante remark:

Social groups evaluate musical practices and practitioners based on their mastery of culturally specific rhythmic techniques. Musical performance is rarely a question of ‘falling into time’ with one another. Playing in time with the music also involves aligning one’s comportment to broader ideologies concerning what is musically appropriate and effective. (Clayton et al 2013: 10)

This has implications for projects of making music across borders. The majority of border-crossing collaborations are performed by a super breed of cosmopolitan musicians adept at this work of aesthetic translation, but their ability to work together is largely based on their shared professional training in conservatories around the world.²² For formally educated musicians like this, metre is normative; for them “proper” metrical performance is a manifestation of musical competence. When amateur musicians—who do not possess this kind of formal relationship with metre—work with them, alternative competence may be mistaken for incompetence. In this way, collaborations may enact and uphold the social distinctions between dominant and subaltern imaginaries (Dueck 2013b). Thus, groove has directly political implications.

One contemporary group who seem to place this political and embodied relationship with groove centrally in their practice is the Chicano (Mexican-American) group Quetzal. With pieces like “2+0+1+2 = cinco”, and an uncomfortable 11-beat “cadencia” created by cutting a beat from a standard 4 x 3-beat dance groove, Quetzal—who as the descendants of immigrants embody a very different kind of border crossing—send out a message that asymmetrical rhythms, and the ability to groove to them, are central to their project of building new forms of community (Rodríguez, 2009).²³ Theoretical approaches to diaspora are also helpful in thinking about border-crossing musical initiatives. Rey Chow notes that diaspora embodies a “question of borders,” which “is not so much about the transient eventually giving way to the permanent as it is about an existential condition of which ‘permanence’ itself is an ongoing fabrication” (Chow 1993: 15). This reminds us that there are no hard borders and no fixed traditions in musical practice. It is more productive to think instead about unbounded transnational spaces of performance, which are framed by our learned ways of hearing and learned ways of feeling, and the temporary and contingent sense of self and other that underpin our shifting musical imaginaries.

²² Saeid Kordmafi, in this volume, similarly notes that a shared background in academic research enabled the musical collaboration between himself and Abduvali Abdurashidov.

²³ Their political project is articulated with a nod to feminist theory by singer Martha Gonzales, speaking about the aptly titled album “Imaginaries”;

<http://www.folkways.si.edu/quetzal/imaginaries/latin/music/album/smithsonian>.

Border-crossing collaborations are most productive when they allow sufficient contact time for participants to listen and reflect on fundamental differences, and to absorb and embody new aesthetics. In the compressed, high pressure contexts that characterize most of these projects, musicians necessarily draw on their existing imaginaries and musical habitus—ways of hearing and ways of embodying—in order to produce a viable performance at short notice. Drawing on their learned experience, they imagine the other in diverse ways that sometimes deviate significantly from the professed aims of the collaboration. Sometimes these juxtaposed imaginaries gel together to form new, shared imaginaries, and sometimes they produce disjuncture. Although the rhetoric surrounding Silk Road projects is all about connection, harmony and transcending borders, in the case studies presented here it was the way that the participants felt the differences that was most enlightening. Homing in on these micro aspects of collaborations across borders, and paying attention to the areas of discomfort and disconnect, helps us to think about the ambiguity inherent in cross-cultural encounters. Our affective and kinaesthetic responses when we listen to other forms of mode or try to embody other grooves, using musical instruments imperfectly adapted for that role, throw us back on ourselves in ways that can be disjunctive but can also be productive. The first challenge is to allow these encounters to help us to perceive more clearly our own bodily and sensory pedagogies and engrained practices.

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