

By Dagmar KUHN,
Germany

BETWEEN EAST AND WEST – my Encounter with the music of Azerbaijan

“With every language you learn, you liberate a spirit that was previously bound within you.”

Friedrich Rückert (1788–1866)

A With this thought from the great poet, linguist (with knowledge of over 40 languages!), and translator Friedrich Rückert, who was himself a mediator between a wide variety of languages and cultures and whose poems have been set to music by many famous composers, I would like to describe my very personal journey into the world of Azerbaijani music. For Rückert’s wisdom can be applied not only to spoken languages, but also to musical languages. Every new world of sound that one encounters opens up inner spaces, sensitizes one to one’s own cultural roots, and invites one to a new kind of inner perception and reflection on musical preferences and one’s own musical sensibility, which is always influenced by one’s personal cultural background.

However, my journey into the music of Azerbaijan was never purely academic, and this short article cannot, of course, claim to comprehensively represent the diversity and depth of Azerbaijani music. I am neither an ethnomusicologist nor a professional singer with training at a music academy. My repertoire includes songs in about ten languages, which I have taught myself with

the help of native speakers. Through encounters with people, concerts, and my own research, I have been able to rediscover the special sound world of Azerbaijan for myself.

Azerbaijan: A Country between East and West

To introduce the topic of Azerbaijani music, I would like to briefly describe its geographical location:

Azerbaijan lies at the intersection of East and West on the southern edge of the Caucasus and is bordered by the Caspian Sea, Iran, Turkey, and Russia. For centuries, this location has made the country a melting pot of cultures. The capital city of Baku in particular was exposed to Western influences at an early stage due to the country’s oil wealth. Just as European architects shaped the cityscape with elements of Western architecture combined with Oriental ornamentation, the influences of Arab, Persian, and Turkish traditions that had existed for centuries remained as vibrant as the rich folk music. When Russian and European musicians and composers enriched the country’s cultural life in the 19th century, this contributed significantly to the development of

Tofiq Guliev

Azerbaijani music into a special synthesis of Eastern and Western music, among other things.

First encounters

My first encounter with Azerbaijani music dates back to 1995. An Azerbaijani medical student from Iran told me about the close ties between Azerbaijanis in Iran and in the former Soviet republic, which had long been separated by the Iron Curtain. He drew my attention to a concert with the famous mugham singer Alim Qasimov (*1957), which took place in Frankfurt in a small private setting, together with his then 16-year-old daughter Fergana Qasimova (*1979), who accompanied him vocally for the first time on his concert tour through Germany.

Among the audience was jazz pianist Aziza Mustafa Zadeh (born 1969), who was also giving concerts in Germany at the same time. Her father was the legendary jazz musician Vagif Mustafa Zadeh (1940–1979), who is considered the founder of “jazz mugham.”



Uzeyir Hajibeyli



Even then, I sensed that these sounds were something special: familiar and foreign at the same time. I had already come into contact with Arabic music before: in the early 1990s, I sang songs by the Lebanese singer Fairouz (born in 1935) with a musician from Baghdad who played the piano, oud (Arabic lute), and darabouka (frame drum), but the Azerbaijani melodies touched me in a whole new and unique way.

Later, I deepened my interest in Azerbaijani music as part of my ethnomusicological research and came across the American radio host Marvin Rosen. In his program Classical Discoveries, he regularly presented works by classical Azerbaijani composers, opening up a whole new world of classical music to his listeners with famous composers such as Fikrat Amirov, Tofiq Guliev, Qara Qarayev, and Üzeyir Hajibeyov, whom “Western” classical music lovers have generally never heard of.

Goethe-Institut 2011 – Encounter with Nesimi

A decisive turning point came in 2010 when I met a writer from Baku at the Frankfurt Book Fair. When I mentioned that I sing in different languages and had already performed Turkish songs, he asked me if I would be interested in performing songs in Azerbaijani (Azeri)

Qara Qarayev



as well. Since Azeri is a Turkic language, like Uzbek, Kazakh, Tatar, Uyghur, and Kyrgyz, among others, this offered me the opportunity to expand my repertoire of international songs.

This led to a special cultural evening at the Goethe-Institut Frankfurt in October 2011 as part of the book fair. For the first time, part of the extensive poetry collection by Imadeddin Nesimi (c. 1370– 1417) had been translated from Azerbaijani into German. The first translation was done by a German Turkologist and renowned Nesimi expert; a German poet then refined it linguistically and poetically – taking into account the original rhyme scheme – and thus elevated it to an even more sophisticated literary level.

Imadeddin Nesimi occupies a special place among the great figures of Azerbaijani culture and as one of the most important poets of the medieval Orient, and his work in Azeri, Persian, and Arabic remains alive to this day. His verses are influenced by the mysticism of Hurufi Sufism, in which man himself is regarded as a “mirror of

the divine.” In many of his poems, Nesimi addresses the unity of body, mind, and soul, as well as the transcendence of human limitations. He expresses this in one of his poems with the words “This world does not contain me,” which brought him into conflict with the religious and political authorities of his time, who condemned him as a heretic. With his martyr’s death in Aleppo in 1417, Nesimi became a symbol of spiritual freedom and the courage to speak one’s own truth, even at the cost of one’s life.

To this day, Nesimi’s poetry remains a source of inspiration for musicians, artists, and thinkers, and his verses have been set to music many times, also in modern Azerbaijan. An imposing statue commemorates him in Baku, and in 2019, UNESCO honored his 650th birthday.

In this special atmosphere, I had the privilege of providing the musical accompaniment for the bilingual reading in Azeri and German – with a selection of traditional folk songs and classical songs by composers such as Tofiq Guliyev and Üzeyir Hacıbəyli (formerly: Hacıbə-



yov). Many of them, similar to Nesimi's poetry, take up themes such as longing, love, and loss, thus combining literature and music into a common form of expression.

Ayrilig – Song of Separation – Song of Connection

Among the songs I sang at this cultural evening, Ayrilig ("Separation") by Ali Salimi (1922–1997) holds a special place for me, and I would like to take this opportunity to go into more detail about its origins and historical circumstances.

Ali Salimi, the son of an Azerbaijani-Iranian family, composed this melody when he was forced to flee Baku with his family – he was 16 at the time – to Iran. For decades, the "Iron Curtain" separated the Azerbaijanis in the USSR and Iran from each other. Neither the Soviet nor the Iranian regime allowed visits to the other part of Azerbaijan.

In 1938, Stalin decreed that all persons who did not have Soviet citizenship must either acquire it or leave the country. Salimi's mother, deeply concerned about her husband's poor health due to his imprisonment,

was able to obtain Iranian passports by telling a white lie, so that the entire family could then go to Ardabil in Iran. This experience of flight, loss of homeland, and uprooting—a topic that is particularly relevant again today—gave rise to the wistful melody of Ayrilig. Ali Salimi finally found the ideal lyrical complement he had long been searching for in the verses of the Persian poet Farhad Ibrahimi (1935-2019).

For me, however, the meaning goes much deeper than the theme of the separation of two states, which is of course also a German theme, albeit with a different historical background.

Ayrilig also touches on a universal experience, as every human life is marked by separations and farewells – in relationships, from children who grow up and want to go their own way, separation from ideas of how things should be, separation from dreams that did not come true, separation from loved ones who die, right up to one's own death and farewell to this earthly world.

For me, Ayrilig also resonates with Nesimi's message that we should transcend our affiliation with a nationality, culture, and religion, which we as humans so often

Fikret Amirov



define ourselves in a very narrow and exclusive sense, because the deepest truth lies not in separation but in the connectedness of all humans.

The song *Ayrilig* became famous through the multilingual singer Rashid Behbudov (1915–1988) and, more recently, through the Iranian-Azerbaijani artist Goo-goosh (* 1950), who lives in the USA.

Another very moving song that I sang that evening at the Goethe-Institut was “Ana” (“Mother”) by

Sevil Aliyeva (born 1955). The lyrics describe a mother’s love as timeless, “like an eternal spring.”

I became aware of this song through a recording by the legendary singer Muslim Magomayev (1942–2008), which I discovered on YouTube while researching well-known Azerbaijani songs. Magomayev was a celebrity in the Soviet Union, awarded the highest state honors, and considered one of Azerbaijan’s greatest voices. He combined opera, folk songs, and patriotic hymns in his voice, but also sang pop songs and Western hits of the time in various European languages. This shows how strongly the Western music world influenced the Soviet Union, even through the “Iron Curtain.” Magomayev built bridges between Azerbaijan’s classical heritage, in-

ternational pop trends, and the Soviet Union people’s wish to be part of a global music culture despite political boundaries.

For me, “Ana” is a song of universal validity, because the experience of being loved by a mother or the longing for that love—regardless of language or origin—touches a chord that resonates in all of us.

Mugham and Ashiq – Spiritual Roots of Azerbaijani Music Culture

I already mentioned the singing style of mugham — a highly complex art form that requires years of study—in connection with Alim Qasimov’s concert. Mugham is a highly complex system of scales, improvisation, and poetry whose roots reach deep into the Persian-Turkish-Arabic musical world.

In Azerbaijan, however, it developed a specific and distinctive form. Learning mugham requires not only years of study of the demanding vocal technique, but also a mental and spiritual attitude. That is why many singers describe mugham as a “school of life.”

In 2003, UNESCO added mugham to its list of intangible cultural heritage.

This international appeal was also evident at the First International Mugham Festival, which took place in Baku in 2009 and has since brought together musicians, scholars, and lovers of this art from all over the world. The world-renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma also discovered mugham for himself as part of his Silk Road Project and expressed his fascination and enthusiasm for its universal expressiveness.

Closely related is the tradition of the Ashiqs, who are often inadequately described as “wandering bards” or “storytellers.” Ashiqs recite stories, myths, epics, and love poems through song, poetry, and playing the saz (long-necked lute). Their art is not merely entertainment in a trivial sense, but represents a form of living philosophy and folk wisdom, thereby making a significant contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage. In 2009, this musical tradition was also recognized by UNESCO as intangible world cultural heritage.

Composers between Tradition and Modernity –A brief Overview

Classical music in Azerbaijan began with **Uzeyir Hajibeyli** (1885–1948). He composed *Leyli* and *Majnun*, a tragic love story and the first opera in the Islamic world, which premiered in Baku in 1908, combining the tonal spectrum of mugham with Western sound forms. In do-

Vagif Mustafa Zadeh with his daughter Aziza

ing so, he established a national school and opened the door to a new form of musical expression.

Qara Qarayev (1918–1982), a student of Dmitri Shostakovich, composed symphonic works and became famous for his ballet *The Seven Beauties*, premiered in 1952, in which he integrated motifs from literature into classical ballet and combined them with typical Azerbaijani rhythms and timbres in a modern musical style.

Fikret Amirov (1922–1984) developed the “symphonic mugham” and combined traditional folk melodies, for which he conducted intensive ethnomusicological research, with Western-style orchestral music in a completely new way.

Arif Malikov (1933–2019) created a work of great significance with *The Legend of Love* – the libretto was written by Nazim Hikmet (1902–1963), the great Turkish poet who was also a close friend of Qara Qarayev, among others, but who unfortunately was never able to return to his homeland from exile in Russia.

During the Soviet era, this musical development took a politically motivated turn: Stalin’s cultural policy prescribed the creation of music in the spirit of “Socialist Realism,” whose main phase lasted from the early 1930s to the mid-1950s. This music was supposed to incorpo-

rate traditional folklore melodies, and at the same time represent the Soviet idea of progress. So, on the one hand, artists had to meet these expectations, but they still found ways to achieve artistic freedom. However, the constant pressure and fear that a premiere could result not only in recognition but also in rejection or worse certainly left its mark on every artist who lived and worked during those years.

However, the fact that such a unique synthesis of Eastern tradition and Western symphonic music was able to develop in Azerbaijan cannot be explained solely by the guidelines of Soviet cultural policy. Rather, other factors also played a role here: among them, the country’s special geographical location between the Orient and the Occident, the early Western influence due to the oil boom, which gave rise to a cosmopolitan urban culture, and finally the close exchange with Russian musicians and teachers, who opened doors to European modernism for composers and thus contributed decisively to the emergence of a musical culture which still clearly distinguishes Azerbaijan from other Turkic-speaking republics today.

Many Azerbaijani composers found their artistic maturity not least through this artistic dialogue with

Rashid Behbudov



Russian teachers and mentors. Qara Qarayev and Fikret Amirov, for example, studied with Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975), who was not only an important composer but also a great promoter of young talents. Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908) also had a major influence on **Fikret Amirov**, particularly with regard to his orchestral compositions. Similarly, the Russian composer Reinhold Glière (1875–1956) influenced generations of musicians in Baku, encouraging them to find their own style. These relationships were often more than mere master-student relationships; they were human encounters in which friendships based on mutual respect developed.

Rashid Behbudov – a Singer between Worlds and an Example of the Popularity of Azerbaijani Music across many national Borders

The international appeal of Azerbaijani music is particularly evident in the person of Rashid Behbudov (1915–1989). Behbudov was known as the “Golden Voice of Azerbaijan” and was not only a celebrated singer in his homeland, performing songs in Azeri and Russian as well

as Persian, Turkish, Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali, but was also highly revered in many other countries of the Orient.

An anecdote illustrates his popularity at the time, which extended as far as India: during a concert tour, the train on which he was traveling to Hyderabad was stopped by a crowd of people who wanted to hear him sing. Behbudov stepped up to the door of the carriage and gave an impromptu concert with songs in Azerbaijani and Hindi language, and the enthusiastic audience showered him with flowers and fruit — a story about the popularity of Azerbaijani music far beyond the country’s borders and another example of how music transcends boundaries and unites people in their longing for beauty and artistic expression.

Classical Music in everyday Life – The Metro in Baku

The extent to which classical music has become part of everyday life and cultural identity in Azerbaijan is evident even in places where one would not expect it:

Alim Gasimov



At the 23 stations of the Baku Metro, short excerpts from works by classical Azerbaijani composers, such as Üzeyir Hajibeyli's *Leyli and Majnun* or *The Seven Beauties* by Qara Qarayev, can be heard as passengers board and alight. This is another fine example of how classical music does not have to be confined to the concert hall, but can also be integrated into everyday life and thus brought closer to people who would otherwise be hardly interested in this type of music.

I owe this information to the highly readable book *Music of Azerbaijan – From Mugham to Opera* (USA 2016) by the musicologist Aida Huseynova (1964–2022), who sadly passed away far too early in 2022. She wrote her doctoral thesis on the influence of Russian composer Reinhold Glière on Azerbaijani music.

The book is recommended for anyone who wants to learn more about the various aspects of Azerbaijani music, and this excellently researched work was another important key for me to understanding Azerbaijani music culture.

For me, the summary is the experience or realization that the music of Azerbaijan is much more than a regionally limited tradition: it is an expression of a culture that builds bridges between East and West, past and present, and the familiar and the foreign.

Especially in today's world, music can remind us that it is a silent light that connects where borders divide and allows something within us to shine that is greater than any national or other attribution. 🌟

References:

1. Huseynova, Aida - *Music of Azerbaijan – From Mugham to Opera* – USA 2016
2. Kazimova, Lala – Qara Qarayev – *A Short Essay on Life and Work. Remarkable People of Azerbaijan* – Baku 2018
3. *Space of Mugham – First International Mugam Festival in Baku* (2009) Heydar Aliyev Foundation – Baku 2009
4. Falter und Flamme – *Ein Jahrtausend Aserbaidzhanischer Liebeslyrik (Butterfly and Flame – A Millennium of Azerbaijani Love Poetry)*. Nourida Ateshi (ed.) – Berlin 2008
5. *I Vanished into the Absolute – The Azerbaijani poet Nesimi (1370-1417) in German for the first time.* Interview by Vougar Aslanov with Michael R. Hess and Reinhart Moritzen - *IRS Literature* – Spring 2015 www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rc=t=j&opi=89978449&url=https://irs-az.com/new/pdf/201506/1434699206358406204.pdf&ved=2-ahUKEwiqlbiS4tWPAXXo9LslHaqrA4QFnoECBgQAQ&usg=AOvWaw1Ok58HyHmZi0Ca2O7GTdR7
6. *Mystical Roots of Ancient Oriental Music - Mugham & Magicians in Azerbaijan* - Melek WELISADE <https://irs-az.com/de/article/538>
7. Fikret AMIROV: 95th birthday <https://onlinemerk-er.com/in-memori-geburtstage-im-november-2017>
8. Ali Salimi, *Composer Putting Memories to Music* - Interview by Pirouz Khanlou www.azer.com/aiweb/categories/magazine/24_folder/24_articles/24_salimi.html
9. *With a Song in His Heart* - Rashid Behbudov (1915-1989) - by Azad Sharifov www.azeri.org/Azeri/az-latin/latin_articles/latin_text/latin_54/eng_54/54-behbudov.html
10. Marvin Rosen - Director of "Classical Discoveries"
11. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_Discoveries