



Who Is Alash?

ALASH is a group of three talented young musicians from Tuva who bring their fascinating music and culture to delighted audiences worldwide. In addition to traditional Tuvan musical training, they have all received classical Western musical training. Their music is infused with subtle Western influences, and yet remains true to its Tuvan heritage. Alash has a passion for educating future generations and for deepening the understanding between cultures. While on tour, they have taught at numerous educational institutions, from Tibbals Elementary School in Texas to Dartmouth University in New Hampshire. They share their knowledge with American youth, and bring their acquired knowledge back home to the youth of Tuva. The musicians are Bady-Dorzhu Ondar, Ayan-ool Sam, and Ayan Shirizhik.

What Is Unique about Tuvan Music?

Tuva's music is best known for the other-worldly sounds of throat singing, or *xöömei*. Throat singers accomplish the amazing vocal feat of producing multiple pitches at the same time, and they do so in a variety of styles. The effect is riveting and mind-expanding. Tuvan instruments support and complement the tapestry of harmonics. Instruments include the two-stringed, bowed *igil* with its complex and soulful timbres; the three-stringed, banjo-like *doshpuluur* with its galloping rhythms; and the resonant bass drum, the *kengirge*.

Where to Hear the Music

Listen to Alash's music and watch video clips on the Alash website: www.alashensemble.com

“When we play for young people, we're opening up an entire world for them that most of them probably didn't know existed when they came to school that morning. It's priceless to see the children's reaction when they hear our music. I think we've made lasting impressions on some youngsters. That's good for them and it's good for our people too.”

—Bady-Dorzhu Ondar, member of Alash

High School Students Respond:

“I couldn't get over the sounds they were making with their mouths. When I walked in, I heard what I thought were instruments, but when I looked closely, there were no instruments in use.”

“The music was very meditative. I felt my spirit dancing. I closed my eyes and used only my ears.”

“Alash opened my eyes to a whole new world, to not only music, but to the human body's abilities.”

“We get so caught up in local and national music that we lose out on the beauty of the music that other countries create. . . . My musical understanding and awareness was expanded.”

Teachers Tell Us:

“The Alash Ensemble brought a magical and inspiring program to our small town. The students were delighted with this new kind of music and several students have been learning how to sing in the Tuvan style. Two students, aged 8 and 9, have honed their skills enough to sing in two styles of throat singing.”

“Within minutes, Alash had the full attention of our middle school students. Students and teachers alike marveled at how the throat singers created what seemed like a full symphony with just four mouths. Everyone was engaged for the hour and beyond. We had a powerful lesson in geography, cultural traditions and aesthetics, and we even joined in a sing-along.”

“I wasn't sure how students in our small, rural Ohio high school would react to Tuvan throat singing and the unusual instruments, but when Alash started playing and singing, you could have heard a pin drop.”

“Students are asking, ‘When are they coming back?’”



Tuvan Throat Singing

“Imagine a human bagpipe—a person who could sing a sustained low note while humming an eerie, whistle-like melody. For good measure, toss in a thrumming rhythm similar to that of a jaw harp, but produced vocally—by the same person, at the same time.” —*Newsweek* (March 17, 2006)

THE TINY REPUBLIC OF TUVA is a giant when it comes to mastery of the human voice. The ancient tradition of throat singing (*xöömei* in Tuvan) developed among the nomadic herdsman of Central Asia, people who lived in yurts, rode horses, raised yaks, sheep and camels, and had a close spiritual relationship with nature. Passed down through the generations but largely unheard by the outside world, *xöömei* is now the subject of international fascination and has become Tuva’s best known export.

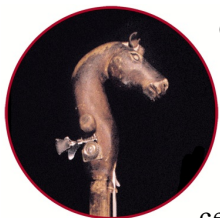


WHERE IS TUVA? Tuva (sometimes spelled *Tyva*) sits at the southern edge of Siberia, with Mongolia to its south. Over the centuries, Tuva has been part of Chinese and Mongolian empires, and shares many cultural ties with Mongolia. In 1944 it became part of the USSR, and until the late physicist Richard Feynman drew attention* to it, was largely unknown to westerners. Tuva is now a member of the Russian Federation.

A UNIQUE CONCEPT OF SOUND. The Tuvan way of making music is based on appreciation of complex sounds with multiple layers. The throat singer amplifies some overtones while screening out others, so that a careful listener can hear two, three, even four distinct pitches emanating from one singer’s mouth. The importance of sonic complexity is illustrated by an anecdote about a respected Tuvan musician who was demonstrating the *igil*, a bowed instrument with two strings tuned a fifth apart. When asked to play each string separately, he refused, saying it wouldn’t make any sense. The only meaningful sound was the combination of the two pitches played together.†



TUVAN THROAT SINGING includes a variety of styles, each associated with a different sound in nature. In the *sygyt* and *xöömei*‡ styles, the singer starts with a fundamental pitch which then splits into the original tone plus one or more higher overtones that may sound like birdsong or whistling wind. The singer may embellish the highest note by varying the shape of his vocal tract, producing a mini-melody in the top range while the other pitches remain fixed. In the growling *kargyraa* style, the singer produces a deep guttural undertone below the fundamental pitch as well as overtones above. More complex throatsinging styles create rhythms or quickly changing harmonics to imitate the sounds of bubbling water or a trotting horse.



COWBOYS OF THE EAST. The rhythms of Tuvan songs often simulate the loping gait of a horse. Tuvans are great admirers of horses, and their songs are as likely to extol the virtues of fast horses as they are to express love for beautiful women. Just as the western cowboy plays a guitar or banjo, the Tuvan cowboy often accompanies himself with a three-stringed *doshpuluur* or *chanzy* (plucked or strummed like a banjo) or a two-stringed *igil* (bowed like a cello). The instruments are traditionally decorated with carved horses’ heads.

**Tuva or Bust!* by Ralph Leighton (W.W. Norton & Co., 2000) is an entertaining account of Feynman’s interest in Tuva.

†Related by Valentina Suzukei in *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing: Sound, Music, and Nomadism in Tuva and Beyond*, by Theodore Levin with Valentina Suzukei (Indiana University Press, 2006).

‡The Tuvan word *xöömei* is the name of one style as well as a general term for throat singing.

Joining Alash Ensemble is Dominic "Shodekeh" Talifero, a beatboxer from Baltimore. He became interested in Tuvan throat singing and traveled to Tuva to learn more. He has developed a relationship with Alash and has toured with them on a number of occasions.

He provides something of a bridge for students between the unknown art of throat singing and the more familiar art of beatboxing.

Some questions to pose to students:

- What is it about throat singing that you think made Shodekeh want to travel halfway across the world to learn more?
- Is there something you have been so interested in that you would travel halfway around the world to master?
- Is there some type of creative expression, skill or hobby that you are currently putting a lot of attention and energy into mastering?