

The Silk Road as Jam Session, Then and Now

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“The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”
(William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*)

“The past does not influence me; I influence it.”
(William de Kooning, quoted in John Cage, *Silence*)

In the lands of the Silk Road, as in much of the world, the musical past is more than ever alive in the musical present. It’s alive both in mediated and unmediated forms – in the first case, through archives of recorded sound that, digitally de-noised and nattily packaged, are rebranded as tokens of national cultural heritage, and in the second case, through the efforts of musicians, scholars, non-governmental organizations, and state-sponsored cultural actors to resurrect and revitalize the performance of musical traditions, repertoires, and specific works – often glossed as “classical” – that act as sonic symbols of cultural prestige and identity for a nation or social group. In both cases, reconstructions of the musical past are shaped by a singular, overriding constraint: the history of sound recording goes back little more than a century.

Before the invention of sound recording, only a tiny fraction of the world’s music was ever documented through some form of written notation. The older the notation, the more it tends to serve as a locus of contention for legions of musical exegetes who often vociferously disagree about aspects of tonality, pitch, timbre, tempo, texture, dynamics, rhythm, and any other musical parameter that is notated incompletely or ambiguously – which in just about any notation system, includes most musical parameters. Additional clues about the musical past come from musical instruments preserved from eras and epochs both recent and distant; iconographic depictions of instruments and music making; and scholarly treatises, ritual manuals, histories, chronicles, travelogues, and other narrative accounts that describe music, musicians, and musical events. In the end,

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however, as quite a few contemporary music historians have pointed out, each successive era invents, or re-invents, the performance conventions of its own musical past, which to a significant degree, are shaped by its musical present¹. Our own era is no exception.

The musical past of the vast Silk Road region, based on copious archaeological and iconographic evidence that extends back to early antiquity, included an exceptionally rich and diverse array of musical instruments, styles, and repertoires. Yet for all that we presently know about which kinds of instruments were played, where they were played, how they were made and tuned, which peoples and social groups played them, the way in which they were combined into various types of ensembles, and on what kinds of occasions and at whose behest music making took place, much crucial evidence about music and musical life is missing – first and foremost, of course, the sounds themselves. This sonic lacuna leaves musicians and music scholars interested in reconstructing the musical past in the realm of what the anthropologist Victor Turner (1986) called the “subjunctive mood of culture” – the mood of “maybe, might be, as if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire”. Meanwhile, in the present-day context of Silk Road mystique and chic 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 that are presumed to have occurred along the historical Silk Road. In the spirit of full disclosure, let me confess that I have been a serial trafficker in contemporary versions of so-called Silk Road music, and the examples I’ll share in the following pages come from my own experience in this quirky corner of the music world.

My initial engagement with the Silk Road as metaphor and metonymy for cultural exchange came in the late 1990s, when I was recruited by the cellist Yo-Yo Ma to join his nascent Silk Road Project, of which I served as the first executive director, and later, a board member. The personal interpretation of Silk Road music history that Ma turned into a meta-narrative for the Silk Road Project and shared earnestly with new recruits and potential funders was simple but powerful: music and musicians have always been on the move, and music evolves when influences from other cultures infuse it, leading to new creativity expressed through hybrid musical styles, instruments, and repertoires. “Nothing is pure” became the mantra of the Project.

To bring Yo-Yo Ma’s ideas to life through musical performance, the Silk Road Project created an ensemble: The Silk Road Ensemble. Its name, as I recall, was first suggested by art historian Milo Beach, an early Silk Road Project advisor. Anchored by Yo-Yo Ma, the Silk Road Ensemble blended together instruments from China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Central Asia, India, Iran, the Middle East, the Caucasus, Europe, and, eventually, other continents and regions. The performers were supremely talented, and the *modus operandi* was that music from one or another cultural origin was adapted by composers and arrangers to the unique instrumentation of the ensemble. Some performers in the ensemble came from musical traditions where European notation isn’t used, and thus they either memorized or extemporized their parts – or some of each. However, they did it, the musicians learned quickly, and the repertoire of the ensemble

¹ See, for example, Richard Taruskin, 1995.

expanded both through commissions to composers and through the creation of pieces – sometimes quite extemporaneously – by ensemble members themselves.



Photo 1: Members of the Silk Road Ensemble rehearse a newly commissioned work at Tanglewood Musical Center, July 2000

Not all of the scholars initially invited to advise the project were prepared to abandon the historical Silk Road, which Yo-Yo Ma was fond of calling “the Internet of Antiquity”, to the domain of musical whimsy and metaphor. At an early Silk Road Project brainstorming meeting attended by several prospective consultants, one distinguished curator of Asian art and antiquities insisted that the “Silk Road” truly existed only in the time of the Han dynasty, and that the use of the term to refer to any other era – especially the present one – represented a historical travesty. Exeunt the curator. Other skeptics and metaphor deniers followed suit. Membership in the Silk Road Project was essentially self-selective; the principal qualification for membership was willing suspension of disbelief.

From its earliest days, the Silk Road Project was nothing if not ambitious. Soon after it was officially incorporated as a not-for-profit organization, Yo-Yo Ma and several of his colleagues from the Silk Road Project visited the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C., to meet with the leadership of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, which organizes and curates the annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival on Washington’s National Mall. The Silk Road Project’s proposal to the Smithsonian was to co-produce a festival devoted entirely to the Silk Road. That proposal led to the production, in 2002, of “The Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust”, which brought some 400 musicians and artisans from 25 countries to the National Mall, along which the Smithsonian built a simulacrum of the Silk Road that was visited by some 1.5 million people over 10 days.



Photo 2: Buddhas of Bamiyan at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, National Mall, July 2002



Photo 3: Samarkand's Registan at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, July 2002



Photo 4: Yo-Yo Ma jams with a musician from Rajasthan and members of the Hua Family Shawm Band at the Folklife Festival

In preparation for the Folklife Festival, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings asked me to produce a compact disc of “Silk Road music,” which resulted in *The Silk Road: A Musical Caravan*, a double-CD that I assembled with Jean During, France’s leading specialist on the music of Iran and Central Asia.

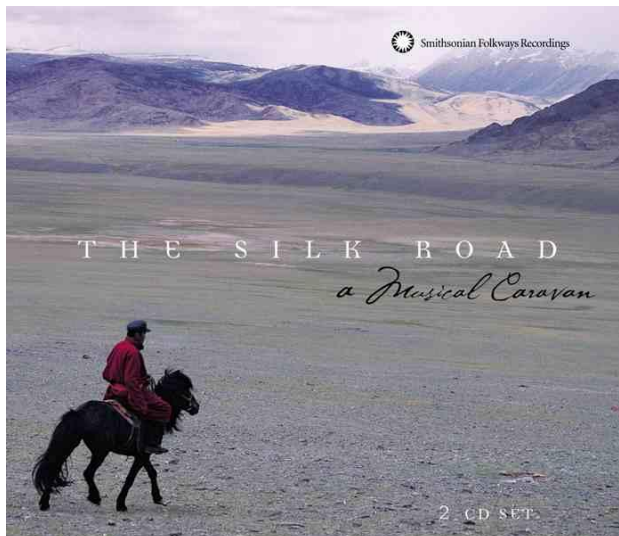


Photo 5: *The Silk Road: A Musical Caravan*. Cover photo by the author, western Mongolia, 2000

In booklet notes for the CD, During and I wrote:

“What if Marco Polo had owned a tape recorder? And what if his epic travels along the Silk Road had taken place not at the end of the 13th century, but at the beginning of the 21st? Far-fetched conjectures to be sure, but our compilation offers a glimpse of the rich musical life that an intrepid and curious traveler like Marco Polo might find in the lands of the Silk Road today.”

Later in the notes, we addressed Silk Road music history:

“It may well have been along the Silk Road that some of the first “world music” jam sessions took place. For both Europeans and Asians, the mesmerizing sound of exotic instruments must have had an appeal not unlike the visual allure of exotic textiles, ceramics, and glass. Innovative musicians and luthiers adapted unfamiliar instruments to perform local music while simultaneously introducing non-native rhythmic patterns, scales, and performance techniques².”

Even taking into account the license for rhetorical flourish that is liberally granted to writers of CD booklet notes, the notion that music was transmitted along the Silk Road through something like a cross-cultural jam session – essentially the model of musical creativity and transmission adopted by the Silk Road Ensemble – was a stretch. Yet the image of long-ago musicians from different cultures coming together and finding a common musical groove was alluring, and when the musicians in the Silk Road Ensemble actually did it, the spectacle made for terrific entertainment. If it could happen in the Silk Road Ensemble, why couldn't it have happened along the historical Silk Road? Or so our thinking went.

Unlike the disillusioned curator at the Silk Road Project brainstorming meeting, no skeptical music historians or ethnomusicologists stepped forward to challenge the verisimilitude of the Project's take on how music traveled along the Silk Road. The cultural authority of Yo-Yo Ma, combined with the international goodwill generated by the Silk Road Project and the sheer talent of its musicians all lent credibility to the notion of the Silk Road as host to an ongoing musical jam session that continues today. And if imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, then the Silk Road Project has been deeply flattered. A quick glance at the CD section of *Amazon.com* tells the story: current inventory lists dozens of Silk Road CDs, including *Silk Road Café*, *Sunrise Over Silk Road*, *Moon Rise Over Silk Road*, *Songs from the Silk Road*, *Lost Songs of the Silk Road*, *Lost along the Silk Road*, *The Road of Silk*, and so on. But let us now look more critically at this notion of the Silk Road as jam session.

At the Chinese end of the Silk Road, a multitude of evidence shows that from the time of the ancient Zhou dynasty, with its elaborate court music institutions, foreign instruments were officially imported and assimilated into Chinese musical styles and repertoires. For nonspecialist readers, a useful summary of these assimilative processes

² [<http://www.folkways.si.edu/the-silk-road-a-musical-caravan/central-asia-islamica-world/music/album/smithsonian>].

can be found in Liang Mingyue's informative book, *Music of the Billion: An Introduction to Chinese Musical Culture*³. It is not my purpose here to rehearse Liang's exposition, but suffice to say that one of his key points concerns the time scale in which processes of musical acculturation, assimilation, and hybridization took place – a time scale typically measured in centuries. For example, Liang describes how styles of hybridized Central Asian and Han Chinese music that developed during the Southern and Northern dynasties period (420-589) in western border regions – in particular, in Liangzhou, with its strong Kuchean presence – were gradually codified into one of the ten genres of court music during the later Tang dynasty, hundreds of years later (Liang Mingyue, 1985, p. 88). This cyclic process through which foreign musical instruments, and, presumably, musical styles and performance techniques, from Central Asia, Iran, and India were assimilated over long periods in provincial centers along the trade routes before their adoption in enculturated forms in centralized court music culture – most notably, in the court of the music-loving Tang emperor Xuanzhong, who is said to have retained 30,000 musicians and dancers – helps to explain the stylistically seamless way in which Chinese music has incorporated such highly visible (and audible) foreign imports as the *pipa*, *erhu*, *suona*, and *yangqin*⁴.

Not all foreign musical styles and musical instruments extant on Chinese-ruled territory were necessarily assimilated into mainstream Chinese music, even over long time frames. This may have been particularly the case for music linked to religious or ritual purposes. A well-known example is the music performed by the so-called orchestras – really small ensembles – sustained by enclaves of Sogdian merchants. One such group of musicians is depicted in reliefs on the stone sarcophagus of the Sogdian *sabao* Wirkak (a.k.a. Shi Jun), discovered in 2003, in Xi'an (See Judith A. Lerner, 2005). The organologist Bo Lawergren describes an image from one panel of the sarcophagus as eight musicians who play “panpipes, a flute, a lute, a vertical angular harp, a lute, a waisted drum, an undetermined object, and a pipe”. Lawergren further notes that the musicians play near fire altars, and hence concludes that “we may consider their music Zoroastrian⁵”. Whether or not any particular musical subculture or “micromusic” eventually becomes assimilated into more mainstream cultural flows depends on multiple factors, but music history is replete with examples from many times and places of musical traditions that stubbornly resist assimilation (See Mark Slobin, 1993).

The extended time frames, heavily bureaucratized official music establishments, and – at least in some cases – assimilation-resistant musical practices of émigré communities that shaped the processes through which foreign musical instruments and influences were or weren't assimilated into China from what we can broadly call the lands of the Silk Road belies the present-day re-imagination of intercultural “jam sessions” as engines of cross-cultural transmission and creativity. Furthermore, the very idea of “cultural exchange” at the heart of the contemporary Silk Road imaginary has to be called into question in the domain of music, since there's little evidence that the Chinese infatuation

³ Liang Mingyue, 1985. On foreign music influences during the Tang dynasty, see also Edward H. Schafer, 1963, p. 50-57.

⁴ Both Liang (p. 98) and Schafer (p. 52) provide the number 30,000.

⁵ Bo Lawergren, “Music History I. Pre-Islamic Iran”, (iv.3: Sogdian instruments in China), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

with musical instruments from Central Asia, Iran, India, and the Middle East was reciprocated. In western and central regions of the Silk Road – for example, in Sassanian Iran, Abbasid Baghdad, Samanid Bukhara, and Sogdian Samarkand, evidence of Chinese musical influences is all but nonexistent. This is not to say that inhabitants of these regions were unaware of Chinese instruments. For example, the mid-7th-century Afrāsiāb murals excavated from the so-called Hall of the Ambassadors in Samarkand include an aquatic scene that scholars who have studied the murals broadly agree (despite conflicting hypotheses about the occasion represented in the image) depicts a Chinese noblewoman – possibly an imperial princess or empress – accompanied by singers and musicians. The musicians are playing a zither and a lute. Only the scroll of the lute is visible, but the slender, elongated tuning pegs are similar to those of a *pipa* and other Chinese lutes. Whether or not the Sogdian artist(s) who painted the mural had actually seen these instruments, or whether he/she/they were working from a pictorial source of Chinese origin is unknown, though the latter version has been put forward as a hypothesis about the source of the imagery⁶.



Photo 6: Mural on the northern wall of the Hall of the Ambassadors, Afrāsiāb

The Afrāsiāb aquatic scene is reproduced in a contemporary mural installed in a hotel in Samarkand in which the instruments are easier to see:

⁶ The hypothesis that the Sogdian artists who painted this scene worked from a Chinese original work of art is advanced by Matteo Compareti in “A Reading of the Royal Hunt at Afrāsiāb Based on Chinese Sources”, in Matteo Compareti and Etienne de la Vaissière (eds.), *Royal Naurūz in Samarkand: Proceedings of the Conference Held in Venice on the Pre-Islamic Paintings at Afrasiab* (Pisa and Rome: Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2006), 173-184. The papers delivered at the conference collectively offer an exhaustive analysis of the murals, but none of the authors discuss the representation of musical instruments.



Photo 7: Copy of Afrāsiāb mural in a Samarkand hotel

As for Sassanian Iran, the musical taste of one of the most important Sassanian kings, Bahrām Gōr, who ruled from 420-438, tilted to India. According to the *Shāh-nāma*, Bahrām Gōr is said to have recruited 10.000 Lōrīs (gypsies) from India “all excelling in the art of the *barba*” (Jean During, “Barbaṭ”) – *barbaṭ* being the short-necked lute with a bent scroll that may well have provided the prototype for both the *pipa* and the Middle Eastern *‘ud*. Among instruments depicted in musical iconography of the Sassanian era, much of it on silver vessels, the only certain Chinese import to which I could find a reference is the mouth organ, which Lawergren mentions enjoyed a brief efflorescence in Iran⁷. Among miniature paintings – the medium of musical iconography par excellence of Islamicate Persia, Central Asia, and India – I can’t think of a single depiction of an instrument of obvious Chinese origin. Nor is there mention of Chinese musical instruments or musical influences in the large corpus of music treatises written in Arabic and Persian by medieval polymaths, some of them of Central Asian origin, who worked in Abassid Baghdad and Damascus at a time corresponding to the Five Dynasties (906-960) and Northern Song period (960-1127) in China, when one might expect that musical instruments or influences that had traveled westward from China during the height of the Tang-era Silk Road trade would have still been very much in evidence. Another distinguished lineage of music theorists who wrote in Arabic and Persian arose in Baghdad and in the cities of Greater Khorasan beginning in the era of the Pax Mongolica

⁷ Bo Lawergren, “Music History I. Pre-Islamic Iran” (IV.2: Sasanian instruments), *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

and continuing through the Herat-based rule of Sultan Husayn Bāyqarā (d. 1506), when, again, one might have expected the authors of these treatises to describe instruments of Chinese origin had they been in common use. But, again, the treatises of Safi Al-Din Al-Urmawi (c. 1216-1294), Qutb Al-Din Al-Shirazi (1236-1311), Abd Al-Qadir Al-Maraghi (1353-1435), and their successors are mostly silent on the topic of Chinese music, musical instruments, or influence, though Maraghi mentions the *pipa* in passing in the *Maqasid al-Alhan* (The Purpose of Melodies). Another 15th-century document, Sharaf Ad-Din Yazdi's *Zafar-nama*, a biography of Timur, describes a great feast organized by Timur in Samarkand at which one group of musicians played "according to the rules of the Chinese" (*rasm-e xitaiī*). But these cameo appearances of Chinese music and musicians in Persian and Central Asian sources only serve to underscore their rarity.

Chinese music was not the only foreign musical influence that the Persianate musical culture of Greater Khorasan appears to have eschewed. It also eschewed the music of much nearer neighbors: the Turkic-speaking nomads (a.k.a. mobile pastoralists) who inhabited parts of Mā Warā' Al-Nahr (Transoxania) and the vast steppe and grasslands that lay beyond it to the north and northeast. The cultural chasm that divides the musical instruments, repertoires, genres, styles, and sensibilities of nomads from those of sedentary-dwellers remains even today the most enduring and prominent feature of musical life in Central Eurasia.

The following comparative table illustrates some of the most conspicuous contrasts between musical instruments linked to nomadic or historically nomadic cultures, and musical instruments linked to the historically sedentary-dwelling populations of cities, towns, and villages engaged primarily in agriculture. These contrasts are apparent in the technologies that support the construction of instruments, the techniques used to play them, the way that instrumental performance is configured (for solo, duo or trio, small or large ensemble), and the way that playing instruments serves as a communal activity or, by contrast, as a demonstration of individual virtuosity.

The title of the table – "Tendencies and Typologies" – indicates that the terse generalizations it contains are precisely that: generalizations, which do not account for the fluid way in which particular instruments have migrated from the realm of nomads to the realm of sedentary-dwellers or vice versa, in the process undergoing adaptation or transformation⁸ (the most salient example of such an instrument is the two-stringed long-necked lute *dutar*). Thus the vertical line in the table dividing the attributes of nomadic and historically nomadic groups from sedentary-dwellers and agriculturalists⁹ represents more a porous and permeable cultural boundary than a cultural "fire wall".

⁸ For the formulation "tendencies and typologies", I am indebted to Jean During, who used it as the title of a similar table that compares "*musique nomade*" and "*musique sédentaire/urbaine*". The binary comparisons in During's table, however, are considerably broader. See Jean During, 1998, p. 21.

⁹ Contrasts between the music and musical worldview of nomads and sedentary-dwellers are illuminatingly explored in Elie During and Jean During, 2015.

Nomadic/Historically Groups	Nomadic	Sedentary-Dwellers/Agriculturalists
	Ancient source of bowed fiddles	Ancient source of long-necked lutes
	Lutes are frequently fretless	Lutes are typically fretted
	Scales based on diatonic intervals	Non-diatonic intervals such as microtones and neutral thirds are a structural feature of modes and scales
	Instrument strings made of animal gut	Instrument strings made of metal or silk
	Lutes strummed or plucked with fingers	Lutes played with a metal plectrum
	Lutes typically have 2–3 strings	Many lutes include several drone strings or sympathetic strings
	Percussion is peripheral to central musical repertoires	Frame drums or other percussion instruments are central to music making
	Virtuosic instrumental soloist is a central figure in musical life	Small vocal-instrumental ensembles are central to musical life
	Music and musical instruments are non-gendered (both genders play the same instruments)	Music and musical instruments are gendered (“male” music / “female” music)

Table 1: Tendencies and Typologies in Central Asian Musical Instruments

One could readily imagine various contemporary platforms for musical connectivity that bring together musicians from sedentary-dwelling Central Asia with their compatriots from the historically nomadic realm: jam sessions, fusion groups, composed works, or “ethno-jazz” – a catch-all term for improvisatory music rooted in but not constrained by traditional forms. In practice, however, such connectivity is all but nonexistent in Central Asia itself. Where it’s been attempted, the initiators have typically been outsiders – a Western record producer, a foreign NGO, an ex-patriot impresario. While contemporary musicians from sedentary-dwelling cultures and historically nomadic cultures each seem to find it easy to fuse their music with Western pop, rock, jazz, or even classical concert music, they continue to avoid fusing with one another. As a frequent visitor to Central Asia, I continue to marvel at the resilience of the musical disconnect between nomads and sedentary-dwellers that has persisted through centuries and millennia of social contact and economic symbiosis.



Photo 8: American and Kyrgyz performers at the Jazz Bishkek Autumn festival. Logos of the festival’s sponsors, which include the US Embassy, are on the right side of the banner

The absence of compelling historical evidence for Silk Road-era jam sessions and East-West musical exchange (in the bi-directional sense of “exchange”) has not dampened the enthusiasm of contemporary musicians seeking prestigious historical precedents for cross-cultural music projects. And perhaps it is in keeping with the increasingly rapid pace of just about all forms of cross-cultural connectivity in our time that processes of musical assimilation that may once have taken centuries are now condensed into days or hours – as if captured and re-presented in time-lapse photography. In the vignettes that follow, I’ll share a few examples of how, for better and for worse, accelerated cross-cultural creativity has played out in some recent Silk Road-related projects.

1. The Silk Road as East-West Musical Fusion: Alim Qasimov and the Kronos Quartet

For the past dozen years, I’ve worked with the Aga Khan Music Initiative, a non-governmental cultural development program that supports talented musicians and music educators in Central Asia, the Middle East, and West Africa who are working to preserve, transmit, and cultivate their musical heritage in contemporary forms¹⁰. The Music Initiative grew out of the interest of its patron, His Highness the Aga Khan, in the

¹⁰ On the Music Initiative, see: [http://www.akdn.org/aktc_music.asp?type=p].

Silk Road as a symbol of East-West cultural exchange (The Aga Khan Trust for Culture was the largest supporter of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival devoted to the Silk Road). Among the projects undertaken by the Music Initiative is a 10-volume CD-DVD series, called *Music of Central Asia*, which came out on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings between 2006 and 2012. Volume 8 of the series is called “Rainbow,” and includes a collaboration between the San Francisco-based Kronos Quartet and the Azerbaijani singer Alim Qasimov, who performs with his vocalist daughter, Fargana, and a quartet of Azerbaijani instrumentalists. The idea of the Kronos-Qasimov collaboration was to create new versions of traditional Azerbaijani songs that would integrate the sound of the two vocalists and the two quartets – Kronos’s violins, viola, and cello, and the Qasimov ensemble’s *tar* (long-necked lute), *balaban* (oboe), *kamancha* (spike fiddle), and *naghara* (double-headed hand drum). The 5-day rehearsal period allotted for putting the music together was typical – even generous – by the standards of busy professional musicians. The entire project was documented on video, and excerpts from this footage were compiled into a 25-minute documentary film as well as a condensed version that has been screened at the start of concerts featuring the Kronos-Qasimov collaboration as a way of offering audiences a glimpse of how cross-cultural music making actually comes together¹¹.



Photo 9: Alim Qasimov (holding drum) rehearsing with his ensemble and Kronos Quartet

As you can see in the film, East-West musical fusion is impeded by the two groups’ antipodal relationship to improvisation vs. note-reading: for the Kronos Quartet, the music only becomes real when it is written down, making it possible to repeat verbatim the music’s sequence of pitches and rhythmic patterns, whereas for Alim Qasimov, who can’t read musical notation, the music is only real when it is a little different each time it’s performed. Navigating a middle way between these two extremes proved to be a

¹¹ The 4-minute film can be viewed at: [<https://vimeo.com/116997660>].

challenge for the performers, and, six years after the initial recording session, I wouldn't say that the two groups have reached a point of rapprochement between freedom and fixity that resembles what jazz musicians would recognize as a jam session.

2. Branding the Silk Road: NHK's Search for a Silk Road Theme Song

In 1980, NHK, the Japanese national broadcasting company, began broadcasting an epic 12-part series on the Silk Road. NHK's website notes that the network "devoted 17 years to the planning, shooting and production of *The Silk Road*". For a soundtrack, NHK commissioned the Japanese New Age musician Kitaro, who used such venerable Silk Road instruments as the Minimoog, Minikorg 700, and Maxikorg DV800 to compose his new work¹². The soundtrack became immensely popular in Japan, and various recorded versions of it have sold millions of copies worldwide. Kitaro's "Silk Road Theme" is easily searchable on YouTube.

In 2004, NHK senior management decided to update *The Silk Road* with new footage made possible by a much more open People's Republic of China and rebroadcast the series in order to take viewers on what NHK called "a journey to the 'new' Silk Road". In the wake of this decision, a high-level delegation from NHK traveled to New York for a meeting with Yo-Yo Ma and members of the Silk Road Project to discuss the creation of a new soundtrack for the revived series. I attended the meeting in the guise of an ethnomusicologist with expertise in "Silk Road music." The lead NHK producer opened the meeting by succinctly describing what NHK hoped the Silk Road Project could deliver: a repeat of Kitaro's blockbuster soundtrack of almost a quarter-century earlier. To this end, they were counting both on the *renomé* of Yo-Yo Ma, and on the collective experience of the Silk Road Ensemble to create popular new works that evoked images of the Silk Road in contemporary musical languages. From NHK's perspective, the key deliverable was a theme song for the series – a song that NHK hoped would have universal appeal in all of its broadcast markets and could help sell at least a million copies of a stand-alone soundtrack album. NHK made it clear that they weren't the least bit interested in recordings of actual traditional music from the Silk Road region. They wanted something Kitaro-like. And with that daunting charge, the Silk Road Ensemble set to work. A number of the pieces they created appear on a CD titled *Beyond the Horizon*, released on the Sony Classical label. The first track on the album, "Mohini (Enchantment)," offers a good sense of the Silk Road Project's approach. This track is easily searchable on YouTube.

3. The Silk Road in Cyberspace

In the 21st-century version of the Silk Road – often dubbed "the new Silk Road" in Central Asia – music travels to far-flung destinations through virtual mediascapes with far greater ease and far lower transaction costs than it did even two decades ago, when international musical exchange occurred principally through concert tours, cultural exchange programs, and cassettes or CDs – both legal and pirated. These days, the enormous variety of music that's available online as a resource for cross-cultural music

¹² [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitaro>].

making can lead to forms of hybridity and fusion that would be unlikely to occur in the physical world, i.e., a world constrained by geography and temporality. An example of virtually-driven Silk Road hybridity is some music I heard during a recent visit to Kyrgyzstan, where I've spent a lot of time over the last decade on behalf of the Aga Khan Music Initiative. During this particular visit, I dropped in on the rehearsal of an ensemble of student musicians who were working under the aegis of a program in Bishkek supported by the Music Initiative. The ensemble consisted of standard Kyrgyz instruments: *komuz* (three-stringed lute), *kil-kiyak* (two-stringed upright fiddle), *chopochoor* (ocarina), *sybyzghy* (transverse flute), and *temir komuz* (metal jaw harp), among others. When I walked into the students' rehearsal space, I did a double-take. The music they were playing wasn't Kyrgyz; it was Italian, composed in the late 16th century – a song called “Chi Passa Per ‘Sta Strada,” by Fillippo Azzaiolo, which the Kyrgyz musicians performed without the lyrics. I knew that song, not because I remembered anything from my graduate school studies of Renaissance music, but because it had been recorded by the Silk Road Ensemble in a jam session-like rendition on the ensemble's first compact disc for Sony Classical, “Where Strangers Meet”, released in 2002. One of the young Kyrgyz musicians had come across a clip of “Chi Passa” on YouTube, and had thought that it would sound good on Kyrgyz instruments. He quickly learned the catchy melody, and taught it to his fellow musicians, who improvised their own variations on it. I asked the student musicians please to make a video for me¹³ of their performance of “Chi Passa”.

The original Silk Road Ensemble recording of “Chi passa per'sta strada” is easily searchable on YouTube.

The Kyrgyz students clearly excelled at improvising on “Chi Passa,” and part of their interest in the piece was to show how similar the sounds of their Kyrgyz instruments were to the sounds of string, wind, and percussion instruments one might have heard in late 16th-century Italy – a nod to the mystique of “the Silk Road.” And yet this particular example of East-West musical mimesis could have only transpired thanks to the Internet, and represents very much a 21st-century sensibility.

While the example of Kyrgyz students learning “Chi Passa” is a more or less random case of spontaneous virtual connectivity facilitating cross-cultural improvisatory music making, more deliberate initiatives in this domain have also begun to come online. One such initiative that I find promising was recently launched by American composer-improviser-sound artist Jeff Roberts, who, as a graduate student became interested in Chinese music, and spent five years in Beijing studying *guqin*, one of the most ancient of living instruments. Roberts called his initiative the East Asian Improvisation Ensemble (later the name was changed to PAN Project), and described it as “a newly formed ensemble with instrumentalists from Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and the United States that develops improvisation in an intercultural context, using traditional musical languages as a foundation for improvisation and experimentation”. Roberts hopes to conduct rehearsals of the ensemble's geographically far-flung members via Internet. But in contrast to the project-based or piece-based approach that characterizes a large amount of present-day intercultural music-making and often takes place within a time frame of

¹³ That video is viewable at the following link: [<https://vimeo.com/116992672>].

weeks, days, or even just hours of rehearsal, Roberts aspires to work in a time frame that extends over years. Though this is a far shorter duration than the decades and centuries that it took foreign musical influences to become assimilated into Chinese music during the Tang dynasty, Roberts and his fellow ensemble members stand a chance of creating new music with the kind of craft and sensibility that can only emerge from long incubation and patient nurturing. Meanwhile, Roberts is occupied with his own efforts to find new points of connection between the *guqin* and contemporary Western music. Here as well, he is not in a hurry. One of his recent compositions is: “12 Landscape Views III”, for *guqin*, saxophone, and electronics¹⁴.

Roberts explains that the piece has a direct relationship to the *yijing* (immediate emotional impression) that he gets from looking at his favorite section of his favorite Song dynasty scroll painting, *shan shui shi er jing* (山水十二景), by the artist Xia Gui (active ca. 1200-1240¹⁵).

“12 Landscape Views III” blends pre-composed with improvised music and feels spontaneous and alive in the moment, even after repeated listenings. In a statement about his music that I solicited, Roberts wrote:

“The exploration of the guqin tradition in the context of intercultural music making really involves listening with two different sets of ears at the same time. Ideally I have in mind the concept of a hybrid work in which the cultural idioms and resources are no longer discernible as separable elements. One new focus I find myself gravitating toward is the idea of space – an obvious point of focus for Western composers in their initial engagement with East Asian music traditions. After having performed guqin’s traditional repertoire for many years, I have a deeper appreciation for what space in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese music is, and how it is different in each. The gravity of these elements of space increasingly occupies my creative intuition and shapes the trajectory of my composing and improvising. The compositions that come from this will most likely sound very different than ‘Twelve Landscape Views III,’ and may reflect more of a Chinese or Korean musical sensibility.”

Reasonable people may disagree about whether Roberts’s work represents a promising, or desirable direction for East-West intercultural music making. My own assessment is that while “Twelve Landscape Views III” may at some level be a work-in-progress, it creates an original musical language that draws listeners deeply into its sound world – a world that could not exist outside the cross-cultural musical encounter that Roberts engineered – literally and figuratively. The piece stays away from cliché, and though it is not “easy listening” music, I find it readily accessible, finely crafted, and sonically seductive. If this be the musical future of the “New Silk Road”, play on.

¹⁴ That video is viewable at the following link: [<https://soundcloud.com/jeff-roberts-1/roberts-twelve-landscape-views-iii>]. N.B: The duration of this piece is 6:03. The link may continue automatically to a subsequent piece if the music is not manually stopped.

¹⁵ See: [<http://scrolls.uchicago.edu/scroll/twelve-views-landscape>].

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