

# Khöömei:

The Art of Tuvan Throat-Singing

by Matt Finlay

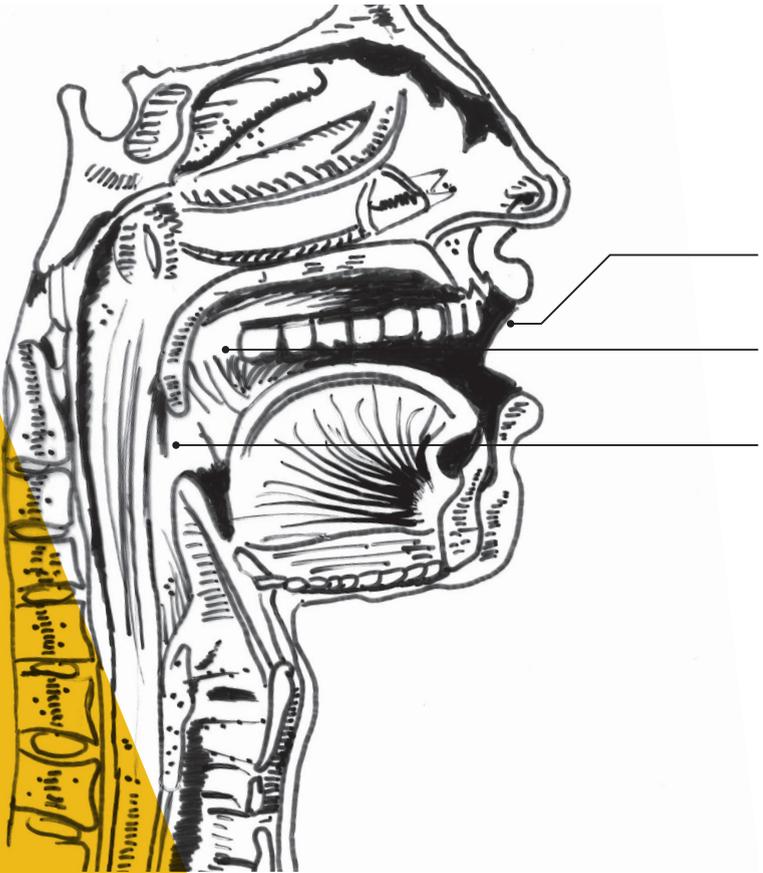


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Futura is a geometric sans  
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## Introduction to Tuvan Throat-Singing

The country of Tuva

Tuvan throat-singing is one of several types of overtone singing practiced by various human cultures for thousands of years. Tuvan throat-singing originated in the small Asian nation of Tuva, which borders Mongolia to the south and Russia to the north, and claims to constitute the geographic center of the continent.

In the 20th century, the country of Tuva came under the control of outside influences; various Russian forces during the Russian Civil War, and finally, Soviet Union annexed the country in 1944. Tuva was isolated from the outside world until the fall of the USSR, and was shrouded in mystery for many westerners, including famous American physicist Richard Feynman, who became fascinated with the customs of the country and with throat-singing, but died before he could visit.

Tuva has gained fame in western nations in post-Soviet years largely due to the unique character and properties of Tuvan throat-singing, which is one of Tuva's primary cultural exports. And since the 1990s with the widespread adoption of the internet, throatsinging has become more accessible to people around the world.

Generally, the overtone singing technique is designed to enhance the contrast between the natural over-tones and under-tones (sonic frequencies) created in human speech and song, so that they become distinguishable to the unpracticed ear. This can be done by forming the lips and tongue in distinctive patterns and singing certain tones while manipulating the shape and tension of those two features simultaneously in conjunction with throat airflow.

There are three main substyles of Tuvan throat-singing: *khöömei*, *sygyt*, and *kargyraa*. Each of these can be further embellished by “additive” techniques such as *borbanngadyr* and *ezenggileer*, but as far as a difference in the pitch of notes produced, those three styles are the primary choices.

Tuvan throat-singing is often further enhanced by the addition of more traditional musical instruments — like the *igil* (a stringed instrument played like a cello), *doshpolours* and *chanzys* (stringed instruments played like a guitar), *khomuses* (jaw harps that sounds like a spring), percussive objects like horse hooves, and various other instruments that have been played in Tuva for several millennia.



A “ton” — the traditional garb of a male Tuvan throatsinger



Golden Eagle (*aquila chrysaetos*) on top of a Tuvan yurt dwelling decorated with a traditional Tuvan textile pattern

## Sygyt (suh•gut)

### *The High-Pitched Whistle*

The *sygyt* style is meant to evoke “gentle breezes of summer, the songs of birds,” and is the most piercing and high-pitched overtone produced in Tuvan Throat-Singing. Like other throat-singing styles, *sygyt* involves splitting an over-tone and an undertone into easily distinguishable frequencies — in this case, frequencies consisting of a high, clear quality. Of all throat-singing styles, *sygyt*’s whistle is likely the cleanest and most accessible for the uninitiated. Because it is high-pitched, *sygyt* reduces strain on the lower regions of the throat and carries very little injury risk for the practitioner’s vocal cords. In this sense, it is the easiest of the three styles to master, and provides the most piercing and recognizable tones. It’s a good starting point for throat-singing beginners, and is often the easiest to recognize for outsiders. Tuvan master throat-singer Kongar-ol Ondar was a *sygyt* style specialist prior to his death in August 2013.

Like all throat-singing styles, *sygyt* may be difficult to master, initially. However, there are special techniques that can allow beginners to work into a clear *sygyt* overtone without too much trouble. The easiest way to accomplish this is to produce an “eee” phoneme and sustain it for a few seconds at a single pitch. Then, slide the tongue back to roughly the alveolar ridge while still touching it to the roof of the mouth and change its shape to “o” or a “u” while still speaking “eee.” Tensing the lips and making the mouth aperture smaller while also oscillating the forward-backward position of the tongue helps to the aspiring throat-singer to find the desired pitch and ease into the *sygyt*.

*Sygyt style is meant to evoke the “gentle breezes of summer, the songs of birds”*

## Khöömei (hoo•may)

### *The Moderate Style*

*Khöömei* is often used as a general term for throat-singing, but it also references the medium vocal range and most popular style of Tuvan throat-singing as well as the general concept.

*Khöömei, the individual style, is meant to evoke “wind swirling among the rocks”*

*Khöömei*, the individual style, is meant to evoke “wind swirling among rocks.” In pitch, *khöömei* is roughly halfway in between *kargyraa* and *sygyt*. However, its production more closely mirrors that of *sygyt* than of *kargyraa*. The style has occasionally been described as sounding more metallic or synthetic in some ways than the other primary styles. The constriction of the throat, its moisture, and the oscillation of the tones produced may all contribute to this incongruous perception of a

completely organic sound — produced with body components that are innate to all humans — as something synthetic.

*Khöömei* differs from *sygyt* in that the movement of the back of the tongue is used to produce the overtone rather than the front of the tongue. Because most westerners are not often tasked with making minute manipulations to back regions of the tongue to produce subtle changes in overtones (consciously, at least), this is probably a harder style for throat-singing newcomers to master consistently compared to *sygyt*, which is built at the front of the vocal tract, just behind the lips and the top two incisor teeth. *Khöömei*'s tone is less piercing than *sygyt*, and it is generated with much less laryngeal tension, and as a result sounds smoother; perhaps more harmonious or coherent.



*Khöömei* is often likened to the sound of wind floating and swirling in air



Kargyaa evokes "the plaintive cries of a mother camel after losing her calf"

## Kargyraa (kar•guh•rah)

### *The Low-Pitched Moan*

*Kargyraa* is the deepest style of Tuvan Throat-Singing. It is meant to evoke "howling winds of winter or the plaintive cries of a mother camel after losing her calf." *Kargyraa* differs from the other two styles significantly in sound. It is essentially, a low, resonant rumble, and feels almost as if it is too deep to be produced by a human voice. Yet, it is an established technique, and one of the three main styles of Tuvan throat-singing. Unlike *khöömei* and *sygyt*, the *kargyraa* style is not generated primarily by movements of the front of the mouth. The lips may slightly alter its pitch, but the power of *Kargyraa* is built at the lowest part of the throat, even in the chest itself.

*Kargyraa* is produced with much wider mouth position than *sygyt* or *khöömei*. However, in order to ease into *kargyraa*, it is often easier for

beginners to start with a closed mouth, singing a normal tone, opening the mouth and gradually moving lower in vocal range, until a deep rattle begins to resonate at the back of the throat and vocal folds. This rattle has potential to be seriously damaging to the vocal folds of inexperienced practitioners; it is generally advised that singing *kargyraa* causes discomfort, pain, or tickling in the throat, one should cease throat-singing and drink some water.

Despite its dangers, when safely executed, *Kargyraa* is a rich and resonant sound that affects listeners in a way few other human vocalizations have the capacity to do.

*Kargyraa ... is meant to evoke "the plaintive cries of a mother camel after losing her calf"*

## Additive Styles

### *Ezenggileer* & *Borbangnadyr*

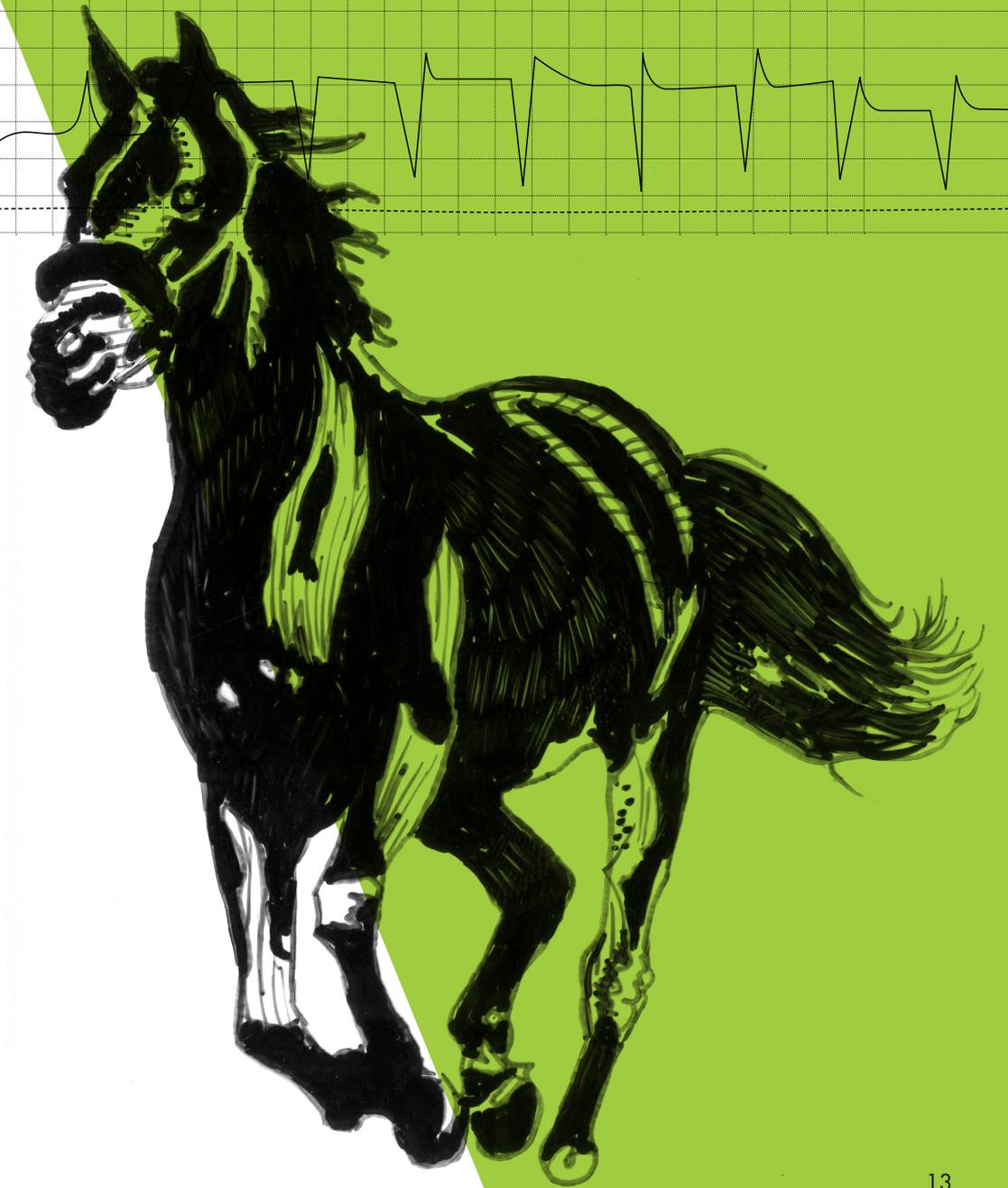
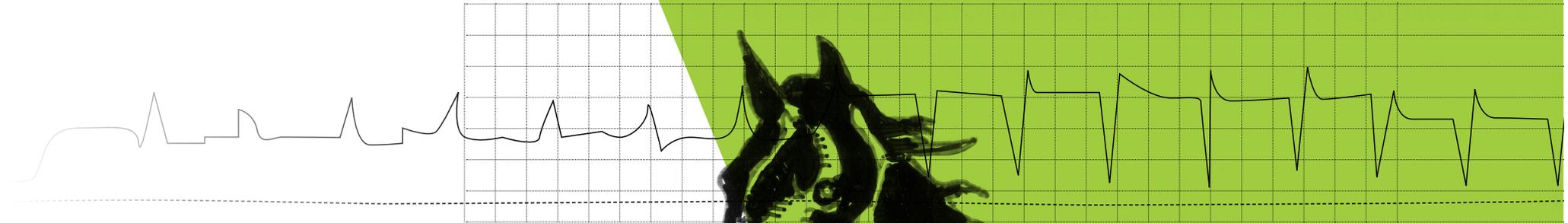
The Additive styles are two forms of embellishment that master throat-singers may choose to add to their songs and performances to enhance the aural quality of the three basic styles of throat-singing.

*Ezenggileer* is one such additive style. It can best be described as a cadence which, when applied to Kargyraa, Sygyt, or Khöömei, mimics the gait of a trotting horse.

In *ezenggileer* style, the clapping of “horse hooves” corresponds to the periodic clarification of the overtone and undertone in distinct and easily recognizable frequencies, as well as an increase in volume or amplitude. That periodic increase

in amplitude and the solidification of distinct sonic frequencies is clearly visible on any spectrogram of a recording of this style, as are the muddier, softer breaks between clarifications.

*Borbangnadyr* is often considered the most difficult style to master, and is typically the most difficult throat-singing embellishment style. Much like employing vibrato techniques when playing a stringed instrument, inducing *borbangnadyr* involves rapid, radical oscillation between several tones. This is a difficult style for most people to master because few can move their lips rapidly enough to produce oscillations as frequently as is required by the technique. The lips must be trained to voluntarily vibrate when tensed and held taut in an O-shape; a skill which takes many years to produce and many more to control.



*Ezenggileer* is ...  
a cadence which  
mimics the gait of a  
trotting horse.



Man playing a khomus / a closeup detail of a khomus with labeled components



Arms

Tongue

Base

## Other Tuvan Instruments & Conclusion

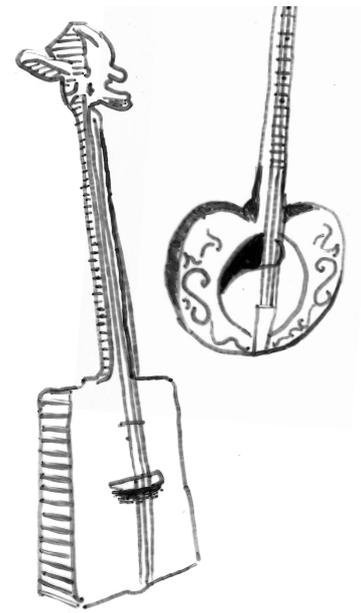
There are a variety of additional Tuvan instruments that throat-singing performers and their groups may decide to play either in isolation or in conjunction with throat-singing. These instruments include the *igil*, *khomus*, *doshpolour*, and *chanzy*.

The *igil* is a stringed instrument that is played with a bow. Like a small cello, the *Igil* is held upright in the player's lap and braced between the thighs. The *Igil* typically has two strings, and is played with long bow-strokes.

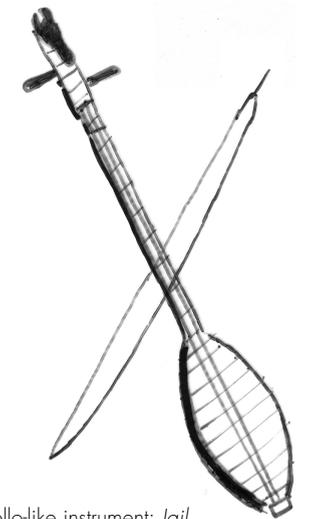
The *khomus* is often known in the west as a "Jew's Harp," "jaw harp," or "mouth harp." It is played by bracing the fork against one's front teeth and plucking the metal reed so it resonates. Melodies are created when the player alters his or her breathing pattern

The *doshpolour* and *chanzy* are two stringed instruments played like guitars or lutes. *Doshpolours* typically have a square-shaped resonant chamber and three strings. Most *chanzys*, while also three-stringed, are typically ornately carved and produce a louder tone.

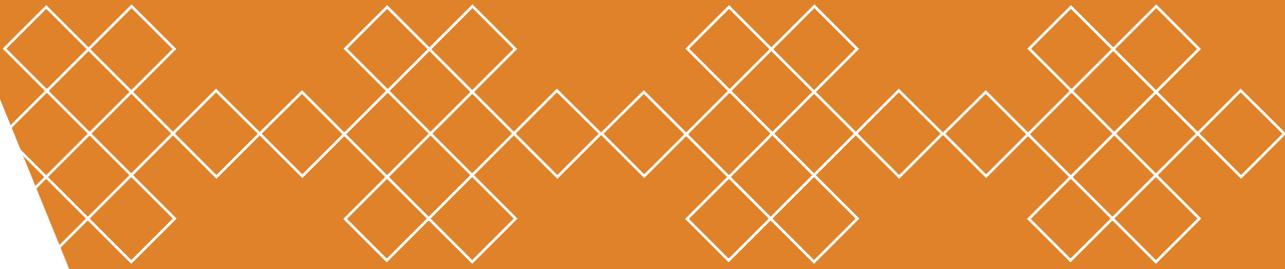
These instruments, when used to accompany Tuvan Throat-singing create an unmistakable and totally unique aesthetic. Honed over the course of centuries, no other country or region in the world can claim as enchanting a diversity or quality of throat-singing as Tuva. And despite its current status as a niche musical interest, Tuvans have graciously exported this tradition around the world, and continue to encourage the spread of the ancient techniques via the internet and other new media.



Two guitar-like Tuvan instruments. Left: *Doshpolour* / Right: *Chanzy*



A cello-like instrument: *Igil*

A decorative graphic consisting of a horizontal row of white diamond shapes on an orange background. The diamonds are arranged in a repeating pattern of three clusters. Each cluster contains a central diamond surrounded by four other diamonds, with additional diamonds extending horizontally from the central diamond. The pattern is symmetrical and repeats across the width of the page.

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