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# Crossroads

– an interview with Benjamin Yusupov

In these years, Benjamin Yusupov is becoming a still more recognized figure on the international stage of contemporary music. He was born and raised in Tajikistan when it was one of the Central Asian Soviet Republics, educated in Moscow in the 1980s and since 1990 he has been living in Israel. This interview was made in August 2010 during his visit at the Summer Music Festival of the Danish Chamber Players (Storstrøms Kammerensemble) at the estate Fuglsang on the Danish island of Lolland.<sup>1</sup> At the festival, four of Yusupov's works were presented: the first performance of *Memories – Crossroads No. 6* (2009), a commission by the Danish Chamber Players; his early Sonata for two pianos (1983, rev. 1998); his Piano Quintet (1996); and *Haqqoni – Crossroads No. 4* (2007) for clarinet, violin, violoncello, piano and tape.

## *One name, three identities*

*MF:* I have been listening to some of your music from the 1990s and to your Symphony from 1987 (rev. 1992). I have in mind pieces such as *Jonona* for flute, *oud*, double bass and percussion (1996), the Piano Quintet and orchestral pieces like *Tanovor* for flute and chamber orchestra (1994) and *Nola* (1994) for various flutes and string orchestra. A conspicuous feature of these pieces is the combination of modern ensembles and the sound of traditional instruments and playing techniques. What traditions are we listening to in these pieces?

*Yusupov:* Yusef, my family name, can explain the three components of my identity. Yusef is a Jewish name, in Muslim transcription it turns into Yusuf, and when the Russians came and started issuing passports and registering their citizens it became Yusupov, because they added an '-ov' to the names as it is a custom among the Russians. This is highly symbolic, because I am Jewish with a background in a Muslim tradition of music and with a Western education from Moscow.

I was born in Tajikistan in 1962 and had all my basic training there until the age of 18. My father was a folk musician, who played the *rubab*, a folk instrument of the Tajik-Iranian region. So I grew up naturally with the ethnic music of the region. I myself learned to play the piano in the European tradition. Then I went to Moscow where

1 This interview was first published in Danish in a slightly different version on the website of *Dansk Musiktidsskrift*, 26.10.2010, at <http://www.danskmusiktidsskrift.dk/interview/crossroads>. For further information on Benjamin Yusupov I refer to his homepage, <http://www.byusupov.com>.

I studied at the conservatory for ten years. I studied composition and theory and was trained as a conductor, too, so I have learned European technique and European culture.

### *From regional to global*

I considered it the main challenge for me to combine my roots with the modern technique, which is the result of the development in our musical world. What contemporary Western composers were looking for – unheard sounds or uncommon rhythms or textures – those were completely natural to the Eastern world. So I started to combine elements from these two worlds and until the time around 2000 I mainly used Central Asian melodies and *maqams*, the Eastern system of music making. Maqam is not just melodies, it is great philosophy too, modes or scales and teachings on how to develop scales and achieve form.

One of my earliest pieces is Sonata for two pianos, which was composed while I was still studying in Moscow. In those years some Soviet composers had the opportunity of travelling in the West, for example Alfred Schnittke and Sofia Gubaidulina, and they brought music back home to Moscow. One of the things I work on in this piece is to make the piano reproduce the sound of folk music, for example by playing on the strings within in piano. In this way it is a clash between folk music and a modern, Western instrument. But it is also a clash with features of the Western avant-garde as I experienced it in Moscow in the 1980s.

But within the latest ten years I have come to feel more and more global. Due to access to the Internet and Youtube we are able to get to a totally different musical culture just by one click, for example Chinese music, South American music, or African music. To me as an artist this is very interesting to listen to. I find that Ethnic music from different countries actually to a great extent have a common notion of development and mentality. And to me it is only a matter of taking it in or to translate it into my European sources and their musical language and instruments.

The globalization, which happened in economy and politics, applies naturally to the arts to. When I listen to the tango or the Indian raga or Armenian *duduk*, I am listening to the sound. I hear it from the outside. Then I scoop from all these sources and translate it to my own ideas, out of my identity and my soul. That can be heard, for example, in my Concerto for Viola and Orchestra, which is called *Viola Tango Rock Concerto* (2003). I find that much more interesting than the narrow line of avant-garde, because so much has been said by Boulez and Stockhausen and their schools that I cannot add anything to that.

Israel is the best example of my ideas. Many Jewish communities from various countries immigrated to Israel and brought their traditions along, their culture and their practice of music and all. In this fairly small country with 5-6 million inhabitants they exchanged ideas and influenced each other. We have many ensembles, too, where Western and Eastern musicians are playing together, African music, jazz, and so on, and sometimes amazing results are achieved.

Something similar happens in large cities like London and New York and Paris, but in those places it is not the identity of the country. They recognize that it is French or English music, but in Israel they do not know what it is. There they are creating out of all these elements, it is like creating a new dish – and that is a very interesting process. Israel is still a very young culture, about 50-60 years, and that give the opportunity to create this kind of ‘mixed salad’.

### *Entangled roots*

*MF:* When I visited Uzbekistan, the neighbouring country of Tajikistan, in the spring of 2010 I noticed that in the old cultural cities of Bukhara and Samarkand, Uzbek and Tajik culture is living side by side. Traditional high culture of music and poetry is attached to Tajik and before that Persian court culture. Is it the same culture one finds in Tajikistan?

*Yusupov:* Before the Russians occupied this region in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was divided into three emirates: Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokant. These emirates were bilingual with an Uzbek culture belonging to the family of Turkic languages and the Tajik-Persian culture which is ancient.

In the 1920s the Soviet government divided the whole area into five Republics: Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Those are not natural entities and Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, was only established at this moment. There was nothing there. And the majority of the Jews and Tajiks, which now live in Dushanbe, came from Bukhara and Samarkand.

So you are right that the old traditions, which existed in Bukhara and Samarkand, are the same as in Tajikistan. The culture of the whole region is strongly under the influence of old, Persian poetry and Arab ideas and concerning music the *maqam*-tradition. But the area too had a strong identity of its own, not least in the Pamir mountains, where the originality of melodies and harmonies have been preserved.

*MF:* In Bukhara there is a very old Jewish community with a rich Jewish culture. And often, Jewish musicians were the ones performing the traditional *maqam* or, as it is known in its most fashionable form, *shash maqam*, which is orally transmitted suites of vocal and instrumental music inherited from the Persian court culture. You are a Jewish composer from Tajikistan. Does the same tradition of Jews being associated with the trade of being a musician apply to that area?

*Yusupov:* My great-great-great-grandfather was a court musician at the Emir of Bukhara. He played the *tanbur* and was also a singer of *shash maqam*. His instrument passed down through my family and hangs on my wall. He was very famous and his name was Josefi Gurg. This is a good example of where I come from. Jews were subjected to laws which prevented them from owning land; one of the things Jews were allowed to

do was to be musicians and to work in stores and workshops as merchants and artisans. So many of them were musicians and the most famous musicians of the tradition of performing shash maqam were Jewish.

Bukhara has a very rich tradition in all areas, in poetry, in music, in architecture. But since the arrival of the Russians there was also a link with the West. And one of the things I sensed after my emigration to Israel was that the former Soviet Muslim countries possess much richer means of expression compared to Arab countries like Egypt, Iraq, Syria, or Jordan. One of the good things about the Soviet Union was the existence of this openness in the Russian approach to the Western tradition and to Western instrumentation and music history.

#### *Crossroads No. 4*

*MF:* One of the pieces performed during the Fuglsang festival was *Haqqoni – Crossroads No. 4* for clarinet, violin, violoncello, piano and tape – or actually a CD. It contains a song performed by your grandfather, which you have recorded and worked into the piece. What kind of song is this haqqoni and why did you use it in this way?

*Yosupov:* The genre of haqqoni is highly interesting. The word comes from Arab, *haqq*, which means 'the absolute truth' and *hoqq* which in Jewish means 'law', the law of existence. Haqqoni is a vocal genre which is exclusive to Bukhara and which is sung by Jews as well as Muslims. The songs are performed by professional singers and are used during funeral processions and memorial ceremonies, by now mostly among Jews. When someone died, such singers would arrive and sing about fate and the loss.

My grandfather was one of those singers and I use a recording which was made in the 1980s. The text is poetry in Persian style where one poetically paraphrases the same situation in numerous ways; here it is the experience of being abandoned by a beloved one and the feeling of being left alone and behind. The songs aim at very strong feelings and are very powerful and mournful, performed with lengthy pauses between the verses. Contrary to most of the music from Bukhara, haqqoni is not metrical and it is sung a cappella. There is a strong influence from sufi traditions in style as well as in the text.

Furthermore, I called the piece *Crossroads No. 4*, Crossroads being a cycle of so far six different works. In each of them I try to cross musical ideas, first of all of the West and the East, here also acoustical instruments and pre-recorded sound, and I was occupied with how a live performer is affected by pre-recorded sound. Acoustically I find that very interesting. It corresponds to when a musician playing in a specific hall changes his touch or dynamics or even the tempo. That is familiar to every musician. And it corresponds to the idea of haqqoni, the law of existence, where you might have an idea but must acknowledge that the situation does not allow you to realize it.

Finally it was interesting to cross the Eastern scale, maqam, with the so-called European scales. It is hard to explain, it is nothing but musical ideas, but I feel it expresses

our situation of today: I am sitting here in Denmark, looking on Raphael or something like that on the wall of Fuglsang, I am using Internet, playing Iranian music, drinking French wine, and so on. It becomes ever more interesting to consider what you can add to this great culture, from your heart, from your identity, so that your listeners can enjoy your ideas. And that applied to Haqqoni too, because musicians are expressing themselves and get feedback from something that exists on recorded tape.

*Editorial comment by Michael Fjeldsøe*

This interview was made as an attempt to present Benjamin Yusupov to a Danish audience. Besides that, I find it important to present detailed stories on composers from the 'Orient' in order to counter the orientalist notion of the East that this is just the undifferentiated 'other' against which we are upholding our own, Western notions of identity. Even if one agrees with the basic critique of Western orientalism, such simplistic views do not fit reality very well. What turned out to be one of the most interesting aspects of the interview was how Yusupov explained to me his notion of identity. He was not trying to present a plain and simple story of a national identity as either a Tajik or Israeli citizen. Instead, what was presented as his identity was clearly negotiated within a multi-layered discourse of national identities, family histories, and personal experiences. Another aspect of the discourse is the various notions of East and West, which are also part of an ongoing negotiation of identities.

Presenting this interview at a session of the research colloquium of the Section Musicology at the University of Copenhagen in the spring of 2011, the overall theme being 'orientalism', it became clear to me that this kind of material presents perspectives for further research in the field where theories of nationalism in music and theories of orientalism clash. In the on-going process of defining nations and identities of national musics, what was originally orientalist features of the 'West' turned out to be internalized and regarded proper features of national identity by composers of the 'East', based on Western models of nations from the 19th century which are constantly being revised and revived within a larger discourse of modernization.