A celebration of women’s music making in Central Asia featuring the performers of

“QYRQ QYZ” (Forty Girls)

A retelling of a Central Asian heroic epic in which the main heroes are female—young women whose equestrian skills, valor, and military prowess call to mind the legendary Amazons described by ancient Greek geographers and historians.

TUESDAY March 6 | 8:00 pm
John Knowles Paine Concert Hall | 3 Oxford St, Cambridge
FREE

Co-sponsored by Davis Center, Asia Center & Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Islamic Studies Program
Info: 617-495-2791 | musicdpt@fas.harvard.edu | music.fas.harvard.edu

Music in Central Asia has been shaped by the region’s millennia-old geocultural symbiosis between sedentary-dwellers and nomads who inhabit distinct and strongly contrasting musical worlds, each with its own musical instruments, styles, repertoires, and sensibilities. Music making by women has been a vital part of both of these worlds.

The musicians featured in this evening’s concert were brought together to perform Qyrq Qyz (Forty Girls), a retelling of a Central Asian heroic epic. The historical setting is the windswept steppe land surrounding the southern portion of the Aral Sea, which comprises the territory of present-day Karakalpakistan.

Qyrq Qyz represents a vestige of the archaic currents of matriarchy that course through Central Asian cultures, traces of which remain robust today in the form of numerous legends about “forty girls” told and retold particularly among women. These legends are physically embodied in the eponymous names of ancient fortresses, sacred pilgrimage sites, shrines, and personified geological formations such as rock outcroppings and large boulders that local inhabitants perceive as human figures. Pilgrimage sites and shrines are often draped with strips of cloth left as offerings to the spirits of the Forty Girls.

Among Central Asian nomadic peoples, poetic verse, singing, and musical instruments were believed to have therapeutic powers—in particular, the power to heal the psyche, and bring about social equilibrium and harmony. In Central Asian Turkic languages, terms for “epic reciter” and “traditional healer” or “shaman” are often cognate, suggesting that both professions developed from the same cultural practice. The leader of the Qyrq Qyz ensemble, Raushan Urazbayeva, is a master performer on the qyl qobyz, an archaic two-stringed fiddle historically linked to shamanic practices.

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