

Eduard Alekseyev: One of the Founders of Sakha Ethnomusicology

By Anna S. Larionova, with Robin P. Harris

Abstract: *This article describes the life and work of Eduard Alekseyev, Sakha musicologist, including his childhood, education, key theoretical contributions to the field of ethnomusicology, expeditions around Siberia and beyond, field recordings, and approach to transcriptional issues.*

Eduard Yefimovich Alekseyev was born in Yakutsk, Siberia, on December 4, 1937, into the family of two Honored Teachers of the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic: Asya Alekseyeva (1911–1974) and Yefim Alekseyev (1912–1972); the latter's own father was a famous Sakha bone-carver.

1. Early life, education, and work

At 14 years old, the young Alekseyev moved to Moscow to attend the Central Music School of Moscow State Conservatory, studying piano from 1952 to 1956 with Abram Shatskes (who was himself previously a student of Nikolaï Medtner), and music theory with Ludmila Fokina. He graduated with highest honors, and from 1956 to 1961 studied theory and composition at the Moscow Conservatory under Professor Leo Mazel, graduating with honors. Alekseyev did his graduate work in folklore from 1963 to 1966 at the Institute of Art History under Professor Viktor Belyaev. In 1959 and 1960 he worked as an assistant in the Moscow Conservatory's folklore laboratory, the institution to which he later returned (1986–1990) as a supervisor of a graduate student.



Fieldwork with a team in the Gobi Desert (Mongolia, 1976)

(Photos in this article are from Eduard Alekseyev's personal collection and are used by permission)

Returning briefly to the Republic of Yakutia's capital city (Yakutsk) in 1961, he taught at the music college and the teachers' college until 1963. This was followed by three decades of service (until 1993) in Moscow at the Institute of Art History. For two of those decades (1972–1992), he also led the All-Union Commission of Folk Music of the Union of Soviet Composers. In 1986, he became one of the musical editors of the 60-volume series *Folklore of the Peoples of Siberia and the Far East*. He founded the General Theory of Musical Folklore department at the Institute of Art History in 1987, the same year he became a member of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM). In 1991 he was awarded the Boris Asafyev state prize for his monograph titled *Early Folklore Intonation: Aspects of Pitch* (1986). From 1993 to 1996, he worked at the Institute of Ethnic Minorities of the North in Yakutsk and served as the vice-president of the Academy of Spirituality of the Sakha Republic during 1996 and 1997. Since 1997, he has lived in the USA, near Boston, Massachusetts.

2. Contributions to the field of ethnomusicology

Alekseyev has published numerous works,¹ among them various articles on aspects of Sakha folk music. Thanks to him, one of the more studied areas of Sakha traditional music is its tonal organization, explored in his book *Problems of mode formation: From the material of Yakut folk song* (1976). As a scholar, he further developed the observations and conclusions of his predecessor, Mark Zhirkov, an early Sakha composer and musicologist, who was the first person to codify the performance characteristics of the two primary Sakha singing styles (*dièrétii yrya* and *dégèrèn yrya*). Alekseyev's work analyzed the distinctive markers of Sakha melodies, in particular the principles related to the inception of sung scales—a process similar to that of morphogenesis in biology. He noted the connections between verbal text and music and the flexible interpretation of early melodies, especially the character of pitch transformations. In addition, he was able to build models of intonation from these archaic songs, models which reflected the continuous development of folklore tunes. His expansion on the concepts of “early folklore intonation” and “unfolding modes” are still in use, not only in Russian scholarship, but in the scholarship of countries drawing on Russian language texts and beyond.²

2.1 Early folklore intonation

The principles governing the tonal inventories of Sakha traditional songs are connected to the formation of their modal structures and the functions of various tones. Sakha tunes are characterized by a predominance of short intervallic structures with well-defined supporting foundations relating to one another through their specific locations in the mode. Accordingly, there are upper, middle and base tones that, in the mind of the musician, are stable and relatively equal. Early forms of these modes were characterized by microtonal changes of the melodic pitches, both in their expansion and contraction, as well as the gradual, imperceptible change of tessitura as the tune progresses. These changes of pitch elevation during the performance are difficult to identify by ear; they are often unnoticed by the performer. In *Early folklore intonation: Aspects of pitch*, Alekseyev describes this phenomenon of traditional Sakha pitch organization, especially in regard to the specifics of olonkho recitative. He explains:

Imagine that the whole melodic structure slowly but irresistibly slides lower, as if it were on a slightly inclined plane. When the olonkosut [performer of olonkho] finishes his single, remarkably long-breathed phrase of rapid recitative, covering a dozen or so poetic lines, he takes an audible breath. Then we are surprised to observe that the resultant pause separates a broad interval of more than one and a half octaves, the lowest point of which the singer reached in a slow, almost imperceptible manner. The nearly constant interval

¹ For a list of publications, see <http://www.eduard.alekseyev.org/author4.html> (accessed Nov. 27, 2013).

² See, for example the use of “early folklore intonation” in a book by Dina Kirnarskaya which transcended Russia's borders: *The natural musician: On abilities, giftedness, and talent* (Oxford University Press, 2009). A summary of the work is available at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/music_and_letters/summary/v092/92.1.sloboda.html. See also its use by Rytis Ambrazevičius in examining Lithuanian folk music: http://icmpc-escom2012.web.auth.gr/sites/default/files/papers/58_Proc.pdf and http://www.musicstudies.org/JIMS2008/articles/Ambrazevicius_JIMS_0821202.pdf, as well as an article by Bahit Jakupova published in Kazakhstan: <http://mysl.kz/?p=1070>. In addition, Alekseyev's explanation of the Sakha “unfolding mode” is mentioned in Brian Schrag's forthcoming "Motivations and Methods for Encouraging Artists in Longer Traditions" in *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology*, edited by Svanibor Pettan and Jeff Todd Titon (New York: Oxford University Press).

of a fourth between two alternating tones remains constant, as if in plain sight. Breaks in the tessitura can be detected only at the intersections between periods of recitative, and even then, masked by a change in breathing, they are not too noticeable. In summary, the nature of intonation is comprised of a long descending glissando on two parallel levels, a phenomenon largely related to the emotional and expressive character of the recitative.³

An understanding of these important aspects of pitch relationships is key to comprehending olonkho tonal organization and the expressive means available to the olonkhosut.

2.2 “Unfolding modes” and tritones in Sakha folk songs

Based on song samples, Alekseyev identified two types of scales: *stable* and *mobile*. Stable scales, familiar to musicologists, are characterized by only internal fluctuations of melodic tones for all constructions of the tunes.⁴ Less common than stable scales, mobile scales have been traditionally characteristic of Sakha songs. They have been characterized by what turn out to be simply fluctuations of the tonal system as a whole: “purposeful, gradual changes of one, several, or all of the melodic tones, resulting in an expansion, after many repetitions, of the intervals between those tones, but in which the intonational-functional organization of the tune is preserved” (Alekseyev 1986: 177). According to Alekseyev’s research, early folk tunes with “unfolding modes” do not have a single tonal center; their tones are instead functionally equivalent:

Intervallic relationships between these malleable pitch melodies...represent an active equilibrium between the opposing tendencies of attraction and repulsion... If, under the influence of any external factors, the stability of the structures is disrupted and the mode begins to “unfold,” the distance between the tones of the melody increases uniformly and proportionately across the scale.... [T]herefore, the overall balance between the forces of attraction and repulsion is not broken, the intervallic relationships and the modal melodic organization, with its transformations of pitch, remains basically the same. (1976: 148)

In his search to understand the various types of melodies in Sakha traditional songs, Alekseyev explored some general properties characteristic of melodies of archaic culture. His findings are outlined in his foundational work, *Problems of mode formation: From the material of Yakut folk song* (1976). In particular, he noted that a characteristic feature of Sakha traditional songs is the interval of a tritone. This fact was first discussed by composer Grant Grigorian, who wrote, “Initially, a singer improvising within the interval of a major third expanded that interval in the melody to an augmented fourth, and finally—stretching to another tone up—to a fifth (the resulting notes, including the augmented fourth, created a whole tone scale)” (1956: 75). The tritone appeared in whole tone melodic passages, often after a major third. Grigorian noted that the tritone interval was quite stable, and “characteristic, not so much as a connector as it is an element of contrast for its component colors. It is no wonder that early song intonation put at the forefront timbral/register contrast, rather than the melodic pitch connection of notes” (1986: 56).

³ Translated by Robin Harris from the Internet version of *Rannefol'klornoe intonirovanie. Zvukovysotnyĭ aspekt* [Early folklore intonation: Aspects of pitch], (Moscow: Soviet Composer, 1986: 76), available at <http://eduard.alekseyev.org/rfi/chapter4.html>, accessed Nov. 11, 2013].

⁴ By “fluctuations” he means “accidental, haphazard deviation of the pitch of a tone from its average level” (from <http://eduard.alekseyev.org/rfi/summary.html>, Section 3.4, accessed Nov. 12, 2013).

2.3 Text and texture

In the Internet version of his first book, *Yakut folk songs: Emergence of tonal organization* (1976), Alekseyev explores the tonal inventories of Sakha folk songs and asserts that the song melodies and the verbal speech elements are inseparable. He affirms the primacy of speech rhythms and their effect on the vocal-musical element: “What ultimately determines the temporal organization of artistic speech is the textual-syllabic rhythm. In other words, the principles of textual-syllabic rhythm are seen no matter what form is used—poetic verse or song and music” (1976: 23).

Although intra-syllabic melismas play an important role in Sakha folk music, Alekseyev observes that there are regional distinctives in the way these melismas are sung. He notes that the olonkhosuts of the central region of Yakutia are prone to a more decorated manner of intoning the melodic material and calls this manner of singing, *tardan yllyyr* (singing every syllable with



Crossing the Viliui river with reel-to-reel recording equipment (1963)

decoration). He contrasts this with the Viliui manner of singing, *étén yllyyr* (sung speech in a declarative speech manner), noting that this latter method is characterized by a clear, rhythmic declamation and a general lack of long, sung-out words.⁵

Both of these styles of *raspev* (chanting), however, fall within the singing style of *dièrétii yrya* and are clearly a stylistic trait of not just olonkho, but also other Sakha genres such as *toyuk* and *algys*. The song sections of olonkho he believes are *toyuk*-like, observing that “the defining structural feature of *toyuk* and similar kinds of forms are more or less systematically based on intrasyllabic, rhythmic-intonational formulas. . . . This singing method actually turns each syllable into a uniform (or slightly varied) metric ‘step,’ giving rise to the term *slogostop*, or ‘syllabic-stepped’ style” (1996: 48). This contrasts sharply with the metrical-rhythmic structure of the other style of Yakut traditional singing—*dègèrèn yrya*—which is dependent on a “highly stable seven-syllable, eight-beat, metrical-rhythmic structure. This style enjoys an unabated popularity in the *ohuokhai* round dance and is well-established in many other genres of everyday songs, including those not associated with dance” (1976: 13–14).

2.4 Timbre, Ornamentation, and Pitch Zones

Alekseyev’s contribution to understanding the expressive materials of the Yakut folk song is significant. In particular he addressed the role of timbre and ornamentation, closely linking the Sakha *dieretii yrya* style of singing to overtones produced in the throat—*kylyhakh*. Alekseyev described *kylyhakh* as “a kind of unique ornamentation, like a ‘counterpoint’ to the sound of the

⁵ See also <http://eduard.alekseyev.org/work26.html>, fifth paragraph (accessed Nov. 12, 2013).

main melodic line, creating the effect of a ‘two-voiced solo,’ in which the singing voice splits into two independent melodic lines⁶ according to timbre. This highly original way of singing is no less significant than the traditional two-timbred *khoomoi* performed by Tuvan throat-singers and other peoples” (1981: 5).

Other ideas coming out of Alekseyev’s observations from his field work were related to the zonal nature of pitch in early music cultures. He proposed that in regards to early folk singing, one can talk only about the existence of different reference tones. These reference tones are independent of exact pitch labels because the breadth of the pitch zone can be fairly wide. This idea of a brilliantly colored pitch zone, exemplified in Yakut *kylyhakh* as vibrato and trills, is “not so much an alternating between tones of the scale as it is a special way of singing that interprets the reference pitch quite widely. A trill of this sort seems to be a deliberate vocal vibrato, rather than a succession of alternating pitches or timbres. Both of the sounds in this trill—no matter how far apart they are in actual pitch, are in fact one and the same degree of the scale” (1976: 176). This principle of a *zonal range of pitch in emic tonal understanding* became the basis of Finnish folklore scholar Jarkko Niemi’s comprehensive study of the relationship of words and music of the Yenisei Nenets (1997 and 1999).

3. Expeditions, recordings, and transcriptions

In addition to his research analyzing Sakha songs, Alekseyev conducted expeditions in various areas around Yakutia, as well as far-flung regions of the former Soviet Union, namely Altai, Abkhazia, Adjara, Adygea, Bashkiria, Belarus, Buryatia, West Georgia, Mongolia, Tuva, Kalmykia, Kyrgyzstan, the Crimea, and Uzbekistan. On these expeditions he recorded samples of Russian folk music as well as the musics of the Èven, Èvenk, Yukagir, Chukchi, Eskimos, Kalmyks, Jews, Roma, Crimean Tatars and others. He compiled a collection of songs by the popular Sakha amateur composer Khristofor Maximov as well as a collection, *Examples of Yakut Folk Music* (with Nadezhda Nikolaeva, 1981). In the 1970s and early 80s, he carried out a series of musical-sociological studies with Grigoriĭ Golovinskiĭ regarding the musical tastes of Moscow youths. In 1987 he participated in the production of a documentary film about shamans, *Dreamtime*, which was awarded a prize at the International Festival of Audiovisual Anthropology in Pärnu (Estonia). He also composed musical works, including one in collaboration with German Komrakov on the opera *Song of Manchary* (1967).



In the field, southern Yakutia (1990)

In 1976 he notated and released on vinyl records some re-mastered recordings from 1946 by the famous Sakha folk singer Ustin Nokhsorov. Other recordings of Nokhsorov included fragments of introductory recitatives and songs of the heroes such as “Song of Soruk Bollur,” “Song of Kyys-Kyskyidaan,” “Song of the Bride Hero,” “Song of Timir Sülüntäi,” “Song of the Celestial Shamaness” and “Song of the Tungus Hero” from the olonkhos *Ürüing Uolan* and *Nyurgun*

⁶ I.e., both the *kylyhakh* line and the “normal” melodic line.

Bootur the Impetuous. They were recorded with the help of a discograph in the folklore laboratory of the Moscow Conservatory.

Rare kinds of songs recorded by Alekseyev included examples of people singing in their sleep—(carotic) songs (*tiiül yryata*), moans (*ênêlgên yryata*), farewell and dying songs (*sulanny yryata*), songs of deep physical suffering (*köghüüüü yryata*), “arctic hysteria” songs⁷ (*mênèrik yryata*), and traveling songs (*suol yryata*), among others (1976: 11).

The problem of how to transcribe and notate the recordings of these traditional songs was first raised by Zhirkov and later developed by Alekseyev in his book *Notation of folk music: Theory and practice* (1990). On the whole, notational issues are highly relevant to the music of non-European cultures, including Siberian peoples, whose melodies have a preponderance of modal outliers and a broad variety of timbres. In this respect, Alekseyev’s works suggest some conventions for the music notation of each oral tradition, while insisting that all types of song notations reflect the subjective perceptions of the one notating. In this regard, he recommends finding, among the various musical notations of a single tune, the core (unvarying) image of the song, as well as its basic structural model. His work accurately predicted the important role of computers in this kind of analytical synthesis, noting that it “...is extremely difficult and time consuming, and in some ways yet to be developed in detail. This type of work, however—the decoding of folk-music materials—will likely be the achievement of a computer-aided age, the age to which the future belongs” (1990: 94).

4. Optimism for the future

Alekseyev sees folk melodies as living organisms which have enormous capacities of resilience, durability, and longevity—even in the face of rapid change and a globalizing world. This conviction allows him to be an optimist when speaking of the future of folk music, despite the grim predictions of folklore demise posited by some scholars.⁸ The remarkable breadth and depth of scholarship represented in the works of Eduard Alekseyev make him not only one of the founders of Sakha musicology, but also point to the significant contribution of his life and writings to the study of traditional musics of Siberia and beyond.



⁷ An article on “Singing during culturally specific mental disorders of the peoples of the Siberian North” at Alekseyev’s site <http://eduard.alekseyev.org/work4.html> (accessed Nov 12, 2013) talks about these *mênèrik yryata* and other genres related to illnesses.

⁸ In this regard, another work of Alekseyev’s which explores these issues and may thus be of interest for the inquisitive reader, is *Fol’klor v kontekste sovremennoï kul’tury: Rassuzhdenia o sud’bakh narodnoi pesni* [*Folklore in the context of modern culture: Thoughts on the fate of folk song*], Moscow: Soviet Composer, 1988. An English language summary is available (<http://eduard.alekseyev.org/work14.html>) as well as a review by Anna Czekanowska (<http://eduard.alekseyev.org/author9.html>), both accessed Nov. 12, 2013.

Authors

Anna S. Larionova, Doctor of Arts, is the Director of the Yakut Folklore Division at the Institute of Humanities and Problems of Minorities of the North, Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Science. She lives in the city of Yakutsk, the capital city of the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in the Russian Federation. Her publications include *Dègèrèn yrya: Lyrical song of the Yakuts* (2000) and *Verbal and musical in Yakut dièrètii song* (2004), and *Tunes of the Yakut heroic epos olonkho: Textual symbolic aspects* (2012).

Robin P. Harris, PhD, lived for a decade in the Russian North, where she began studying the music of the Sakha, whose epic narrative song genre *olonkho* became the focus of her dissertation at the University of Georgia Athens (2012), and is the subject of a book project with University of Illinois Press. She directs the MA program in World Arts at the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics (GIAL).

Resources

Alekseyev, Eduard. 1976. *Problemy formirovaniia lada: na material yakutskoï narodnoï pesni* [*Problems of mode formation: From the material of Yakut folk song*]. Moscow: Muzyka. [An updated Internet version, under the new title: *Yakutskie narodnye pesni: stanovlenie lada (Yakut folk songs: Emergence of tonal organization)*, is available at <http://eduard.alekseyev.org/pfl/index.html>, accessed Nov. 11, 2013].

———. 1986. *Rannefol'klornoe intonirovanie. Zvukovysotnyi aspekt* [Early folklore intonation: Aspects of pitch]. Moscow: Soviet Composer.

———. 1990. *Notnaia zapis' narodnoï muzyki: teoriia i praktika* [Notation of folk music: Theory and practice]. Moscow: Soviet Composer.

———. 1996. "O muzykal'nom voploshchenii olonkho" [On the musical embodiment of *olonkho*]. In *Monuments of the Folklore of the Peoples of Siberia and Far East*. Vol. 10, "Yakut Heroic Epic: The Mighty Er Sogotokh." Novosibirsk: Nauka.

Alekseyev, Eduard and Nadezhda Nikolaeva. 1981. *Obraztsy yakutskogo pesennogo fol'klora* [Examples of Yakut song folklore]. Yakutsk: Yakutskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo.

Grigorian, Grant. 1956. "V Yakutii" [In Yakutia]. *Soviet Music* 10: 71–78.

Niemi Jarkko. 1997. "Music transcription in Z. N. Kupriyanova's collection of Nenets epic songs." *Journal de la Société Finno-Ougrienne* 87: 161–224. Helsinki: Publications of the Finno-Ugrian Society.

———. 1999. "Nyenei nyenyanggi' sho" [Songs of the real nenyang]. In *Songs of the Yenisey Nenets performed by Lyubov' Prokop'yevna Nenyang-Komarova*. Tampere, Finland: Virrat.