

Tenger Ayalguu (Folk Music Group)

Mongolians are guardians of one of the richest and earliest known folklore in the world. Stories of the origin and inception of its traditional folklore, song and dance have been long recorded in ancient scripts and historical accounts. Mongolian lifestyles, its traditions and customs as well as natural environment and code of conducts have shaped its rich musical heritage. A group of dedicated artists who wish to preserve these traditional forms of precious art founded the ethnic music band “Tenger Ayalguu” in 1997. Literally meaning Sky Melody, “Tenger Ayalguu” has a repertoire that includes traditional dances, songs as well as international folklore. All members are educated and graduated from the Musical College of Ulaanbaatar and the Mongolian State University of Art and Culture. Aside from their performing career, they also hold fulltime teaching and lecturing positions at various musical institutions across the country.

Tenger Ayalguu has performed to a wide range of audiences including various government dignitaries, ambassadors, members of international corporations as well as leisure travelers visiting Mongolia from all five continents. During any of its performance, audiences get a chance to immerse into traditional Mongolian short and long songs about the grassland, romance and loved ones as well as dances, praise songs, and the “throat” or khoonii singing and enjoy the amazing acrobats of contortionists. The band is also open to various professional collaborations in the field of research, trainings and various commercial undertakings.

Limbe (Flute): This flute is one example of the precious cultural heritage of Central Asian nomadic people living under the eternal blue sky. In the beginning, the flute was made from bone while brasses were introduced later. While many other countries have flutes, the Mongolian flute has the following unique characteristics:

1. Full tones are produced while all major holes are closed
2. One specific technique used in flute playing is called circular breathing, which allows the musician to play continuously without pausing for breath. Only Mongolian musicians are known to possess this skill, locally called “Bituu Amisgal”. The limbe circular breathing was inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding by UNESCO in 2011.

Morin Huur (Horse headed fiddle): Morin Huur is Mongolia’s most celebrated ancient form of instrument and is considered as a musical representation of Mongolia’s horse based culture. The strings are traditionally made from horse tails, producing unique musical sound when played. Considered to have been originated over 2500 years ago, it has two strings, trapezoid shaped sound box and a distinctive horse head carved on its top.

Ever buree (Horn flute): The origin of ever buree is thought to be the ancient battle horns used to summon Mongols into the battle. It has the semi-circular shape of a bull horn and produces gentle, melodic tunes. Significant improvements have been made over the years into its core design.

Yochin (Hammered Dulcimer): Yochin is one of the main Mongolian national instruments. It has a history connected to the development and spread of string instruments in other countries.

Key features include:

1. 140 strings are stretched over a trapezoidal sounding board, producing rich sound
2. Played with two small mallet hammers
3. Serves as a lead instrument during traditional orchestra performances

Ih Huur (The Great Fiddle): The predecessor to the Ih huur is thought to have been played at the Palace of Kublai Khan during its grand national orchestra performance.

Features include:

1. Bears similar appearance to the Morin Huur only twice as big
2. Has two metal strings
3. Plays the role of bass in the traditional orchestra and ensembles

Hoomii (Throat singing): Hoomii is a unique traditional Mongolian art of singing, developed by early nomads imitating the sound of nature, wind and river. It is certainly a musical legacy of nomads living in a harmony and respect with the nature.

During hoomii singing, two sounds are sang simultaneously while using the vocal chords to make different notes and tones. The singing is also aided by the nose, throat chest and abdomen. When one hears hoomii singing, the person can easily feel the sounds of amazing rivers, majestic mountains, and wildlife as well as the wind and water.

Long and Short Songs: The traditional Mongolian folk singing is known to have two types, one being called the long song and the other called short songs. This is due to their style and different techniques of singing. The long song is one of the richest and most treasured Mongolian arts. Performing long song requires a wide vocal range and experience to support it with measured breathing, a test of powerful voice and lung to their utmost limit. Long songs symbolize the vast steppe and their lyrics are often said to be quite philosophical, challenging the listeners to immerse into their deep meanings. Short songs are often performed for more fast tuned songs, specially about loves, marriages and just about any daily happenings that traditionally took place on the steppe. Both singing skills require years of training to acquire and the performers have been some of the most respected figures traditionally on the Mongolian wide open steppe.

Contortion (sometimes contortionism): Contortion is an unusual form of physical display which involves the dramatic bending and flexing of the human body. Contortion

is often part of acrobatics and circus acts. In general, "contortionists" have unusual natural flexibility, which is then enhanced through acrobatic training, or they put themselves through intense, vigorous and painful training to gain this flexibility.

In some countries like Mongolia, many people (mainly girls) learn contortion and it is considered a nationally respected art form that holds cultural importance. For hundreds of years contortionists have entertained crowds all over Mongolia. Contortionists usually start practicing from a very early age. In Mongolia the minimum acceptable age is 5, as they believe contortion can cause bone deformities in younger children. Some sports, rhythmic gymnastics for example, demand extreme flexibility but not the hand balancing skills or performance skills of a contortionist.

The Mongol Biyelgee: Mongolian Traditional Folk Dance is performed by dancers from different ethnic groups in the Khovd and Uvs provinces of Mongolia. Regarded as the original forebear of Mongolian national dances, Biyelgee dances embody and originate from the nomadic way of life. Biyelgee dances are typically confined to the small space inside the ger (nomadic dwelling) and are performed while half sitting or cross-legged. Hand, shoulder and leg movements express aspects of Mongol lifestyle including household labour, customs and traditions, as well as spiritual characteristics tied to different ethnic groups. Biyelgee dancers wear clothing and accessories featuring colour combinations, artistic patterns, embroidery, knitting, quilting and leather techniques, and gold and silver jewellery specific to their ethnic group and community. The dances play a significant role in family and community events such as feasts, celebrations, weddings and labour-related practices, simultaneously expressing distinct ethnic identities and promoting family unity and mutual understanding among different Mongolian ethnic groups. Traditionally, Mongol Biyelgee is transmitted to younger generations through apprenticeships or home-tutoring within the family, clan or neighbourhood. Today, the majority of transmitters of Biyelgee dance are elderly, and their numbers are decreasing. The inherent diversity of Mongol Biyelgee is also under threat as there remain very few representatives of the distinct forms of Biyelgee from different ethnic groups.