



Mugham Trio (2006) by Sanan Samadov

Into the Divine

The Music of *Layla and Majnun*

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At the age of 23, the composer Uzeyir Hajibeyli (1885–1948) put Azerbaijan—and himself—on the map of music history with his *Leyli and Majnun*. This opera was the first piece of composed music created in Azerbaijan, premiering in 1908 in Baku (then part of the Russian Empire, now the capital of the Republic of Azerbaijan). Azerbaijanis have revered their first national composer and his work ever since. For decades, every season at the Azerbaijan State Opera and Ballet Theater has opened with *Leyli and Majnun*. Each Azerbaijani singer appreciates the honor and responsibility of participating in these productions, and audiences throughout the country enjoy broadcasts of the performances.

Nearly a century after the Baku premiere, Hajibeyli's opera found a new life half a world away thanks to the Silk Road Ensemble under the artistic direction of Yo-Yo Ma. In 2007, the group created a chamber arrangement of Hajibeyli's work that was entitled *Layla and Majnun*, following the pronunciation of the heroine's name in Arabic culture, in which this ancient legend had originated. From 2007 to 2009, the arrangement was a highlight of the ensemble's repertoire, delighting large audiences around the world.

The rich multicultural potential of Hajibeyli's opera perfectly resonates with Silkroad, the cultural organization Yo-Yo Ma founded to house the Silk Road Ensemble. Silkroad envisions music as a global phenomenon, with musical

forms, genres, and styles serving as bridges across time and between cultures. Azerbaijani opera offers many possibilities for such musical and cultural synthesis. In *Leyli and Majnun*, Hajibeyli combined Western opera with two artistic treasures of Central Asia and the Middle East: the story of Layla and Majnun and the genre of *mugham*.

The ill-fated lovers Layla and Majnun are often compared to Romeo and Juliet, although their story in oral tradition predates Shakespeare's play by more than a thousand years. Layla and Majnun have been celebrated in tales by Turks, Arabs, Persians, Indians, Pakistanis, and Afghans. Known in many poetic renditions, their story also has inspired works of visual art, literature, cinema, and music. It is not accidental that Hajibeyli chose the poetic setting of the Azerbaijani poet and philosopher Muhammad Fuzuli (1483–1556). Written in the Azerbaijani language, Fuzuli's work is one of the most famous versions of this ancient legend.

Musical interpretations of the legend of Layla and Majnun appear in diverse genres and national traditions, attesting to the tale's enduring popularity. Hajibeyli's opera—the first piece of composed music to set this ancient story—was based on *mugham*, the quintessential genre of traditional Azerbaijani music. *Mugham* is a branch of the large *maqam* tradition cultivated in the Middle East and Central Asia. An improvised modal music, *mugham* historically has been performed by a *mugham* trio that consists of a singer playing *gaval* (frame drum) and two instrumentalists playing *tar* (lute) and *ka-mancheh* (spike fiddle). *Mugham* remains a precious part of the traditional music heritage of Azerbaijan. Since the early 20th century, *mugham* also has become the main source of creative inspiration and experimentation for Azerbaijani composers. In 1977, Azerbaijani *mugham* was one of the 27 musical selections put in *Voyagers I and II*. Sent beyond our solar system, these American spacecraft carried this music as a testament to the emotional life of human beings. In 2003, UNESCO recognized Azerbaijani *mugham* as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Throughout its long history, the *mugham* genre has attracted many outstanding performers in Azerbaijan. Among them is Alim Qasimov, who occupies a unique and honorable place in Azerbaijan's national music history. Qasimov is revered as a National Treasure of Azerbaijan, and he also has enjoyed substantial acclaim abroad. In 1999, Qasimov won the International IMC-UNESCO Music Prize—a highly respected award that previously had been bestowed on Dmitri Shostakovich, Leonard Bernstein, Olivier Messiaen, Daniel Barenboim, Munir Bashir, and Ravi Shankar, among others. Qasimov possesses an in-depth knowledge of *mugham*. At the same time, he is renowned for his innovative approach to tradition and his openness to experimentation. This is why it is no surprise that Qasimov initiated the idea of a new embodiment of Hajibeyli's old "*mugham* opera."

Qasimov shared his vision with members of the Silk Road Ensemble and received a positive response. He was intimately familiar with Hajibeyli's *Leyli and Majnun*, as he had been involved in its productions in the Azerbaijan State Opera and Ballet Theater in the 1980s. For his Silkroad work, Qasimov selected the portions of Hajibeyli's score that focus on Majnun's solo and duet scenes with Layla, the heroine, whose role was performed by Fargana Qasimova, Qasimov's daughter and student, now a highly reputed *mugham* singer on her own. Qasimov also included choral and ensemble episodes, along with instrumental interludes. Based on these selections, Silk Road Ensemble members Johnny Gandelsman and Colin Jacobsen, both violinists, created a score.

In the interpretation of the Silk Road Ensemble, the story of Layla and Majnun is presented in a condensed version: the three-and-a-half-hour-long opera is compressed into an hour-long chamber piece. Hajibeyli's five acts are rearranged into six parts. These changes have resulted in a reordering and even an omission of many operatic episodes. Ultimately, the Silk Road Ensemble's alterations highlight the story's time-honored messages. The legend of Layla and Majnun has a strong Sufi component, with the love between a man and a woman

being seen as a reflection of love for God. The death resulting from separation from one's beloved is a supreme fulfillment, as it takes the individual into the divine. In Hajibeyli's opera, this idea was conveyed through the chorus "Night of Separation," which opens and concludes the work. These episodes can be compared to the Chorus in Greek tragedies, which comments on events before they occur in the

Layla and Majnun is a constantly changing and developing project. Every performance is unique, and it is impossible to take a snapshot of this work. Yo-Yo Ma called this a "part of the thrill" and described the project as "perhaps the finest example of group intelligence at work" (*New York Times*, March 1, 2009). A reviewer of a performance by the Silk Road Ensemble noted, "*Layla and Majnun* was the apex of the program. Classical music making rarely achieves this combination of spontaneity and superb craftsmanship" (*Washington Post*, March 14, 2009).

Indeed, this composition is a result of collective effort and is imbued with the spirit of improvisation. Hajibeyli was aware of the large cultural span of his project, in terms of its musical and literary contents. However, Hajibeyli limited the cultural, aesthetic, and stylistic scope of the opera to the context of his native culture. In so doing, he reflected the social and cultural expectations of early 20th-century Azerbaijan as well as his own professional experience (or rather, its absence, as *Leyli and Majnun* was Hajibeyli's first work). The Silk Road Ensemble has expanded the cultural reach of Azerbaijani opera deep into the Middle East and Central Asia. No less importantly, they have in-

creased the Western elements in Hajibeyli's score, creating a work of global East-West significance. The new musical arrangement of *Layla and Majnun* is a respectful and highly artistic transformation of Hajibeyli's "mugham" opera, now shaped by creative energies coming from diverse cultural, stylistic, and temporal sources.

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First poster for Uzeyir Hajibeyli's *Leyli and Majnun*

narrative. Reconstituting the Chorus as a cello solo, both at the beginning and at the end of the piece, is one of the new arrangement's most insightful interpretations: the lonely melody of the cello sounds as the voice of eternity.

The new arrangement of Hajibeyli's opera has created a different balance between Western and Eastern traits. In Hajibeyli's opera, these two components mostly are kept separate: the symphony orchestra plays all episodes of composed music and remains silent during the *mughams*. Only the *tar* and *kamancheh* accompany singers during *mugham* episodes. In the new version, however, the role of the ensemble—with *tar* and *kamancheh* included—is crucial throughout the entire piece, and both the improvised and written parts of the composition are firmly integrated.