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The Tradition and Contemporary Changes of the Kazakh Musical Instrument Dombra in the Altay Region

Dombra is a representative instrument of the Kazakhs, which is popular in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Kazakhstan, and parts of Mongolia. Based on six years of fieldwork, the author presents the traditional form and contemporary developments of dombra in the Altay Region by studying collections of the recordings, by interviewing folk artists, and by learning to perform. Dombra in the Altay Region consists of mainly five-degree chord setting and shows a biphonic structure of Fundamental voice + Melodic part in musical form, which is consistent with the musical thinking of the nomadic people in the region of Inner Asia. Contemporary compositions for dombra maintain structural thinking of traditional music, while the motivation for them and their themes are more closely associated with daily life, which testifies to the continuation of the tradition in the contemporary era. Under the influence of symphonies, the dombra repertoires performed by local orchestras have gradually lost their connection with the local oral tradition, and the narration of the works has been weakened. Based on the importance of timbre in Kazakh music, pop bands and young musicians combine traditional music with electronic music technology, giving electronic sound effects a way of interpretation in traditional knowledge systems.

Bio

Zhang Shan is a PhD candidate at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music with a research focus on Kazakh music in China. From 2017 to 2023, Zhang was conducting fieldwork in Xinjiang. He learned to play sibizgi, dombra, and kobyz under the guidance of Kazakh folk music masters.