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A Soundtrack to Mongolian History

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Lucy M. Rees. *Mongolian Film Music: Tradition, Revolution and Propaganda*. London: Routledge. 2015. 210 pp. \$110 (cloth).

In her recently published study, ethnomusicologist Lucy M. Rees recounts the evolution of Mongolian film music, from the establishment of the country's film industry as a vehicle of propaganda in the early socialist era to the release of the latest international productions, such as *Khadak* (2006), *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (2003), and *The Cave of the Yellow Dog* (2005). An in-depth analysis of the genres, structures, and melodies of Mongolia's filmic landscape, Rees's book also extends to the historical context and social reception of the most important films in that country's history and is thus more than a mere compendium of cinematic works. Rees presents a narrative of Mongolian history from the perspective of film music, with each introduction of instruments, techniques, and harmonies representing a particular turn in the cultural transformation experienced by Mongolia over the course of the twentieth century. Each chapter is dedicated to a specific period of the country's history and is constructed around a particular case study—one personality or one film—that played a defining role in that period.

The book opens with two introductory chapters that cover much of the same ground and thus might have worked better combined into one introduction. The very short chapter 1 provides an overview of the evolution of the Mongolian film tradition—from the establishment of its film industry in the mid-1930s under the guidance of the Soviet Union to its current postsocialist forms—as well as a brief outline of twentieth-century Mongolian history and a couple of pages on the country's other cultural traditions. Chapter 2 pursues this

introduction of Mongolian musical traditions in more depth and presents the main genres that dominated the socialist cultural environment, providing the context for the rest of the study.

Chapter 3 focuses on the early period of the socialist era, when Mongolian cinema and film music were first established and new composers were trained. This period saw the creation of a new style of symphonic music and represents the initial development of Mongolian film scoring. This important chapter brings into play the seductive aspect of a revolutionary period that has often been described primarily through the trauma that accompanied the installation of a new regime (see Kaplonski 2014). Films, and the music that accompanied them, were a new technological medium ideally suited to convey the socialist values, hopes, and ambitions the government sought to impart. From the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s, the newly established state film studio, Film Factory (Kino Üildver)—later Mongol Kino—gradually gained expertise, eventually producing its own films with socialist and patriotic themes. In this chapter, Rees shows that Mongols were trained in Western musical styles, primarily in Russian conservatories, and that performances of ballets and operas became regular occurrences in Ulaanbaatar. Formal training, combined with restricted access to the orchestral music of nations beyond the socialist bloc, meant that these musical forms became dominant. In addition, Russian materials and instrument-making techniques had important repercussions on the sounds of traditional instruments. The horsehead fiddle (*morin huur*), the emblematic Mongolian instrument, would now be made of birch and pine wood rather than animal skin; the horsehair strings were replaced by nylon; and “F-holes, like those of the European violin family, were added to the soundboard” (24). Rees notes, nonetheless, that Mongolian compositions did not simply replicate European traditions. Mongolian symphonic music was able to retain an idiosyncratic Mongolian sound, notably through its pentatonic scales (44). Thus, if the dominant musical forms were European in origin, Mongolian traditions were frequently accommodated within them.

In chapter 4, Rees focuses on the period between 1950 and 1970, when the film industry was well established, and analyzes the main trends and themes presented on screen during that period. Included in this chapter is the process of filmmaking itself—that is, the governmental plans that dictated what topics should be covered by films and the preproduction stage (writing screenplays, designing sets and costumes, and casting). In Mongolia, as in the Soviet Union, every aspect of the process, from conception to production, including score composition and dissemination, “was controlled as part of a strategic and comprehensive governmental plan” (74). The specific task of the composers was to create

scores that would help the “filmmakers portray life under the socialist regime favorably” (55).

Chapter 4 draws on the author’s interview of Dagvyn Luvsansharav, one of Mongolia’s most prolific and respected film composers, whose professional trajectory echoes in many ways the cultural and social developments of the early decades of the regime. Born to a family of herders and enrolled in a Buddhist monastery at the age of five, Luvsansharav was prompted by the repression of the 1930s to leave his religious community. He went to work at a cultural club in his native province of Khentii, in eastern Mongolia. Having already learned Buddhist temple music, he became familiar with Russian accordion music at the cultural club and later received formal training as a composer at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow. These diverse musical influences, which laid the foundations for his personal style of composition, echoed the complex and syncretic musical landscape of the 1950s to 1970s.

Chapters 5 and 6 offer in-depth discussions of film scores representative of the 1970s and 1980s, respectively. Chapter 5 centers on *The Clear River Tamir*, a three-part epic about the 1921 revolution and a standard of socialist cinema. Unlike previous films, which used explicit propaganda and one-dimensional characters, *The Clear River Tamir* employed more sophisticated methods to disseminate socialist ideology. Drawing successfully on the propagandist imagery of the 1960s, it also acknowledged Mongolian folklore and looked to “the introspective stories that started to become popular from the mid-1970s” (75). With a few exceptions, the characters are given more depth, with some even expressing doubts about socialism. While these doubts are assuaged in the end, overcoming such personal struggles makes the characters more human and relatable. The film score reflects this more sophisticated approach, with a mixture of symphonic, military, and traditional music. Unlike the majority of films of the previous decades, there are also no cuts mid-melody, suggesting fewer interventions by the censors and more relaxed attitudes toward introspective critique.

In chapter 6, Rees uses two case studies as a prism to analyze the influence of glasnost (*il tod*) and perestroika (*öörchlön baiguulalt*) on Mongolian film composers at the end of the 1980s, the Film Factory’s most productive decade. *Mandukhai the Wise Queen* (1988), an epic 305-minute production involving a large cast and opulent sets and costumes, is based on the true story of a fifteenth-century queen. In Mongolia the film is widely considered one of the greatest domestic productions, and many members of the cast received state awards for their contribution. Strongly influenced by perestroika, the score’s composer,

Natsagiin Jantsannorov, began thinking about the Mongolian traditions that had been lost and reevaluating where his national loyalties lay. In composing the score, he attempted to recreate what Mongolian music would have sounded like in the fifteenth century, before the introduction of foreign influences.

Whirlpool (1989), the second film discussed in chapter 6, was both controversial and anti-socialist. Dealing with topics such as crime, drugs, alcoholism, and sexual violence, the film's soundtrack was a stark departure from earlier Mongolian productions. It incorporated a wide variety of music genres, from pop and rock songs to ballads, and from electronic keyboards to a traditional Mongolian folk song. The score is also noteworthy for the absence of military bands and new folk music, two fixtures of Mongolian film scoring at the time. The use of this score clearly sought to destabilize established cinematic norms. The Western songs used during a party scene reflect the fact that Western music styles had become the preferred genres among young Mongolians, "whereas previously it was customary for people to sing traditional songs at social gatherings" (111). The use of distorted classical pieces by Mozart and Bizet, played on electronic keyboard and accompanying scenes of gambling and drug use, intimate the political insubordination that foreshadowed the fall of socialism.

Chapter 7 takes the reader to the postsocialist period after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, an event that paved the way for further radical developments in film music after 1990. The state film studio, renamed Mongol Kino, ceased to have a monopoly on film production, and state support for the arts slowly dried up. New filmmakers and composers struggled to make a living, and their lack of funds and experience contributed to a sharp drop in the overall quality of Mongolian productions. At the same time, increased access to a wider range of films—notably Hollywood productions, movies from Hong Kong in the 1990s, and South Korean productions in the 2000s—led to popular music playing a more prominent role in film soundtracks.

The postsocialist period also witnessed a cultural revival, notably through the figure of Chinggis (Genghis) Khan, who until 1990 had been considered inappropriate as a national hero figure for socialist Mongolia. The production of films about Khan peaked in 2006, on the eight hundredth anniversary of Mongolia, and many of these films attracted generous governmental funding. Other films produced since 1990 have been collaborations with foreign filmmakers, notably *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (2003), *The Cave of the Yellow Dog* (2005), and *Khadak* (2006), which have enjoyed wide distribution in the West. Inevitably, these international productions have, in turn, shaped Mongolian cinema. As only

foreign studios and directors had the financial resources in the first decade or so after the end of the socialist era to produce and distribute Mongolian films internationally, the topics covered have “tended to be those desired by non-Mongolian audiences, namely rural Mongolian traditions” (137).

In her brief conclusion, Rees summarizes the main arguments of the book and offers some tantalizing insights about Mongolian identification (and the limits of identification) with the socialist and postsocialist periods, as well as her interviewees’ feelings about the way Mongolians have been (and continue to be) portrayed in films. Rees writes that she rarely “encountered Mongolians who deemed the Soviet Union a wholly oppressive influence” and that, despite having to adhere to governmental plans and guidelines, many professionals “saw this as an opportunity to learn and improve their work” (142). Since 1990, the blending of traditional Mongolian and foreign musical influences recalls some of the features of the socialist era, “even though the contexts of film production are different and the foreign influences are from elsewhere (146).

Overall, this is a well-researched and sensitively conducted study of Mongolia’s film music traditions. In showing how cultural policies shaped Mongolia’s musical landscape, Rees’s book speaks to other studies carried out by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists who have worked on Mongolia, such as Carole Pegg (2001), Peter Marsh (2009), and Laurent Legrain (2014). Like the studies by these authors, Rees’s book looks at the syncretic relationship between Mongolian traditions and socialist standards established over the course of the twentieth century. Also like them, she points to the lasting impact of the socialist period in remolding—and occasionally reinventing—Mongolian musical forms and instruments. Where she makes a valuable contribution to the literature is in her discussion of the influence of contemporary Western filmmakers on further shaping these musical traditions.

Rees’s book is a study of all aspects of film production—from formal musical training during the socialist era to casting, postproduction, and archiving—not only of film music. If musical scores constitute a core aspect of the book, the study extends well beyond that topic; I could not help but feel that the book title was selling it short. The book in fact offers an introduction to Mongolian history and culture through the prism of cinema that will appeal to all readers with an interest in the country.

Other aspects of the book, notably the introduction and the conclusion, are less well executed. Except for a cursory mention on page 21, no wider context or comparisons with

non-Russian regions of the Soviet Union are provided. Given the crucial role played by Moscow in reshaping and redefining socialist Asian cultures, a comparative perspective would have been useful to tease out what was specific to the Mongolian experience. As a result, the study does not extend beyond the descriptive and the analysis remains inchoate. The lack of analysis is also conveyed through the paucity of theoretical references in the relatively short bibliography, which does not include works beyond Mongolia or even, surprisingly, recent works on Mongolia. Rees cites, for instance, articles by both Manduhai Buyandelger and Christopher Kaplonski, but she does not mention their more recent books, published in 2013 and 2014, respectively. This oversight, combined with the linear chronological narrative, suggests that the dissertation on which this book was based was published with few changes.

While the book makes for an interesting read, the fact that it remains so geographically circumscribed means that it is unlikely to be read beyond a small circle of scholars interested in Mongolian cinematography. This is a pity. I cannot help but feel that *Mongolian Film Music* would have benefited greatly from a bit of reorganization and pruning of a few sections, as well as from a stronger introduction situating the Mongolian case within larger studies of postcolonial literature. While I enjoyed reading the book and will probably cite it in my own work, its parochialism ultimately makes it a missed opportunity.

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