

# **“SOUND ANSWERS VOICE”—THE BACKGROUND OF MY COMPOSITION BASED ON THE PERSONAL SONG TRADITION OF THE INDIGENOUS TUNDRA CHUKCHI**

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## **Research subject**

My research, "Kuulokulmia" ("Viewpoints of Hearing") concentrates on the music of the indigenous people of northeastern Siberia. Studying their music has been a turning point in my life. It has changed my earlier views and ideas about music. It has also made me question my perception of music, as I have been brought up in the Western tradition of classical music.

Since 2009 I have been making field trips to Chukotka, where the ancient musical tradition is still alive. Through composing, I explore how music is heard and shaped. It raises questions such as what the root of a musical thought is, how music flows in our subconscious mind, and what the relationship between hearing and synchronization is.

## **The Personal Song**

Chukchi Personal Songs have become my research subject. A Personal Song is given to every child at birth. Later, when people are adults, they create their own song, which is as natural as speaking. Singing is not a repetition of something that someone has already heard but is as spontaneous as a conversation. Unfortunately, this aural tradition, and that of the traditional reindeer herding lifestyle, is vanishing. It is not only in Chukotka, which is in the northeastern part of Russia (opposite Alaska), that the Personal Song exists. This tradition exists throughout the whole of the Arctic region, from Lapland to Chukotka, but it differs in each region. My research concentrates on the personal song tradition of the Chukchi.

There are two groups of Chukchi: the coastal Chukchi, who are traditionally sea-mammal hunters (whale, walrus, and seal), and tundra Chukchi, who are traditionally reindeer herders. I am especially interested in the singing of the reindeer herders because the Personal Song is still a living tradition amongst them. The aspect that fascinates me with the Chukchi people is that the Personal Song gives a musical identity to a person that does not depend on words. Today, the words might be about berry picking and tomorrow about a son who is far away and much missed. The words can be about anything that comes to the person's mind, or the songs might have no words at all. It is a musical motif that everybody recognizes in that community and that defines a certain person's song. The song is like a musical identity card.

Within the Chukchi tradition, a person can sing anybody's song as long as that say whose song it is. However, the song's identity is very important. There was a professional performer who kept singing certain songs, claiming that they were hers. The people of the village where she was born were very angry with her and said that she had stolen those songs. The problem was actually not that she was singing somebody else's songs, but that she was claiming ownership of them. As long as the singers says whose song they are performing, it is acceptable to sing it. However, a song's identity is not easy to recognize, at least not for an outsider. I once mixed up two Personal Songs because they sounded very similar to me. I asked the singer if she had sung the same song twice. She was very indignant at how I could possibly have thought that those two songs were the

same. Of course, the more you hear this music, the easier it is to differentiate one song from another.

### **Meeting with Tevlyantonau, a Chukchi Elder**

During my first field trip to Chukotka in 2009, I visited the village of Meinipilgino on the southeastern coast of Chukotka. Meinipilgino is a former reindeer herding village with about 400 inhabitants. In the late 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, reindeer herding died out in hinterland of the village. I met several people there who had been forced to move back to the village because of the disappearance of reindeer herding. Today, however, the villagers are reviving reindeer herding and gradually bringing it back to their territory. I stayed in Meinipilgino for five weeks because the only transportation there was by helicopter and the weather was so bad that I could not fly any further. Due to this delay, I was fortunate to meet many of the elders several times. One of them was Tevlyantonau. At that time, she was almost 80 years old. She was also a nomadic reindeer herder whose job was to take care of the household in the nomadic camp. The job of women in herding is very labor intensive. They must take care of such basic issues such as food, fire, and clothing. They are the first to get up in the morning and the last to go to bed.

Tevlyantonau lived by the sea in a tent, which was made of materials that she had found along the seashore. We met for the first time early in the morning. It is typical on these field trips that a visitor needs time to get to know people and gain their trust. That means several visits over cups of tea, which is customary there. However, I had bought Tevlyantonau a mug. She was very pleased with my gift and immediately put the kettle on, which she hung on a hook above the fireplace. Perhaps thanks to the mug, she felt that she needed to give me something in return and therefore sang for me immediately. She sang several fragments of different songs, but she was constantly interrupted, either by the noise of the tent being fixed by her neighbor or just by her thoughts, which seemed to drift elsewhere. When she started to sing again, she never continued the song that she had sung before, but always began a new song. When I met her on another occasion, I asked about those songs. She told me that they were the songs of her father, uncle, and husband as well as her own song. Later, I edited this recording, which ran for about an hour. In it there was a maximum of two minutes of singing. In the editing process, I left in only the parts where she sang and cut out all the distractions.

### **The composing process for “Sound Answers Voice”**

In May 2018 I chose the songs which would be the base of my new composition. Tevlyantonau's songs were among them. When I returned to her recording, I had already forgotten the editing work that I had done earlier and wondered why the character of the song kept changing in every phrase. I went back to the original recording and remembered how I had edited out all the distractions and therefore several songs were joined together. In my composition I decided to replace those “distractions” with my music.

The question for me is what does this music mean to me? Am I like an alien observing this culture? The music is strange for me but at the same time very fascinating, and I am still seeking to understand it. What is it to be in that environment without being part of that culture and listen to Chukchi music? What do I hear in it? Do I hear the same things as they do? Definitely not. I translate it into something else. Still, everything that is in my music originates from her songs. The notes that I play with violin are all in her music. There are no notes beyond her music; all of them appear somewhere in her singing.