

Giant Steppes

Mixing Mongolia, Persia, Eastern and Southern Europe in France, Meïkhâneh are gloriously, spaciouly unique, says **Elizabeth Kinder**.

On paper, a plan to mash up Mongolian, Persian, Eastern and Southern European musical influences, mix in a bit of blues, sing sometimes in a made-up language and then call the whole shebang *La Silencieuse* might not seem perfect. But French trio Meïkhâneh have pulled it off, making it just that. Theirs is a marvellous sound that all at once seems ancient and modern, familiar and alien. It's rich and spacious and gloriously cinematic.

Johanni Curtet, Milad Pasta and Maria Laurent, the three friends who make up Meïkhâneh, are at the end of a phone in Rennes. Why call an album jam-packed with spectacular sounds, *The Silent* or is it *The Silence*?

Tapping the number, I put my feet up next to the dog on the sofa at home in London, preparing for a poetic discourse on the silence of nature and wide-sweeping landscapes that are never quiet, on epic journeys that take us to the stillness within, and so on. (Because really, this music *is* evocative).

And besides, this is the band that gives the translation of a track featuring the aforementioned made-up language over five minutes and 40 seconds as, "Nuit, neige, le train s'en va... / Night, snow, the train goes away..." And on another *Ayalakhul*: "In Mongolian language, there is a word, 'ayalakhul' which means both travelling and humming."

The phone rings and rings. No answer. The first track on the album, *Silencia*, is inspired by the painting, *Silence / Liberation* by Mongolian contemporary artist Munkhsetseg Jalkhaajav, so maybe that suggested the title. The sleeve notes opposite an image of a woman tilting her head and cutting through her thick, lustrous chestnut hair that tumbles to her side, tell us: "Silent dark-haired woman you cut your hair to join your children within the earth."

In Mongolian tradition, the first haircut is of great symbolic significance, celebrating a child's survival beyond infancy. And though that text in the sleeve notes is Laurent's response to the painting, it does immediately suggest a culture that's rooted in beliefs where humans and landscape are intertwined.

Laurent is the first person I speak to when I try another number. Her speaking voice is soft. As her singing voice it can be

warm and gentle, but also very strong, direct and stripped bare. On the album she plays *tovshuur* (Mongolian lute), and *morin khuur* (Mongolian horsehead-shaped fiddle). I assume she played violin as a child.

"No. I started playing flute when I was nine." She continued with the instrument while growing up near Cherbourg in Normandy. "My father liked the blues and we'd listen to that at home." She started singing because "a friend of mine was a singer and wanted to sing in a choir. I went with her." At university in Rennes, studying musicology, she set up the a cappella trio Portotrio with Mélanie Panaget and Gaëlle Violin. They sang traditional songs from all over the world. And it was in her ten years with them that she says "I really leaned to sing".

Milad Pasta accompanied them on percussion. Pasta had known Johanni Curtet since they'd been friends at high school in Le Mans. They were improvising together when Curtet met Laurent. "Johanni asked me to sing with him and Milad. We spent an afternoon working together. It felt really free, like an experimental workshop for the voice."

"Nine years later there are still no rules," she says. As for her imaginary language, "Material just comes. With the a cappella group we would sing in many languages and all these languages make sounds in my mind and they come out." And though this is like Liz Fraser, who also sings in an invented language favouring sounds over words to convey meaning, Laurent didn't know of the Scottish singer, whose vocal dexterity she brings to mind.

It was at Curtet's suggestion that Laurent took up the iconic Mongolian instruments the *tovshuur* and *morin khuur*, finding she loved to play stringed instruments. "I play in my own way," she says. "I've been playing the banjo now for four years too." She doesn't play this with Meïkhâneh but in a blues band, *Baton Bleu*.

She also plays in a new band with Milad Pasta, *Amou Daria*, the name of the river that flows between Iran and central Asia, the Oxus in Greek mythology. Pasta was born in Tehran and brings his Persian heritage to bear in Meïkhâneh. Playing traditional percussion such as *zarb* (or *tombak*, goblet drum), *daf* (frame drum) and *udu* (Nigerian jug-like drum), he propels the music along, carrying it on its own river of his brilliantly resonant rhythms.

For Pasta, learning traditional Persian percussion was a way of reconnecting with his heritage. At home in the Iranian capital, his extended family would sing and play traditional music to mark various occasions. But Pasta left home and his parents, both teachers, when he was just fourteen, to live in France with his elder brother. Initially he got into playing Latin percussion, which helped with his playing in a high school reggae band with Curtet. But, chancing on a workshop by an Iranian percussion master, he says "I took up the *tombak* and made my way in my own tradition with my ears and my heart."

The reggae band *Riddim Sound Wise* lasted beyond high school for Curtet who, influenced by an oriental festival he attended every summer, "tried to incorporate traditional music into the band's output". He doesn't want to dwell on this particularly as his earlier experiments in music are slightly overshadowed by his total immersion in the Mongolian tradition.

He met his Mongolian wife in Ulan Bator, the country's capital, whilst they were both working to get *khoomii* (the overtone singing tradition) on the UNESCO heritage list. Together they now run a production company, *Routes Nomades*, organising tours for and producing albums of Mongolian musicians. And Curtet also teaches *khoomii*.

It sounds fantastic when he sings it on the album. That gloriously deep sound with its sparkling overtones that seem to fly free from it. It's compelling and liberating to listen to. As is the *magtaal* technique he also uses on the track *Uulyn Nulims* that, he explains, springs from "Mongolian praise songs which require a pressed voice to sing the text".

These vocal techniques may have come to Curtet's aid, given their fabulous transformative impact on the human voice, because, as he explains about when he first picked up a guitar, "I was thirteen. I was listening to the Beatles and Nirvana and grew long hair and sang my favourite tunes. My friends suggested I stop singing."

His father, a pianist, percussionist and electro-acoustic composer, said if his son wanted to play guitar he had to learn classical guitar. "It was hard for me, I didn't want to just make one note, one by one. And I really wanted to use my voice. So I switched to become a human beat box."

This particular musical incarnation did not progress beyond its fledgling stages, unable to survive in the hostile climate of maternal disapproval (though his mum, an actress with a theatre company, sounds open to creative endeavour). And so young Curtet became “focused on jazz and improvisation”.

Then, also when he was thirteen or fourteen, he saw Tran Quang Hai on the telly. The Vietnamese multi-instrumental maestro, ethnomusicologist and khoomii master was demonstrating the art of overtone singing. Curtet wanted to reproduce this extraordinary sound.

“I was amazed. I started listening to ethno recordings, famous recordings of songs with texts. I fell in love with [the Mongolian tradition] long song, its melismatic melodies, and its rhythms.” Whilst studying musicology at Rennes University, he took an option in ethnomusicology and through this determined to study with Tran Quang Hai in Paris.

Though studying a Masters in what he describes as “concert guitar playing at a conservatoire,” he switched to studying khoomii following a successful meeting with Tran Quang Hai in the latter’s office. He soon became “immersed in Mongolian tradition through khoomii, travelling extensively in the Mongolian countryside” and learning the language as he studied for a PhD.

With Meïkhāneh, Curtet also plays ‘mouth harp’ which he says is “very close to khoomii in the way of using the mouth cavity to modulate melodies” and on the album, he’s credited with khoomii and “chant de gorge”. Khoomii is throat-singing, but not all throat-singing is khoomii. “In

Mongolia,” he says, “khoomii is linked to the flow of water, the blow of the wind, and bird songs.”

All throat-singing in its varying styles is thought to have sprung from expression of human perception of sounds in nature, its power to resonate across vast distances, rooted in the wide horizons of the steppes. Of the instruments they use, Curtet says “the rhythm on the dombra, morin khuur and tovshuur is traditionally linked to the walk of the animals such as a horse, or a camel and all of this is linked to nomadic daily life and landscapes.”

The horse has a central role in traditional Mongolian life and the morin khuur, shaped like a horse’s head and strung with hair from its tail, resonates too with the animism that is fundamental to traditional belief. This recognises the spiritual aspect of objects in nature and includes their innate sound.

And so, even if we’re not consciously aware of it, through the sound of the music we’re plugged into Mongolian tradition where humans and animals and nature are all interconnected, where there’s no separation between life and Earth,

There’s some kind of alchemy that, even without reading the sleeve notes, inspires you to conjure up wide-open spaces, mountains and weather. Sometimes sounds are onomatopoeic, as on the opening of *Pluies*, where the plucked guitar suggests rain, or their use of dynamics that subtly suggest the calm of a warm sun or the throes of a storm.

Most of Meïkhāneh’s songs spring from their improvisation, while the theme of interconnection is inherent in the varied sources inspiring that. It’s inherent too in

their use of different languages, from the ghazals sung in Persian, to a poem in Portuguese, via a song – heard on last issue’s *fRoots 66* compilation – which is sung in Hungarian with its text from the poem *Eszmelet* (Consciousness), to their singing in French and Mongolian. And of course Laurent’s made-up language. Which is equally meaningful.

Yet their sound, which also features guest musicians Bijan Chemirani (on various Persian traditional instruments), Martin Coudroy (accordion) and Uuganbaatar Tsend-Ochir is beautifully cohesive. And they produce lovely harmonies.

Munkhtsetseg’s painting *Silence / Liberation* that inspires the opening track *Silencia* explores Mongolian identity and the liberation of women in a culture that’s now free from the heavy stomp of Soviet marginalisation. Reaching back into Mongolian tradition, Meïkhāneh too refute its marginalisation, placing it centre-stage in their glorious multicultural sonic performance.

The album (only their second in nine years together – you heard a track on *fRoots 66* with our November issue) is not exactly named for the painting. Curtet tells me: “The closest meaning to the title *La Silencieuse* is ‘The Silent.’” He sends me a list of what they mean by this. It ends with “anything linked with what happens when you listen to music and you start thinking about landscapes in your imagination”.

So what does Meïkhāneh mean? He says it’s “from Persian poetry. It means the ‘house of intoxication’.”

I say, “Lock yourself in and throw away the key.”

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