

REVIEWS

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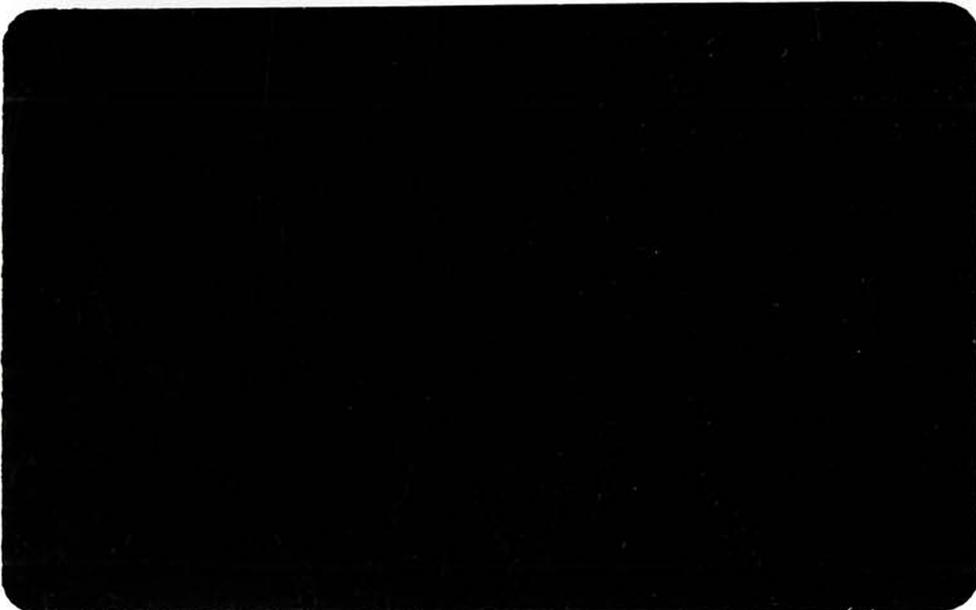
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ACTA ORIENTALIA

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Acta Orientalia provides an international forum for original papers in the field of oriental studies, including Turkic, Mongolian, Manchu-Tungusian, Chinese, Tibetan, Indian, Iranian and Semitic philology, linguistics, literature and history. Papers are mainly in English, but also in German, French, and Russian.

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PRIOR, DANIEL (ed.): *The Semetey of Kenje Kara. A Kirghiz Epic Performance on Phonograph. With a Musical Score and a Compact Disc of the Phonogram.* Edited, translated and with an introduction and commentary by Daniel Prior. Kirghiz text transcribed with the assistance of Ishembi Obolbekov. Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2006 (*Turkologica* 59), 155 pages.

A detailed survey of a Manas epic fragment stands in the centre of Daniel Prior's book. It is not a special enterprise by itself, but the fragment was recorded by Aleksandr Grigor'evich Belinskii, a well-intentioned but amateur collector near Pishkek at a stop of his expedition planned on horseback from Vladikavkas to Vladivostok at the very beginning of the 20th century.

The most important result of this expedition turned out to be just this series of six wax phonograph cylinders, containing a brief section of Semetey, part of the Kirghiz epic cycle Manas, sung by a bard named Kenje Kara. Few sound recordings of earlier date are known from anywhere else in Central Asia or of any Turkic language, and none of them have been described. This is one of the important circumstances that makes the basic material of the book unique and worthy of publishing.

The Kirghiz Manas epic has been subject to extensive research for a long time, and the text publications are often accompanied by musical transcriptions. What is practically always missing is the performance aspect of the epics. Here the author's goal was to give a comprehensive, verbal and musical description and analysis of a single oral performance. This goal is realised in several chapters.

In the prologue Mr. Prior writes about Belinskii's expedition in a very enjoyable style, and it is at this point that we feel like reading the book through. In the Preface one can find introductory information on Kenje Kara, the Kirghiz bard and the circumstances of the recordings; then in the Introduction we get acquainted with the bard himself, with the place and times, the epic tradition and with the performance event.

The exhaustive transcription of the musical progression occupies almost half of the book. While reading the transcription it becomes clear that the musical texture of the epic is basically composed of a single repetitive short section "pacing melody" and a longer, more variegated closing formula "long line". In view of the homogeneous musical material, the reader may come to the conclusion that it would have been more informative to publish only the main motifs with references to the variations.

To publish the recordings of an analysed material is an excellent but risky idea, because it might inspire the interested and critical-minded readers to compare it with the transcription. In doing so it seemed to me that marking the pitch divergences with arrows was an undue accuracy which is sometimes even misleading. Besides, the attentive reader can detect divergences in the intonation where according to the transcription there is none, and inversely. At any rate, the determination of the exact pitch is really very difficult because of the general inaccuracy of the pitches in epic singing, the unstable speed of the phonograph mechanism, the transcription at lower speed and the bad quality of the recording.

All these minor shortcomings notwithstanding, we have to consider the joint publication of the music, the text and the recording not only excellent, but necessary and exemplary. The musical analysis is precise, painstaking and includes every important aspect. We get analyses of the form, the metre and rhythm, the scale and tonality, the melodic contour, the tempo, the dynamics and the texture. Besides, there are useful completions to the musical and textual content of almost every line of the recorded fragment in the "notes to the edition".

Under the musical transcription we find the Kirghiz text as it was sung, and we see a normalised version and the English translation on opposite pages. In a separate chapter we can study the completed English translation and the interpretation of the fragment in the broader epic tradition. In the Appendices a contemporary translation is given made by the Kirghiz Ateybek who was present at the recording event.

In addition, we become acquainted with the personality of the bard and with the peculiarities of the performance. These are based on the performance itself, B. V. Smirnov's account of Kenje Kara' performance, Dmitriev's mention of a performance by Kenje Kara and an additional investigation of the author.

We should be grateful to Daniel Prior for the excellent publication of the musical and textual

material and the comprehensive analysis. The concrete epic rendering fills up the analysis with real life, and the study interprets the unique performance in a broad context. Not only ethnographers, linguists and ethnomusicologists interested in the Manas epic, but historians and interested non-professionals may also learn much from this wide-range case study.

János Sipos