

Huun Huur Tu

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CAPTURING AN ANCIENT VOCAL ART

Huun Huur Tu's upcoming *Klassika* album includes a DVD with interviews and performance footage.

Engineer John Cuniberti took on the challenge of a lifetime when he agreed to record *Klassika*, a forthcoming CD/DVD from Huun Huur Tu, a quartet of Tuvan throat singers that are considered masters in an ancient spiritual art form that must be heard — clearly heard — to be understood.

Throat singing, or *xöömei*, is a technique where one vocalist produces multiple pitches simultaneously. One may hear a deep, low chant and a high-pitched chirp or whistle, and multiple other harmonics emanating from one singer. The Tuvans, who hail from the region of Tuva just north of Mongolia in southern Siberia, use song to describe their natural surroundings, whether it be the animals, mountains and grasslands, or the movement of wind, water and light.

From a technical perspective, recording an ancient art form and ancient stringed instruments requires precision and absolute transparency. "I wanted to capture the instruments and voices in the purest possible way," says Cuniberti, who recorded the group at Fantasy Studios in Berkeley, Calif. "I took a more purist approach, similar to how you might record a symphony orchestra or a string quartet: good mics in the right position through transparent mic pre's straight to hard drive with minimal signal path."

Vocal mics were arguably the most important links in the chain. "I needed mics that were precise and reliable that could handle a high dynamic range and provide a wide frequency response," says Cuniberti. "They also had to be quiet." Telefunken supplied an assortment of mics that met his requirements: AK47s, M16s and an Elam 250 for the vocals; and M260s for the instruments.

Recording direct to Pro Tools HD3 through 16 channels of Millennia Media's HV-3D mic pre's, Cuniberti aimed to recreate the group's live setting as closely as possible to maintain authenticity and comfort for the foursome, who had little professional recording experience.

Cuniberti arranged the musicians in an arc, divided by gobos, with the drummer in an iso booth. "He plays a large bass drum that got on every microphone," says Cuniberti. "Fortunately, the booth had a window large enough to maintain eye contact so it didn't pose a problem."

Opposite the glass, the group played live with minimal overdubs. "Often the singing was so delicate and the bow playing so aggressive that I needed to record them separately," adds Cuniberti. "When I explained that the level of their voice presentation was significantly lower than their bowing and was getting on the mic, they allowed me to do that."

Huun Huur Tu's *Klassika* will be released in early to mid-2009, accompanied by a DVD featuring interviews, information on Tuva, and live studio and performance footage.

"As I started to understand the music and the culture," Cuniberti says, "I saw this as an opportunity to share with the world something that is really quite unique."



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