

Sakha song styles and genres

1. **Song genres of the *dieretii* song style** (ornamented, free meter, not commonly associated with dance): All of these genres are sung solo by either gender. Since the ornamented style is difficult to master, usually only adults (not children) are able to sing it. These are normally sung unaccompanied unless it is by the *khomus* (Jew's harp), or for the shaman songs, which also sometimes make use of the *buben* (frame drum). Rate of information flow in *dieretii* is fairly quick due to very little repetition and emphasis on creativity and poetry of words. A combination of melisma and slow tempo helps keep the rate of information flow at a manageable level; there is little repetition, except for phrases that highlight the poetic form. New songs are composed fairly often in this song style, as the texts are often improvised in an ornamented style on limited tonal material (3 or 4 tones).

A. Praise song (*Toyuk*) – Sung at formal concerts, for recordings, at national festivals like *ysyakh* (summer solstice festival) to praise gods, the beauty of nature, love, welcome, fire-building, achievements of leaders and the Sakha people.

B. Blessing (*Algys*) – Also sung at formal concerts, for recordings, and at national festivals like *ysyakh* with the purpose of blessing the event or the people who are being honored at the event.

C. Healing song (*menerik yryata*) – Possibly (even probably) sung by shamans and other healers at the present time; more research is needed. Lyrical content, information flow, manner of composition, dance movements, and sonic style of this genre is unclear.

D. *Kepseen* is a genre that is not commonly heard, but which the singer uses to express in an improvisatory way what he or she is thinking. Preliminary research indicates that this is a genre that is used in intimate settings, between friends or in a small group.

2. **Song genres of the *degeren* song style** (less ornamented, rhythmic, often associated with dance) – distinguishing characteristics of these genres are being discussed in the most recent Russian-language ethnomusicological literature. Translations need to be done.

A. Love songs

B. Nature songs

C. Lullabies

D. Joke songs

E. Laments

F. Work songs

G. Antiphonal chorus singing between men/women at weddings (*toisyy yryata*)

H. Throat singing (*khabarga yryata*)

I. Comic songs and tongue twisters (*chabyrgakhi*)

J. Children's songs

K. Nasal-palatal singing (*tangalai yryrata*)

L. Modern national choral styles and popular songs – these genres, although not traditional, are nonetheless ubiquitous at the present time and signify “Sakha music” to many. They are sung by men and women, boys and girls of all ages, commonly accompanied by guitar, synthesizer, piano, drums, and orchestra as well as “Russian” instruments such as *bayan* (button accordion), mandolin, and balalaika. These new genres are commonly heard through the mass media and at public concerts for national and ethnic festivals. They are

often included on the program alongside more traditional genres. Lyrical content varies, but the form is often strophic (which is not a traditional Sakha form). As in most Sakha styles, the rate of information flow is high and there is little repetition, except for the repeated chorus sections. The songs of these genres are not improvisatory like many of the traditional genres. They are written, arranged, and published largely by Sakha composers, although there are some Russian composers who include Sakha folk tunes and other elements in their compositions (N.S. Berestov is a prime example). Dance sometimes accompanies these songs; there are dance ensembles that are largely dedicated to these genres (for example, the National Dance Theatre of the Republic of Sakha).

3. Genres which combines both *dieretii* and *degeren* styles:

A. Epic song poem (*olonkho*) -- A one-person epic poem performance comprised of 10-20,000 lines of drama, lyric song, and recitative. Largely improvised (although the story line is maintained), the singer creates a distinct intonation and *leitmotif* for each character in the drama. Traditionally performed in homes, in the last number of decades *olonkho* is mostly performed in recording studios and opera houses. It is only performed in entirety by a specialized singer of this genre, called *olonkhosut*. These “olonkhko specialists” are now virtually non-existent. Currently, *olonkho* is performed only in parts by professional singers who sing various individual songs, similar to the way opera singers perform arias out of their operatic contexts. The lyrical content of *olonkho* was historically to tell the legends of Sakha origins and the exploits of their heroes and gods; the rate of information flow in this narrative form is very high. It is normally performed without instrumental accompaniment and/or dance movements.

B. Round dance (*ohuokai*) – Singers/dancers of both genders stand in a circle, linking arms, and stepping forward with the left foot and back with the right foot; as they do this, the circle slowly moves to the left. The *ohuokai* is performed in three general sections; the first, which serves as an introduction, is sung in *dieretii*, the second and third sections are *degeren*.

Ohuokai singing is unaccompanied call and response; the words are improvised by the caller on standard *ohuokai* melodies in a highly formalized, creative manner on themes of nature, blessing, praise of gods and people, as well as thanksgiving. The rate of new information in the lyrics is somewhat slowed down due to the repetition of the call and response form, however the new information rate is still relatively high, as the caller does not repeat words other than to occasionally return to the phrase, “*Ohuokai, ehekei, ehekei, ohuokai.*”

The *ohuokai* is normally sung out of doors in prominent places like town squares, or at summer festival grounds at every national holiday for which there is decent outside weather. It is performed especially during the summer festival of *Ysyakh*, where there are several circles dancing at all times for a couple of days. If the caller is a good one, the *ohuokai* circle will grow in size as more people are drawn in by his mastery. Normal performance length of the typical *ohuokai* is from 30-60 minutes.

Ohuokai expresses ethnic solidarity and pride; it is thus not normally sung or danced by Russians, although foreigners are allowed to participate and other exceptions have been noted in special contexts (i.e. church celebrations where other kinds of unity are being expressed).

[Note: The division of Sakha music into the two main styles and their subdivisions into various genres can be seen in the works of two authors: 1) Eduard Alekseev’s “New trends in Yakut musical folklore” in Music of the peoples of Asia and Africa, and 2) A.S. Larionova’s Verbal and musical in Yakut *dieretii yrya* and *Degeren yrya*: Lyric song of the Yakut (for publication details, see the Sakha Music and Arts bibliography by R. Harris).]