

Xöömii singing breaks rare ground

Lee Campbell

A French ethnomusicologists' doctoral research into Xöömii – Mongolian overtone singing – has resulted in the first meeting of four of the best and oldest masters of the art, the likes of which may never be seen again in Mongolia.

Their traditional art is a variation of throat singing only practiced in the Altai Mountain region of Central Asia by the Tuvans and Mongolians.

A ceremony to launch the rare meeting – a concert next weekend – was held at the Ulaanbaatar Alli-

ance Française Center, Monday April 2, 2007.

Xöömii singers, Nanjidiin Sengedorj; Dashdorjiin Tserendavaa; Baatarjin Odsuren and Taravjariin Ganbold will perform traditional songs and new works at the 'Dörvön Berkh' concert in the Art Gallery Stadium in Ulaanbaatar, April 7 and 8 at 6pm.

Their performance is the culmination of Frenchman, Johann Curtet and his Mongolian counterpart, Tsend-Ochirin Oigonbaatar's three years of research into Xöömii singing.

"It was not easy to bring the singers together at first and they were suspicious and didn't smile," Mr Curtet said.



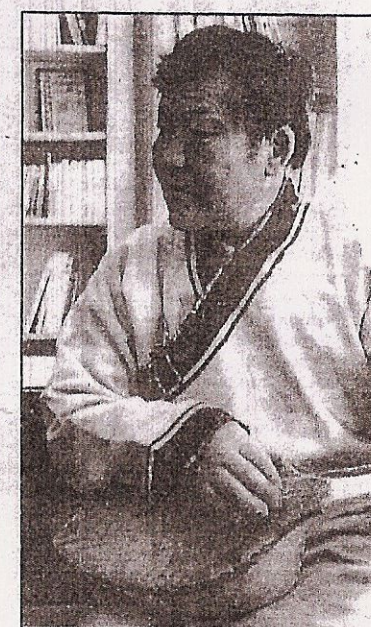
Baatarjin Odsuren, a master of Xöömii and skilled player of Mongolian flute-like instruments makes music for the media while promoting the forthcoming 'Dörvön Berkh' concert.



Nanjidiin Sengedorj plays his instrument and sings Xöömii simultaneously



Dashdorjiin Tserendavaa makes magic with his voice and instrument



Taravjariin Ganbold in perfect harmony with his fellow musicians

"They said, if you can do it we will try [to come together]."

"Xöömii is sung by individuals, not in groups and in the mountains, not on a stage. This will be the first time four have come together to perform and in this environment [the Art Gallery Stadium]," he said.

"They have been in Ulaanbaatar for two weeks and rehearsing up to four and five hours per day. It's demanding on their throats because they would never sing for this long in any one day. They have been so motivated they arrive about 15 minutes early for

rehearsals."

Mr Curtet said the concert would show the virtuosity of techniques of Xöömii singing to the public.

It is an incredibly difficult style of singing where the singer produces two notes simultaneously by pressing the pharynx and diaphragm. One sound usually remains at one pitch – the drone – while a higher one can be manipulated to sing melodies – the overtone.

The concert is an activity in the project "Routes Nomads" which aims to take Mongolian traditional musi-

cians to France to tour and perform.

The name of the concert, 'Dörvön Berkh', can be roughly translated as 'four sides'. It has been taken from the traditional game of shagai – where four sheep or ankle bones are rolled like dice and each side is turned up to reveal people's characteristics. It is extremely rare for one of each side to turn up and when it happens it is a sign of good luck for the future. The bringing together of the four masters for the first time is as rare as one of each side to turning up in shagai and with some luck – to roll 'Dörvön Berkh' again.