

Creating Unity and Peace Through Ethnic Music

Text Andy Bauer



Azmat Hekim was born into a family of artists in the Aksu region of northwest China. He was interested in hand drums from a young age. In 2000, he moved to Beijing to commence his career in the music industry, becoming involved in various projects. He has worked with groups focused on developing traditional Central Asian music and has also made major contributions to the activities of contemporary Central Asian ensembles. In addition, he has taken part in many types of ethnic music projects, which is one of his key distinguishing points, as this type of breadth is rarely seen in Uzbek/Uyghur percussionists. Azmat has a rich international performance track record and has played all kinds of music in China, appearing on music programs such as China Central Television's *The Best of China's Original Folk Songs*, among other shows.

His grandfather was a teacher who moved from Uzbekistan to China's Kuche County in the mid-20th century, becoming the principle of an elementary school. However, due to family reasons, Azmat moved back and forth between the countryside and Aksu over the course of his childhood. In 1989, he graduated from the Aksu Yixiang Art and Dance School.

Due to the needs of the ensemble, soon after joining the Tarim Dance and Song Company as a dancer, Azmat had to shift his focus from dance to percussion, something that was not of interest

to him. At the time, China had just started to develop, so there were very few learning materials on percussion education. In 1991, as the first materials regarding modern percussion started to enter China, Azmat went to Urumqi to study drums.

He studied under a famous percussionist by the name of Yasen, from the Urumqi Ethnic Song and Dance Ensemble, and learned jazz drums under someone named Tursun. Slowly Azmat learned about rhythm and became increasingly fond of it.

He got his first big break during a stadium performance in Shenzhen in 1991, after which he was acquainted with more renowned musicians from around China. To date, he has worked with many bands and ensembles both on stage and in the studio, including Askar Greywolf, Kerman, Chen Hongwei, Aitulan, Buluo, Panjir, Afanti, Loulan and Tiehan. He works as a stage musician for the Tongange Wuxi performance and the Tangchao Beijing Warm-Up Ensemble as well as a guest musician in Haya's Beijing performances. He is also a percussionist for Hanhong during their tours in China.

His greatest influence during his early childhood was Michael Jackson. After he studied music, Azmat realized MJ was even more amazing than he had originally thought. He also respects the music and thinking of Askar Greywolf, because he introduced rock to Xinjiang in

a successful manner. Azmat also acknowledges the influence of Severa Nazarkhan, an Uzbek woman who introducing Uzbek traditional elements into the world of rhythm and blues.

Another person Azmat admires is Hanhong: "She is also an ethnic musician. She sings the music of other minorities, and has a great voice and an outstanding attitude toward music."

A fan of ethnic music, Azmat appreciates the work of the Uzbek musician Sherali Jo'raye, a highly regarded musician throughout the late 20th century in Uzbekistan for his contributions to contemporary Uzbek music as well as the Gypsy Kings — a band that has significantly influenced the modern traditions of Xinjiang.

Azmat said he feels that the authentic development of any music depends on the degree to which musicians from a tradition venture out into the world and return with new ideas. He said "music speaks peace", and the notion of world music is the best way to achieve unity between nations and the brotherhood of humanity. Staying true to his Uzbek roots, Azmat intends to make world music the focus of his remaining career, helping international acts to grace stages worldwide.