

# Qyrq Qyz (Forty Girls)

## Arts Learning Student Matinee



Wednesday, March 14, 10:00 - 11:00 am  
RISD Auditorium, 17 Canal Walk, Providence, RI



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## About FirstWorks Arts Learning

The FirstWorks Arts Learning Program is a community engagement program providing live arts experiences for public, private, and home schools throughout Rhode Island. This exceptional program enriches school curricula while providing students with the cultural experience that comes from early exposure to professional live performance.

Teacher Resource Guides, such as this one, relating to each artist are provided to teachers, giving them the opportunity to use the student lecture/demonstration matinee experience as educational tools in their classrooms. Question and answer sessions are frequently offered after these student matinees, providing an opportunity for students to interact directly with the performers. Many thanks to the Hopkins Center for the Arts at Dartmouth College for allowing FirstWorks Arts Learning to adapt their Qyrq Qyz matinee Study Guide.

Since 2009, FirstWorks Arts Learning programs have reached more than 30,000 students and teachers through live student-focused lecture/demonstration matinees, in-school workshops and Master Classes, access to main stage performances of world premieres and Rhode Island premieres, and, student-focused community engagement opportunities.

Extended performance residencies allow students to participate in a layered learning experience over several months to motivate students to continue learning well beyond their workshop or performance experience. For many students, this is their first introduction to live performance and performers who are recognized as foremost artists in their field. Most performers are recipients of prestigious accolades of the highest artistic distinction such as the Kennedy Center Honors, the National Medal of Arts, MacArthur Fellowships, Guggenheim Fellowships, and Grammy Awards.

FirstWorks Arts Learning Programs commence along with the start of the school year and conclude with the PVDfest in June. These opportunities are generously made possible through the continuous support from businesses through our Adopt-A-School Program, local and national foundations, and community donors.

FirstWorks Arts Learning is dedicated to honoring and raising community awareness about the strong commitment our sponsors make to the children across Rhode Island and surrounding areas who experience artistic “firsts” through our programs. For more information about our Arts Learning Program please contact Kathleen McAreavey, Education and Community Outreach Manager at 401-868-1149, or by email: [kathleenm@first-works.org](mailto:kathleenm@first-works.org). To learn about our Adopt-A-School Program, or discuss support for our Arts Learning Program please contact Isabelle Tadmoury, Director of Development at 401-868-1071, or by e-mail: [isabelle@first-works.org](mailto:isabelle@first-works.org).

Thank you for connecting your students to these unforgettable powerful, live performance experiences.

Enjoy the show!

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# About the Show

In the barren **steppe** of Central Asia, nomadic **Turkic** clans rise to defend themselves against invaders from the east. Leading the defense is Gulayim, a teenage girl who gathers a group of forty young female warriors. Vanquishing the invaders, the forty girls secure their clans' freedom and build a society founded on justice and compassion.

This performance is inspired by Gulayim's (whose name means "moonflower") story, a tale that date backs to ancient times. *Qyrq Qyz* ("Kirk Kiz")—which translates to "forty girls"—remains with us because it is an important piece of epic poetry from the oral **bardic** traditions of Central Asia. Uzbek filmmaker Saodat Ismailova takes inspiration from the story in her luminous reimagining of the poem, combining live performers with recorded images to breathe modern life into the underlying themes and passions of the traditional tale.

Ismailova's conceptualizes the story in four sections—Earth, Air, Water and Fire. The film portion was shot on location in wind-scoured **Karakalpakstan** and features the ruins of ancient cities with roots in Zoroastrianism, one of the world's oldest religions. Local, non-professional actors portray Gulayim and her companions. The images overlap, swirl, hint at the distant past as well as modern times, linger on places, people, the sky, the ground. Recorded text and music composed by Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky complete the ethereal digital world of the story. The visual world of the performance is taken to the next level by a group of young female bards performing on stage—living embodiments of Gulayim and her companions. The bards' voices reflect the languages of the region—Karakalpak, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek. Accompanied by music played on a variety of traditional instruments, the women bring this epic story to life.



Images from the film portion of *Qyrq Qyz* (Forty Girls)

More About the Story: Gulayim is the 16-year-old daughter of Allayar, a ruler who lives in the fortress of Sarkop. Gulayim receives a gift of land from her father on the island of Miuli, where a fort is built for her and her 40 female companions— young women whom she trains in the art of war to defend their lands against invaders. When Sarkop is invaded by the **Kalmyk khan** Surtaishi, Gulayim’s father is killed in battle and many Sarkopians are led away into captivity. Hearing of the invasion, Gulayim and her 40 companions vanquish Surtaishi and the Kalmyks, liberate the captive Sarkopians and demand that the invaders offer compensation for the destruction they wreaked. Before the battle, Ayslan, a knight from the neighboring kingdom of Khorezm, seeks the love of Gulayim. However, Gulayim invites him to join her not in love, but in war. Following their victory, Gulayim and Ayslan join their lands, uniting peoples from different tribes and ethnicities, building a society founded on peace and compassion.

## An Excerpt from *Qyrq Qyz (Forty Girls)*:

I was born in **Transoxania** at the union of the Jaxartes and Oxus rivers;  
Where past and future meet,  
Where moon doesn’t hide from sun,  
Where distinguishing a white thread from black is impossible.

I was born into the steppe where sands sing  
And fiery tigers ramble,  
Where beautiful **Anahita** is worshipped,  
And soon **Zarathustra** will be born, and the steppe smells as if it is strewn  
With moonflowers—Gulayim.  
And I was named Gulayim.

And I united forty girls like me,  
Young, passionate, rigorous and fast,  
Affluent, healthy, resounding with joy.  
And the steppe was filled with these sounds.

And the steppe swelled with fertility.  
Sand has blossomed underfoot,  
Springs welled up from stones,  
The garden of Miuli had appeared.

And our arrows were precise,  
And our horses were fast.

## About the Artists

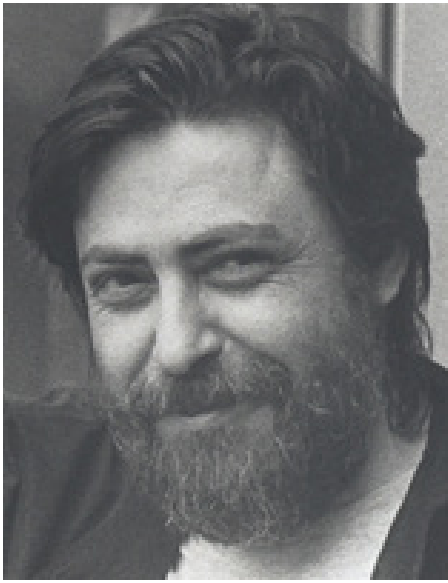


Saodat Ismailova

### **SAODAT ISMAILOVA** (*director and cinematographer*)

Born in Uzbekistan in 1981, Saodat is one of the most internationally visible and accomplished representatives of a new generation of artists from Central Asia who came of age in the post-Soviet era and have established cosmopolitan artistic lives while remaining deeply engaged with their native region as a source of creative inspiration. Her debut feature film *40 Days of Silence*, a poignant depiction of four generations of Tajik women living in the complete absence of men, was nominated for best debut film at the 2014 Berlin International Film Festival, and thereafter was screened in more than two dozen prestigious festivals around the world. Her video installation “Zukhra” was featured in the Central Asian Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale and her documentary film “Aral: Fishing in an Invisible Sea” won Best Documentary at the 2004 Turin Film Festival. Among many other works are nine music documentaries for the CD-DVD anthology *Music*

*of Central Asia*, co-produced by the Aga Khan Music Initiative and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Saodat Ismailova resides in Tashkent and Paris, and is affiliated with Le Fresnoy, France’s National Studio of Contemporary Arts.



### **DMITRI YANOV-YANOVSKY (*composer, soundtrack*)**

Born in Uzbekistan in 1963, Dmitri has produced a distinguished and culturally unique body of work characterized by a merging of musical influences from his native Central Asia with postmodernist compositional styles of Russia and Eastern Europe. Yanov-Yanovsky's music has been commissioned and performed by leading musicians and musical organizations in the United States, including cellist Yo-Yo Ma, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, North Carolina Symphony, Kronos Quartet, soprano Dawn Upshaw, and the New Juilliard Ensemble. From 2008-2010, Yanov-Yanovsky was a composer-in-residence at Harvard University, with support from the Scholars at Risk Program. During the same period, he taught music composition at Dartmouth College. His music has been recognized internationally through prizes and awards, recordings, and performances in prestigious concert venues. Yanov-Yanovsky is also a prolific composer of film soundtracks. From 1996-2006, he served as artistic director of the International Contemporary Music Festival Ilkhom-XX, in Tashkent, the only festival of its kind in Central Asia.

Dmitri Yanov-Yanovsky

### **AGA KHAN MUSIC INITIATIVE (*producer*)**

The Aga Khan Music Initiative is an interregional music and arts education program with worldwide performance, outreach, mentoring and artistic production activities. The Initiative was launched by His Highness the Aga Khan to support talented musicians and music educators working to preserve, transmit and further develop their musical heritage in contemporary forms. The Music Initiative began its work in Central Asia, with projects in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and subsequently expanded its cultural development activities to include artistic communities and audiences in the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia and West Africa.



The Aga Khan meets with then Secretary of State John Kerry in 2014.

## **The Performers**

Raushan Orazbaeva, lead musician, *qobyz*

Alibek Kabdurakhmanov, conductor, percussion, *chang*

Gumisay Berdikhonova, vocal, *girjek*

Gumshagul Bekturganova, vocal, *dutar*

Aziza Davronova, vocal

Tokzhan Karatai, vocal, *qobyz*

Makhabat Kobogonova, vocal, *kyl-kiyak*, *chopo-choor*, jaw harps

Arailym Omirbekova, vocal, *dombyra*

Saltanat Yersultan, vocal, *jetigen*, *qobyz*



# Contextual Background

Portions of the information below are credited to *The Music of Central Asia*, edited by Theodore Levin, Saida Daukeyeva and Elmira Köchümkulova, Indiana University Press, 2016, with support from the Aga Khan Music Initiative. Additional credit to the program notes provided for the public show.



Chopo-choors

## Instruments of *Qyrq Qyz* (Forty Girls)

*chang*: zither struck with wooden mallets similar to a hammered dulcimer

*choor*: Kyrgyz name for an end-blown flute made reed or wood with four or five holes

*chopo-choor*: made of clay, a small egg-shaped wind instrument (ocarina) with a mouthpiece and 3-6 holes

*dombyra*: also called *dombra*, a Kazakh two-stringed long-necked fretted lute played by strumming or plucking

*dutar*: two-stringed long-necked fretted lute that occurs in local variant forms and sizes among Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, Karakalpaks, Uyghurs and other groups

*girjek*: also spelled *ghijek*, round-bodied spike fiddle with 3-4 metal strings and short fretless neck

*kyl-kiyak*: Kyrgyz variant of an upright bowl fiddle with 2 horsehair strings. Kazakhs call an almost identical instrument *qyl-qobyz*.

*jetigen*: wooden zither of Kazakh origin with seven strings made of horsehair



Musicians holding a *girjek* and *dutar*



A *kyl-kiyak*



*Jetigen*

## Epic Poetry in Central Asia

An epic (from Greek *epikos* and *epos*: “word,” “story,” “poem”) is a long, narrative poem that recounts and glorifies the heroic deeds of historical and legendary figures, typically with larger-than-life qualities. Some well-known examples are Greece’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and *Mahabharata* from India. Though 21st-century bardic performance of these classics is rare, epic performance is still a living tradition in many parts of Central Asia. Accompanied by singing and instrumental music, the epic has maintained status in the region due to its roots in the social dynamics of nomadic life. Instead of preserving information in books, nomads relied on their memory. In addition to being entertainment, epics contain rich and valuable information, serving as an effective means of documenting, transmitting and archiving history, genealogy and cultural mores. Though epic poetry is a large part of life in Central Asia, very few of the stories are known outside of the region. Many stories include elements of the spirit world—ancestor spirits, spirit-masters/protectors and natural phenomena like the sky deity, Tengri. Poetic verse, singing and musical instruments were also believed to have therapeutic powers—in particular, the power to heal the psyche, and, by extension, to bring about social equilibrium and harmony. In Central Asian Turkic languages, terms for “epic reciter” and “traditional healer” or “shaman” are often similar—for example, among the Karakalpaks, a *baqsy* is an epic singer whereas among the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, a *baqsy* (or *bakshy*) is a traditional healer—evidence that both professions developed from the same cultural practice.



Contemporary female bard and her *dutar*

## Female Bards

"Our songs don't grow old! They're passed along from one generation to the next, and younger singers perform them as if they were new—with a different voice and fresh passion. When you listen to one of these classics, it's always as if you're hearing it for the first time."—*Nodira Pirmatova, Uzbek singer/songwriter*

Though women have long performed music and dance in the home, for many centuries women in what is now Uzbekistan were largely segregated from men when it came to public performance of music and epic poetry. Local interpretations of Islamic law and custom also meant that most bards were men. Regardless, women still worked to make

their mark as musicians and bards. Kazakh folklore has preserved the story of a woman who faced off in a singing competition against a famous male performer. Though she lost, her courageous example gave her an honored place in the history of the region, encouraging younger generations of women to perform in genres once reserved for men. The appropriation of male-dominated musical traditions by women was spurred by the social policies of the Soviet era, which worked to integrate women into areas of the work force from which they had traditionally been excluded, including the performing arts. Though this integration often served to create an image of emancipation it also opened the door for more women to access music training and performance opportunities. Tashkent State Conservatory and other arts schools in the area now provide music and cultural education for males and females alike. These days the most famous Uzbek musicians outside of Uzbekistan are women. Nodira Pirmatova, Yulduz Usmanova and Sevara Nazarkhan are just a few of the female Uzbek musicians who are admired worldwide.

## Female Warriors in History, Mythology and Popular Culture

*Qyrq Qyz (Forty Girls)*, like other oral epic poetry from Inner Asia, interweaves elements of myth, legend, history and geography. The distinctiveness of *Qyrq Qyz* is in the realm of gender: its main heroes are female—young women whose equestrian skills, valor and military prowess call to mind the mythic Amazons of antiquity. The heroes of *Qyrq Qyz*, however, may have emerged as much from history as myth. As documented in a recent book by Stanford research scholar Adrienne Mayor, *The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women across the Ancient World*, new DNA and bioarchaeological analysis reveals that among the ancient nomadic groups known collectively as Scythians, "about one-third of Scythian females were active fighters."



Ms. Marvel, Kamala Khan

The story of Gulayim resonates with accounts by Herodotus and other ancient historians of female warrior-rulers who belonged to the nomadic or "barbarian" cultures beyond the Black Sea. Among these is Tomyris, ruler of the kingdom of the Massagetae, whose territory was close to that of present-day Karakalpakstan. According to Herodotus, Tomyris led the Massagetaens in defending their land against Persian invaders.



Tomoe Gozen

Other stories of female warriors abound in history and fiction. Tomoe Gozen is a much celebrated female samurai from the 11th-century, one of very few in the famously male occupation. Joan of Arc notably led French troops to success over the English when she was a teenager. The most recent incarnation of Ms. Marvel in the Marvel Universe is a Muslim named Kamala Khan, a teenage Pakistani-American shape-shifter.





Brienne of Tarth (Gwendolyn Christie)

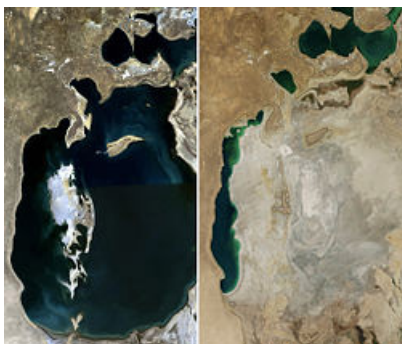
Other fictional stories of female fighters from 20th- and 21st-century popular culture include Wonder Woman, the quintessential female fighter. In the 2017 film *Wonder Woman*, many female athletes, martial artists and professional fighters were cast as Amazonian warriors. The director often had to tell them to “tone it down” as they brought their real-life fight training onto the set. Another popular series featuring female warriors is *Game of Thrones*. The characters of Brienne of Tarth, played by Gwendolyn Christie, and Arya Stark, played by Maisie Williams, both fight their way through the treacherous landscapes of Westeros, deftly wielding their swords.



## About Central Asia

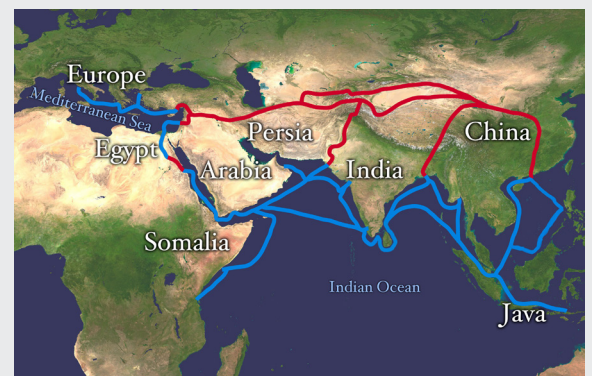
Central Asia stretches from the Caspian Sea in the west to China in the east, from Afghanistan in the south to Russia in the north. It is also colloquially referred to as the “stans,” as the countries generally considered to be within the region all have names ending with the Persian suffix “-stan”, meaning “land of.” Countries include Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, all of which were part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic from the early 20th-century to 1991, when the USSR dissolved and they became independent countries. These lands were home to various ancient cultures who were in contact with each other due to trans-Eurasian trade routes known collectively as the Silk Road. These routes were active from early antiquity through the Middle Ages. Present day countries in Central Asia each have a titular ethnic group,

though a mix of ethnicities is represented in each. Rule by the Soviet Union led to many changes in the area. The northwestern part of Uzbekistan was once dominated by the Aral Sea, which was fed by two rivers, Amu Darya and Syr Darya. In the 1960s, Soviet economic planners and engineers rerouted these rivers to provide crop irrigation. Once the fourth largest inland body of water in the world, it is now more desert than water—the eastern portion of the sea is entirely gone. What water remains has a high level of salinity; fishing is no longer able to support the region as it once did.



On the left, the Aral Sea in 1989; on the right, the sea as of 2014

The Silk Road was an extensive trading route that extended from Europe to China via a combination of overland and maritime routes. The route hit it’s zenith during the Han Dynasty in China (221 BCE-206 BCE) with the trade of silk and horses but soon grew to include many imports and exports.





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