

# Urna Chahar-Tugchi

The voice of the Mongolian grasslands



Photo: Frank Wuttig

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## Urna Chahar-Tugchi - Biography



Urna Chahar-Tugchi was born into a family of livestock farmers in the grasslands of the Ordos district in the Southwest of Inner Mongolia. Being raised among horses and sheep and surrounded by head-high grass and sand dunes, Urna was imbued with a feeling of the endless expanse of the steppe.

Urna's hunger for wisdom and other cultures lead her from the steppe to the far-off Chinese metropolis of Shanghai. At the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, she studied the *Yangqin* (Chinese dulcimer). It was during this time that Urna started her career as the featured singer in Robert Zollitsch's *Gaoshan Liushui* ensemble, one of China's first and most interesting World Music projects.

Urna performs her own compositions in concert, combining her classical music education with experience in traditional Mongolian music. Each piece is crafted from equal parts of tradition and innovation. Her mastery of mixing elements of Mongolian Folk music with influences from other cultures creates a fresh, new sound with a familiar undertone. Urna's lyrics reflect her love for the poetry of her native Mongolian language. The natural immediacy of Urna's strong voice is striking.

The melodies of her improvisations seem to soar endlessly and the dynamic of her voice ranges from the tenderness of a moonlit night to the merciless force of a Mongolian sandstorm. Combining charisma with artistic perfection, she leads her audiences on a journey through landscapes never seen.

Urna is backed by an ensemble, many from other cultures, perform on various instruments and sensitively contribute their own musical language to this inspired music. The result is a colourful and exciting mixture of intimate tranquillity, deeply moving expression and eruptive power.

### Discography:

Jamar (2001, *Trees Music & Art*, CD 278)

Hödööd (1999, *Oriente RIENCD* 27)

Crossing (1997, *KlangRäume* 30330)

Tal Nutag (1995, *KlangRäume* 30200)

## Selected performance history



- Chicago World Music Festival, USA, 2001
- Lotus Festival, Bloomington/IN, USA, 2001
- Monterey World Music Festival, Monterey/CA, USA, 2001
- Migration Music Festival Taipei, Taiwan, 2001
- World music festival Taipei, Taiwan, 2001
- Concertgebouw Amsterdam, Holland, 2001
- Frick Fine Arts Center, University of Pittsburgh, PA, USA, 2000
- Smithsonian Sackler Gallery Auditorium, Washington, DC, 2000
- Allbright College, Reading, PA, USA 2000
- Anthropologia, Moscow, Russia 2000
- Festival Mediteran Isola, Slovenia, 2000
- Ethno Ambient, Split, Croatia, 2000
- Moravia Folk Festival, Gychicko, Poland, 2000
- EBU Contemporary Folk Festival, Roznov, Check Republic, 2000
- Sfinks Festival, Beuchot, Belgium, 1999
- Masala Festival, Hannover, Germany, 1999, 1997, 1996
- Weltmusikfestival, Kassel, Germany, 1999
- Ken Music Festival, Tunisia, 1999, 1998
- Roots Festival, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 1999
- Luxfestival, Echternach, Luxembourg, 1999
- Weltnachtfestival, Bielefeld, Germany, 1999
- Music Meeting, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, 1998
- Tanz und Folk Festival, Rudolstadt, Germany, 1998
- Festival van Vlaanderen, Belgium, 1998
- Virus Festival, Leek, The Netherlands, 1998
- Weltweit Musicfestival, Leipzig, Germany, 1998
- Folklorum Festival Kulturinsel, Einsiedel, Germany, 1998
- Zither II, Munich, Germany, 1997
- Multikulturelles Sommerfestival, Berlin Germany, 1997
- Festival de Plectro, Logroño, Spain, 1996
- World Music Festival, Rotterdam, The Netherlands, 1995
- Jazzwoche, Hannover, Germany, 1995
- Jazzfest Peking, Peking, China, 1994

## Urna talks about her life and childhood in the grasslands

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“My homeland is the Ordos district, a high plateau in western Inner Mongolia belonging to China. It was here that I was born in the last winter month of 1968 into a humble family of livestock farmers. As a child I looked after the lambs on the sand dunes with the neighbouring children. Sometimes we lost track of our flock whilst playing. So to gather them together again we tossed lumps of sand into the air. In this way we sometimes caused whole sandbanks to collapse. Later I looked after calves in the plains of Shirdegiin Tsaidam where the thick grass grows tall. And so the first ten years of my childhood quickly passed. In my country it is customary for the children to attend a day-school when they reach the age of ten. My parents now expected this of me. I got on my horse, presented myself on the neighbouring household and began to learn the Mongolian alphabet. Where I come from ‘day- school’ means a particular family where all the local children gather to receive instruction in writing. Later on I went to a ‘middle-school’. It was too far away to ride to every day, and so from then on I only got to visit my parents for one or two days of a fortnight. The school was run with the strictest discipline. Each morning, as soon as the sun rose, we had to get up out of our warm beds and go to lesson. It was no longer the bleating of sheep and lambs and the lowing of cattle which awoke me but the clanging of the school-bell. The years passed quickly. Soon I finished ‘middle-school’ and set my thoughts on studying. I got in the train – for the very first time in my life – and travelled to Shanghai. There I was, a simple twenty-year-old Mongolian peasant-girl, wanting to matriculate at the conservatory and unable to speak a single word of Chinese! So I diligently learned the language, took lessons on the Chinese ‘Yangqin’ and was eventually admitted in 1990 to the Institute of Traditional Chinese Music at the Shanghai Conservatory. I was fascinated by the student life and getting to know what was still for me the foreign Chinese culture proved to be an important experience. During my studies of the basic music-theory I returned more and more to my Mongolian roots.

The Ordos district has been dubbed the ‘Sea of Songs’ by its inhabitants. I am very happy to have born in this particular part of the world. In my homeland there is no one who doesn’t know our folk music. Its range is endless and the songs are sung everywhere – in the open air, tending the cattle, whilst riding. So it was that I grew up in a sea of wonderful melodies, fairy-tales and legends.

*O my Ordos, deep in whose breast I live,  
O mother and father, who surrounded me with their love,  
O shepherds, who accompanied me on my way with their spirit...”*

(Translation: Renate Bauwe and Graham Waterhouse)