Laurent Legrain’s recently published *Chanter, s'attacher et transmettre chez les Darhad de Mongolie* is a rare example of a study successfully combining analytical rigour and rich ethnographic detail. In a carefully crafted text and beautifully written prose, Legrain traces the outline of the Darhad Mongol soundscape and what he refers to as the Mongolian ‘sound continuum’ (*continuum sonore*). Legrain argues that the Mongolian term *duu*, whose semantic register spans ‘singing’, ‘voice’, but also ‘sound’, indexes a close enmeshment of songs, the human voice and the sounds of animals and the surrounding environment. This enmeshment is visible in the well-established notion that the auditory environment, such as the sound of particular rivers or mountains, inspires particular songs and tunes and shapes its inhabitants in specific ways. Conversely, a vast body of cultural production refers explicitly to the Mongolian landscape. For Legrain, this intimate linkage reveals a Mongolian attachment to the ‘production of the human voice as well as to sounds generated by “objects” perceptually dominant such as the wind, rivers, cattle and the soundscape of human activities’ (p. 362). This encompassing notion of *duu* thus evokes an attunement to a soundscape that discriminates particular auditory qualities and excludes sounds perceived as interferences. The author is careful to show that the importance placed on certain culturally meaningful sounds is not intrinsically linked to the nature of objects, but that emphasis is in fact linked to a particular context of attachment and techniques of cultural transmission.

Through an attentive ethnography supplemented by an analysis of historical documents and literature, the author retraces the transmission of this attachment, both over the course of the socialist period and at the level of the individual through socialisation. The first part of the book explores the processes that saw the parallel formation of a Darhad ethnicity and musical repertoire anchored in phonological, stylistic and musical specificities. Here Legrain offers a careful and finely tuned analysis which resists sweeping generalisations. Thus, if there was a political will to reframe Darhad musical traditions along particular ideological models, musical practices were not subjected to the same scrutiny as other artistic forms such as literature. Music and songs were certainly co-opted by local powers to encourage attendance at political events, but the line between political militancy and artistic enjoyment was always blurred. Several aspects of the Darhad musical tradition could thus
endure relatively unscathed. The Darhad core cultural tenet that relations to nature foster and shape musical expression was, for instance, never challenged. In other words, while some shifts were witnessed, like the major/minor contradiction where major key tonality was to be associated, as per European musical theory, with expressions of joy and enthusiasm, Darhad musical traditions were not entirely subject to the re-imagination process described by Marsh (2009) in the context of the Mongolian horse-fiddle.

At the same time, Legrain does not subscribe to the notion that the socialist period had no bearing on the musical tradition of the Darhads either, nor that postsocialist cultural practices constitute a return to an unadulterated, repressed past. Unlike other studies such as Pegg’s (2001), Legrain’s analysis is more keenly alert both to the cultural continuities and to the dramatic structural shifts brought by decades of political influence—though of course Legrain benefits here from a much longer timeframe. In his reconciliation of both views, the author introduces the concept of ‘the tunnel under history’ (le tunnel sous l’histoire) to illustrate how certain aspects of cultural transmission were occasionally driven underground only to re-emerge later in a different configuration. These ‘partial repressions’ meant that certain artists and personalities were occasionally positioned ambivalently with respect to ideology. Thus, during an altercation between a young composer and his artistic director in their assessment of a piece of music, both protagonists could invoke the influence of the renowned Mongolian composer Dugaržav, one praising him for his role in modernising Mongolian music, the other for his preserving of Mongolian traditions.

In the second part of the book, Legrain returns to the central thesis of ‘sound continuum’ prefigured in the introduction, this time through the lens of childhood and socialisation. This apparent break in the narrative is nonetheless tied to the larger analytical handle of ‘cultural transmission’. What appears at first to be an apposition of two different registers—the political and the personal—in fact sustains the central argument, in that it illustrates how cultural transmission is greatly facilitated by an attention to the Darhad soundscape inculcated through socialisation. Here Legrain insists that this Darhad attachment to sound is only tangentially related to virtuosity. If talent is of course given due recognition, where socialisation most matters is with the ‘excess of attention’ that is elicited when certain sounds of the continuum—and singing in particular—become audible (p. 188). Taking some distance from the notion of competence allows him to integrate culturally important sounds—such as the cries of animals, the howling of the wind and the babbling of rivers, but also human voice and music—into an auditory spectrum of local authenticity. This cultural soundscape helps him fine-tune the complex mechanics of