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“Sung Poetry” of the South Siberian Turks: Interrelations between Music and Poetry

ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the so-called ‘sung poetry’ of several Turkic-speaking peoples of South Siberia. The author’s main focus is on the problem of metric organization of poetic and musical parameters and the interrelations between them.

The author starts with a discussion of some methodological issues, in particular, what can be regarded as ‘meter’ in vocal folk music. Contrary to some authors, who attribute this term exclusively to poetic expression, in this article it is understood in a broader sense: as a system of temporal organization.

In Altai, Tuva, Shor, and Khakass song traditions, there is a ‘syllabic rhythmical formula’ (SRF), which corresponds to the verses, as well as to the melodic line. The SRF, following the author’s opinion, can be regarded as a meter for a song, or the song as genre. It usually regulates number and quality of musical units in correspondence with the syllables.

This common and rather simple picture, nevertheless, becomes more complicated when the author starts to describe some particular cases. The traditions of the Telengits, Chalkans and Kumandins, Shors, and Khakasses-Sagays are chosen to demonstrate a variety of arrangements of the of ‘sung poetry’ of the South Siberian Turks.

KEYWORDS

Music

Poetry

Song traditions

Turkic peoples

South Siberia

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Preliminary remarks

South Siberian Turkic peoples consist of

- the South Altaians (Altai-Kizhi, 'Telengits', 'Teleuts'),
- the North Altaians ('Tubas', 'Chalkans', 'Kumandins');
- the 'Shors' (Northern and Southern);
- the Khakass (Kyzyls, Kachins, Sagays, Beltirs, Koybals, KhakasShors groups);
- the Tuvans (Western, Southern, Central, Southern-Eastern, North-Western, or 'Toju');
- the 'Tofas';
- the Altai Kazakhs (an isolated group of the Kazakhs of Middle Zhuz).

Now some of these peoples are officially on the list of the 'Small people of the North' (they are marked in the list above).

Traditional musical cultures of all of these peoples include song traditions¹, which are the most popular and widely-distributed amongst them. Song traditions mainly belong to the sphere of lyrics. For songs are typical strophic forms, and relatively short compositions. Epic traditions are associated with the singing and glorification of heroes, *alyps*. They are embodied in large epic forms and use a special musical arrangement. All of the song traditions are based on a different kind of syllabic verse and particular poetic forms, characterized by perfect strophic structure. Poetic form corresponds to a particular type of melodies, which we define as 'model tunes' – "melodies, typical for a given local tradition, and characterized by several features: non-attachment to concrete rites, time, place and so on; polytextuality (i.e. possibility to improvise all verbal repertoire with one tune); typified structure²" (Sychenko, Krupich, Pinzhina, 2006:36). These features easily allow for the performance of any poetic texts, including improvised ones, which is very important and essential for these cultures. Considering the extremely high status of poetry in these cultural systems, I proposed that we refer to this type of song tradition as 'sung poetry' (Sychenko, 1989).

¹ I distinguish song tradition with other genre traditions such as epic, cattle incantations, lullabies, shamanic singing, 'throat singing', etc.

² Original is in Russian.

Model tunes play different roles in each of these traditions. Thus, it is the main and, practically the only, kind of melody characteristic of the South Altaians' (Altai-kizhi and Telengit) and the Tofas' song traditions. The Teleuts', North Altaiians', Shors' and the Khakass' as well as the Altaian Kazakhs' traditions also include other groups of song genres and corresponding tunes. Tuvan tradition includes two main genres of songs: *kozhamyk*, performed with model tunes, and *yr/yry*, which is characterized by particular melodies and more strict correlation between text and melody³. However that may be, the model tunes play an important role in each of these cultures and form the main body of their melodic repertoires.

One of the most important characteristics of the model tunes is the free connection between music and poetry. 'Free', in this case, means that practically each verbal text may be performed with any of the model tunes. There is no strict correspondence between them.

Besides this common principle, different traditions demonstrate different interrelations between verbal and musical patterns. Some of them are organized in a very strict way; others are organized more freely.

In the present article I would like to (1) examine several examples from some of these song systems, and (2) demonstrate the different cases of interrelations between music and poetry, and (3) examine 'metric / free-metric' relationships in some of them.

Sources for the research

I base my research on the field materials, published works and several unpublished manuscripts (theses) of students and post-graduate students, which are kept in the Archives of the NSC (Novosibirsk State Conservatoire named after M. I. Glinka). All these materials form a basis for a large research project for the study of Turkic song

³ *Yrlar* are often considered by informants as being 'composed by somebody', that is, they have an author, no matter known or unknown one. *Kozhamyktar*'s melodies (but not the texts!), in its turn, are regarded as 'common, belonging to a whole ethnic group'.

traditions of South Siberia. Historical bibliography can be found in the essays of the volume (Galitskaya, Mazepus, 1997)⁴.

For the given article, the works on the Altai, Shor and Sagay traditions were used. (Eliferenko, 2015; Pinshina, 2007; Sychenko, 1989; 1998; 2010).

Methodological background

Before turning to the concrete examples of the 'sung poetry' of the South Siberian Turks, I would like to discuss some methodological and terminological issues, such as trying to define what can be regarded as 'free-metric' in these musical-poetic systems⁵. In connection with this, one may pose several questions, such as: What is 'meter' for non-European folk traditions? Is the term correct? To which phenomena does it relate: to music, poetry, or both? What is (or, could be) 'free-metric'? and so on.

Primarily, the term 'meter' (Greek *μέτρον* 'measure') has appeared in ancient Greek poetry, which was a poetico-musical art. One of the earliest meanings of the terms 'meter', 'metrical' is connected with the particular poetic system ('metrical', or 'quantitative' poetry), based on the combination of feet formed by short and long syllables. Nowadays, the term 'meter' has a much wider meaning and applies to both poetry and music. It is also used in a narrow as well as in a broader sense. Here I will neither discuss the abundant literature on what meter is in poetry and music, nor analyze and compare different points of view on the subject (see, for instance, Agawu, 2006; Arom, 1985; Jacobs, 1965; Longman, 1984, etc.). Instead, I will refer to the excellent works by Russian philologist and musicologist M.G. Kharlap, who has published several essays on 'meter', 'rhythm', and similar issues in different literary

⁴ So as it is not the purpose of this article to make full review of all sources available, I just mention names of my colleagues – philologists and ethnomusicologists – substantially contributed into collection, notation, studying of the song traditions of South Siberia Turkic peoples during the last thirty years: L. N. Arbachakova, L. S. Astanaeva, A. D.-B. Baranmaa (Mongush), M. M. Badyrgy, M. D. Chertykova, M. A. Demchinova (Tolbina), A. Kh. Kan-ool, N. S. Kapitsyna, Z. S. Kazagacheva, N. M. Kondratyeva, V. V. Mindibekova, R. B. Nazarenko, L. Nyssen, S. K. Pavliuchik, T. M. Sadalova, D. S. Saynakhova, Yu. I. Sheikin, O. A. Sheikina, N. M. Skvortsova. E. L. Tiron (Krupich), K. E. Ykachina, and others.

⁵ 'Free-metric singing' was the main topic of the 2nd Symposium of the ICTM (International Council for Traditional Music) Study Group on Music of the Turkic-Speaking World (Berlin, 2010). By some reasons articles prepared for the Symposium were left unpublished.

and musical encyclopedias, as well as in the Big Soviet Encyclopedia (Kharlap, 1967; 1974; 1976, and others).

On the basis of Kharlap's ideas, as well as my own research experience, I propose a synthetic 'working' definition: 'meter is a system of measurement of time units'. In this broad sense, meter exists in most types of music, poetry, and dance. In all these arts, duration as such should be measured, temporal units should be calculated, and meter is an instrument for it. In this sense it is rather universal.

Meter can reveal itself in different aspects and different modes. Verses / musical lines, poetical / musical feet, or syllables / times, accents / beats, and so on, can be measured and regulated by different 'metric systems', or 'meters'. Therefore, meter is a scheme, a rule(s) of temporal organization. Rhythm, in its term, is the concrete manifestation of the system, including all possible breaches of this scheme.

One of the most common cases of meter in vocal folk musics of the world is 'syllabic rhythmical formula' (SRF). This term is common in Russian-language ethnomusicology. It corresponds to the English term 'pattern', but not completely. It refers to both poetic and musical parameters of vocal music and, therefore, reflects its essential features. Below I will give some examples of this kind of meter. But this is just one possible, specific case of folk meter, and there are others, which cannot be ignored.

It is clear, that in a verbal text of a song, its own – poetical – meter can be found. Thus, we found such meters as 7-, 8-, ... syllabics in syllabic systems; iambic tetrameter in accentual-syllabic systems; double-hit accentual verse in a tonic system, etc. Melody of a song, instead, has its own rhythm, but its meter is usually strictly connected with the verbal one. Therefore, meter reveals itself (1) in an organization of a verse; (2) in a temporal organization of a tune; (3) in a complex interrelation between verse and tune. SRF is a point of connection between two parameters, verbal and musical, and, therefore, it is a real complex meter of a song, or a group of songs.

Similarly to the new European 'bar music', meter in folk songs is a basic structure, and rhythm is its realization. The difference between them is that in folk music,

rhythm and meter are not as independent, as they can be in the composer's music. If meter in 'bar music' has a rather abstract character (2/4, 6/8 and so on) and almost never reveals itself as a rhythm, meter as SRF is concrete and sometimes coincides with rhythm.

The expressions 'free meter', and 'free-metric' are useful, but it is not very clear which phenomena they cover. Does it mean that there are phenomena deprived of meter completely, or is it a matter of an opposition between strict and free meters? So as I speak exclusively about vocal music, the first case could be related to three issues. First, there is prosaic text as a basis; secondly, it is poetry of a *verlibra*, or free verse type; thirdly, it is vocalization without verbal text as such. In Turkic traditions of Southern Siberia very few phenomena can be regarded as free metric in this sense. They are: cattle incantations, some kinds of lullabies, and some epic traditions. As far as song traditions, or 'sung poetry' is concerned – all of them are based on different kinds of syllabic poetical systems, and therefore are not, by definition, deprived of meter (SRF in this case). As my research of shamanic musical-poetic texts shows, these kinds of oral texts in Southern Siberia are based on different kinds of syllabic systems as well.

Another sense of the expression 'free-metric' may concern a possible way of realization of a meter, with continuous gradation on the scale from 'strict' to 'free'.

I will now turn to the examples that illustrate this point.

Sung poetry kozhoŋ (the Telengits)

Sung poetry *kozhoŋ* of the Telengits (as well as of the Altai-kizhi) is one of the most strictly organized in this area (Sychenko, 1998). It is based on 7-syllable verse with a constant caesura: 4+3.

Only the first syllable can be replaced by two, and the basic verse structure changes: 4+3→5+3. The verse structure can therefore be represented by the formula $7(8) = 4(5) + 3$:

Кара таштың бажынаң(7)
 Карчага тўшти, жем сурап,(8)
 Кара тажуур койтылдап,(7)
 Куда келди, кыс сурап.(7)

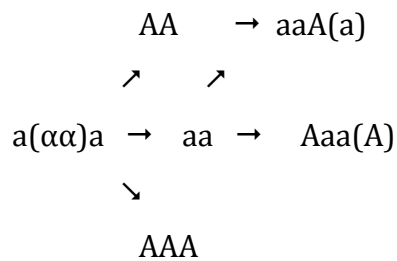
There are four main SRFs for the 7-syllabic verse (Table 1):

1	 odd musical line even musical line
2	 odd musical line even musical line
3	 odd musical line even musical line
4	 odd and even musical lines

Table 1. Rythmical modi of South Altaian sung poetry

SRF in this tradition covers the whole verse (poetic line), which is why I proposed to call it ‘rhythmical modi’ (RM).

Four RMs are strictly connected, and this connection can be shown with this scheme:



In this scheme ‘ α ’ means (extra-short element), ‘a’ means (short element), and ‘A’ means (long element); element(s) in brackets may replace the preceding element.

The first level of freedom in using this strict system⁶ is a variation of the quality of the last syllable of the odd verse. Very often an odd musical line represents a short

⁶ I don’t mention that concrete meaning of each element may vary as well – it is common place in oral performance.

version, and an even line – a long version of the main SRF. Such irregularity breaks the monotonous character of the performing.

The second level of freedom is the possibility of iambic transformation of the basic RMs. Two short elements transform into short and long, and the long element transforms into one and a half long elements:

$$\text{♪ ♪} \rightarrow \text{♪ ♪} ; \text{♫} \rightarrow \text{♫}.$$

It is convenient to define basic RMs as ‘neutral’, and transformed ones as ‘iambic’ (Table 2):

RM	Neutral	Iambic
1	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪.
2	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪	♪ ♪ ♪. ♪. ♪ ♪ ♪.
3	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪. ♪ ♪
4	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪. ♪. ♪.

Table 2. Binar and ternar variants of RM of South Altai sung poetry

Finally, the third level of freedom is the possibility to vary long elements of the neutral RMs and one and half elements of the iambic RMs with extra-long elements with indefinite length, which depends only and exclusively on the performer’s intention, taste, and desire. Its length may exceed the basic long element by double the duration or more.

Melodically, super long elements can be represented by one long lasting tone, or by a group of tones (melisma)⁷. In this way, two styles of drawn-out singing are formed: simple and ornamental.

Four sound examples demonstrate four different realizations of a RM-2. Examples [1](#) and [2](#) demonstrate a fast style of singing using two variants of the basic SRF;

⁷ I guess that in the song traditions with a very elaborate genre of drawn-out songs, these last ones use both techniques: melisma, and lasting tones.

examples 3 and 4 demonstrate a simple drawn-out style, with identical variations of the last syllable of the odd line of SRF.

Sung poetry kyska saryn (the Chalkans)

The Song genre of the North Altaians similar to *kozhoŋ* is called *kyska saryn*, or ‘short songs’ (for the Chalkans), or *takpak*⁸ (for the Kumandins). Two traditions have an almost identical organization (Sychenko, 1998).

Two examples of Chalkan *kyska saryn* demonstrate typical cases of the verse structure 7 (8, 9) = 4 (5) + 3 (4):

1 example

Qas palazı qağıldap (7)	Gosling’s cackling,
Qamıştu sasta uyam, diyt. (8)	In a reed marsh his nest is, says.
Qıs palazı qımnanıp (7)	Girl-child whispering,
Äl aymaqta t’urtım, diyt. (7)	In a middle of people her home is, says.

2 example

Qare <i>le</i> köstü qara adım (9)	With black eyes my black horse,
Qarş’a qaylanıp kisteve. (8)	Turning back, don’t neigh.
Qare <i>le</i> köstü äy, palam, (8)	With black eyes, <i>hey</i> , my child,
Qarş’a qaylanıp qomnava. (8)	Turning back, don’t grieve.

Rhythmical structures of this type of songs are based on the combination of musical feet consisting of 2 or 3 elements (Table 3):

	1 example	2 example
1 line	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪. ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪
2 line	♪ ♪♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪. ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪.
3 line	♪. ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪. ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪
4 line	♪. ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪	♪ ♪ ♪ ♪. ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ (ʔ)

Table 3. Syllabo-rhythmic scheme of two Chalkan songs

⁸ Literal translation of the term does not exist, but its meaning is similar to the Chalkan term *kyska saryn*.

There are several kinds of the two pre-caesura feet. Post-caesura feet are, for the most part, variants of the same foot⁹. Musical feet do not correspond to the verbal feet.

It is impossible to extract basic SRFs of the same type as in the *kozhoŋ* tradition. But one may notice the basic structure, which is close to the RM-1 of the South Altai's *kozhoŋ*. In this case, the meter is formed by measuring the time for each element: first and second pre-caesura feet are equal in duration, and third post-caesura foot is twice as long. Altogether pre- and post-caesura parts are equal: 2 + 2 | 4 time units.

The first level of the freedom is similar to the South Altai tradition: the last element of the line (and of the third foot) varies from short to long, and so on.

The second level is a free combination of musical feet. Particular songs may be based on the same combination of feet (as in example 2), or they may consist of different feet (as in example 1). This provides a possibility to produce different rhythms, sometimes more typified, sometimes more individual.

Unfortunately, the North Altaians don't have a tradition of drawn-out singing. We don't know if such a tradition existed before and was lost, or it likely never existed. Genre *uzun saryn* now refers to songs, which include more stanzas than *kyska saryn*¹⁰. Melodies and, therefore, rhythms, are identical in both kinds of songs.

Two song traditions described above give two examples of rather different rhythmic organization of poetry, based on similar syllabic systems. The 'syllabic-modal' system of South Altaians is based on the syllabic verse and rhythmical modi. 'Syllabic-temporal' system of the North Altaians is based on syllabic verse and musical feet of proportional duration.

Sung poetry takpak (the Shors)

Verse structure of Shor sung poetry is very similar to the North Altai one. But for the Shor tradition 8-syllable verse 8=5+3, is more typical. Musical organization is based on the principle of combining feet as well.

⁹ The 9-syllable verse of example 2 transforms into 'normal' 8-syllable verse during singing because of the elision of one vowel between words: *qara adim* becomes *qar[a] adim*.

¹⁰ Normally it has only one stanza.

There are several model tunes in the Shor tradition, each of them with its own typified meter (Sychenko, 2010). Musical feet can be found in the model tunes 1 and 2¹¹, which are very close to each other (Table 4):





Model tune	Odd line	Even line
1		
2		

Table 4. Syllabo-rhythmic scheme of the two main Shor model tunes

The difference reveals itself in the character of the feet. If the feet in the North Altai sung poetry are of proportional durations, and therefore are of the divisive type, then the feet in the Shor sung poetry are of different durations, and are of the additive type.

Temporal proportion of the feet is typical for the first case¹², and temporal inequality is characteristic of the second case: 2+3 | 4 / 4+3 | 5 (model tune 1); 4+3 | 4 / 4+3 | 5 (model tune 2).

The Shors have a song genre called *uzun / uzak saryn*. In contrast to the North Altaians, they are stylistically opposed to the *takpak*. *Uzak sarynnar* are based on the same model tunes, but they are performed in a slower tempo; performers use the intra syllabic singsongs; the rhythm seems to be of improvised character due to free interpretation of the typified schemes. Nevertheless, its connection with the meter of the model tunes is clear.

Sung poetry saryn and takhpakh (the Khakasses-Sagays)

Verses in the sung poetry of Sagays are realized in numerous variants. (Eliferenko, 2015; Pinzhina, 2007). Thus, in the model tune 1¹³, the following cases can be found: 3+3, 4+3, 5+3, 6+3; 4+4, 5+4, 6+4; 3+5, 4+5, 5+5, 6+5; 4+6, 5+6; 5+7. Verses may consist of 6 to 12 syllables: 6-12 = (3-6) + (3-7).

¹¹ Model tunes 1 and 2 are the most typical and popular amongst the Shors.

¹² Proportion of the feet is usually broken at the end of line. Conversely, this system would be very close to the tact metric system.

¹³ It is the most popular and widely spread model tune.

Of course, all these variants cannot be found in one particular song. But even in one song, the number of syllables may vary significantly. Naturally, the question arises: Is it possible to define this system as ‘syllabic’?

Not all of the verses listed above have the same value for the MT-1. Statistically, more important are the verses of 4+3, 4+4, 5+3, 4+5, 5+4, and 5+5 type; that is, variation can occur from 7 to 10 syllables: 7 (10) = 4 (5) + 3 (4, 5). Even in this case the syllabic system – if we may call it that – is very free.

Different poetic meters may be freely combined in one song:

Хара ла минін хара пастарым 10 (5+5)	Let my dear black heads
Халзын агарып чирдін үстүнде. 10 (5+5)	Leave this earth when they will become grey.
Аймахтан килген поэчыаан 8 (5+3)	You, who came from another land,
Илбек чүректиг пала поларзын. 10 (5+5)	You are, for sure, a child with a big heart.

It seems that the poetic meter of Sagays’ sung poetry is the freest amongst the traditions examined here.

As far as syllabic rhythm is concerned, the musical line is always divided into two parts: pre- and post-caesura¹⁴, with a long stop on the last element of each half of line. Each segment is based on a typified SRF. Thus, for instance, the main SRFs for verses 5+5 and 5+3 are as follows (Table 5):





Verse 5+5	Verse 5+3
	 

Table 5. Syllabo-rhythmic scheme of two variants of a verse in s Sagay model tune

¹⁴ The same principle can be found in Tuva sung poetry, but in this case syllable rhythmical organization based on the verse 8 (4+4) is very strict.

One may notice that SRFs for all 5-syllable segments are identical. It is the most typified structure for the model tune 1. The first 4-syllable segment is usually based on the same SRF without the first element: .

Pre-caesura segments seem to be organized more strictly, and post-caesura segments are organized freer. There are numerous ways to vary the main SRF: to add more syllables; to rearrange elements; to multiply or reduce elements. It gives substantial freedom and allows fitting verses with different number of syllables when necessary. It is very likely that the Sagay song tradition combines syllabic poetic system with free verse, and its complex musical-poetic meter regulates this process.

The drawn-out tradition of singing has a similar approach to that one of Shors and South Altaians: it uses the same model tunes performed in a different style.

Some conclusions

As examples discussed above show, musical-poetical song traditions – ‘sung poetry’ – of South-Siberian Turks have different systems of temporal organization.

On the poetic level, different types of syllabics are characteristic for them – from strict, and caesuraed to free.

On the musical level, there are three main metric principles:

- 1) rhythmical modi (SRF for the whole line); RMs always correspond with the borders of the verse (South Altai tradition);
- 2) musical feet (SRF for the minimal part of the verse); they may not correspond with the borders of the text; they are combined relatively freely when they are of a divisive type (North Altai tradition), and they are used in a more strict way when they are of an additive type (Shor tradition);

- 3) half-line SRF; it is represented in every strict way (Tuva and Tuva-Toju traditions¹⁵) as well as by a very free one (Khakass-Sagay tradition).

As far as drawn-out song genres are concerned, it seems that in this particular area, they are always in relation with a basic metric system of each given tradition. Based on the typical song meters, they interpret them rather freely. As our analysis shows, there are no traditions deprived of all metric organization. So 'free-metric' in all these cases means a degree on the scale of 'strict – free'.

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¹⁵ Tuva and Tuva-Toju traditions are not described here, but they are rather well-known. See, for example, (Tiron, 2018).

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List of audio examples

Example 1

Kozhoŋ

Klavdia Kharlapievna Ul'turkeeva, clan (*söök*) Köböc, 1927 y.
Balyktuyul, Ulagan district, Gorno-Altayskaya avtonomnaya oblast'
15.07.1984

Yuriy Sheikin, Ol'ga Sheikina, Galina Sychenko

ATM, A0014, № 117

Duration: 0:13

Example 2

Kozhoŋ

Klavdia Kharlapievna Ul'turkeeva, clan (*söök*) Köböc, 1927 y.
Balyktuyul, Ulagan district, Gorno-Altayskaya avtonomnaya oblast'
15.07.1984

Yuriy Sheikin, Ol'ga Sheikina, Galina Sychenko

ATM, A0014, № 118

Duration: 0:25

Example 3

Eneniŋ kozhoŋy

Elizaveta Alekseevna Koydysheva, clan (*söök*) Köböc, 1926 y.
Ulagan, Ulagan district, Gorno-Altayskaya avtonomnaya oblast'
16.07.1984

Yuriy Sheikin, Ol'ga Sheikina, Galina Sychenko

ATM, A0014, № 136

Duration: 0:35

Example 4

Eneniŋkozhoŋy

Elizaveta Alekseevna Koydysheva, clan (*söök*) Köböc, 1926 y.
Ulagan, Ulagan district, Gorno-Altayskaya avtonomnaya oblast'
16.07.1984

Yuriy Sheikin, Ol'ga Sheikina, Galina Sychenko

ATM, A0014, № 138

Duration: 0:19