

The Historical and Cultural Significance of Maqam Music

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ABSTRACT

Maqam music represents a profound and intricate art form deeply rooted in the ancient cultural heritage of the Eastern Muslim world. Across different peoples and regions, the concept of maqam has been uniquely interpreted and named according to local traditions and musical systems. For instance, in Uzbek and Tajik cultures, it is referred to as “maqom” among the Uyghurs as “muqom” in Azerbaijan as “mugham” while Arabs and Turks use the term “maqam”. Similarly, in Iranian music, the analogous system is called “dastgah”. And in Indian classical music, the equivalent concept is known as “raga”. These diverse terms and interpretations reflect a rich tapestry of cultural exchange and historical interconnectedness among these civilizations. This article discusses maqam music and its historical and cultural significance.

KEYWORDS: Maqam, Eastern musical traditions, Traditional music, Maqam theory, Mugham (Azerbaijani music), Muqam (Uyghur music), Dastgah (Iranian classical music), Raga (Indian classical music), Cultural heritage, Intercultural exchange, Historical musical connections, Intangible cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Scholarly research suggests that the roots of maqam music trace back to the 7th century with the renowned musician Borbad Marvazi, whose contributions laid foundational elements for this sophisticated musical tradition. Originally, maqam referred to the placement or position of finger stops on stringed instruments to produce specific pitches. However, over time, as the theory and practice of Eastern music evolved, the meaning of maqam expanded beyond mere technical aspects to encompass complex melodic frameworks and emotional expressions.

Etymologically, the word “*maqam*” derives from the Arabic term “*makān*” meaning “*place*” or “*location*” initially denoting the precise point on an instrument’s string where the musician’s finger would press to create a particular pitch. Eventually, maqam became a central theoretical and aesthetic concept in the musical cultures of the Muslim East, embodying not only technical structure but also deep artistic and cultural significance. Although the term maqam may be familiar to many, its profound meanings, historical origins, and its integral role within the broader musical system remain insufficiently understood by the general public. This lack of comprehensive knowledge sometimes hinders a full appreciation of national traditions and the rich musical heritage that maqam embodies. In an era where contemporary genres such as rock, pop, and jazz dominate popular music scenes worldwide, revisiting and revaluing the importance of maqam music, with its centuries-old legacy, becomes increasingly necessary.

Therefore, a detailed study and renewed exploration of maqam traditions are vital for understanding their place within Eastern music and for preserving this invaluable cultural treasure. Maqams are not merely musical modes but are emblematic of the artistic, cultural, and historical identity shared by many Muslim Eastern societies, representing a sophisticated artistic heritage that continues to inspire and influence modern musical thought.

Around the 9th century, the system of maqams began to take a more defined shape across the entire Eastern region, eventually becoming known as the Duvozdahmaqom, or the “*Twelve Maqams*” system. This framework became a foundational structure for musical traditions throughout the Muslim East. Historical manuscripts and treatises contain numerous references to this twelve maqam system, offering valuable insights into its conceptualization and development. Unfortunately, while some of these documents have survived to the present day, actual musical notations from that era have largely been lost, leaving much to the realm of scholarly reconstruction and oral tradition.

By the 18th century, the musical culture in Central Asia saw further specialization and flourishing of maqom systems. In Bukhara, the celebrated Shashmaqom - meaning “*Six Maqams*” - had firmly established itself as a rich and complex musical genre. This system included six principal maqams: *Buzruk*, *Rost*, *Navo*, *Dugoh*, *Segoh*, and *Iroq*, each distinguished by their unique suites and challenging compositional structures. These maqams were performed with both nasr (vocal poetry) and mushkulot (intricate instrumental passages), showcasing the depth and sophistication of the genre.

Similarly, in the Fergana Valley, distinct maqam traditions flourished, including the Chor Maqom (“*Four Maqams*”) and the seven performance styles of Dugoh Husayniy. Additionally, the Chorgoh maqam developed six distinct modes of execution, while the Shahnozi Gulyor maqam and the various melodic pathways of Bayot contributed their own rich stylistic colors and repertoire to the regional soundscape. These regional variations reflect a dynamic, living tradition that both preserved core maqam principles and allowed for local artistic innovation.

In Khorezm, the maqam tradition also mirrored this complexity, maintaining the core six maqams with a distinctive stylistic approach unique to the region. It is notable that the Panjgoh maqam-often considered the seventh addition-emerged later and became an integral part of Khorezm’s musical vocabulary, expanding the traditional framework.

The maqams of Bukhara, Khorezm, Fergana, and Tashkent have been passed down through generations as priceless cultural treasures. These rich musical repertoires, encompassing both short and long suites known as betakror ashulas and katta ashulas, are cherished national legacies that embody centuries of artistic refinement and emotional expression.

The modern field of maqamology owes much to scholars like Dr. Ishoq Rajabov, a pioneer in maqam studies and a respected expert in arts and musicology. According to his extensive research, the Shashmaqom tradition originated from the earlier Duvozdahmaqom system and crystallized in the mid-18th century. Rajabov’s work highlights how Shashmaqom evolved into an invaluable musical heritage cherished by both Uzbek and Tajik peoples. Historically, the Shashmaqom repertoire was primarily performed in the royal courts of Bukhara, where it became a symbol of cultural sophistication and artistic excellence.

In Uzbekistan, the Khorezm maqams hold a distinct and important place within the country’s rich musical heritage. These maqams, named after the Khorezm region where they are widely practiced, share structural similarities with the Shashmaqom system, being traditionally divided into two main sections: the instrumental part called Manzum, and the vocal segment known as Mansur. The Khorezm maqams encompass a wide variety of musical compositions and performance styles, which collectively enhance their uniqueness and cultural value.

In the fertile valley regions of Uzbekistan-particularly in Fergana and Tashkent-the maqam pathways exhibit unique characteristics distinguished by their accessibility and popularity among the general populace. Prominent suites performed in these regions include well-known groups such as Bayot I-V, Chorgoh I-V, Gulyor-Shahnoz, and Dugoh-Husayniy I-VII. These suites are not only musically rich but also bear significant historical and cultural importance, playing a crucial role in preserving diverse musical traditions that have

been cultivated over centuries.

Maqams are regarded as a form of sacred art, demanding exceptional spiritual and artistic abilities from performers. Historically, our ancestors held this priceless art form in the highest esteem. During the 18th and 19th centuries in the territory of Uzbekistan, it was forbidden to alter or incorrectly perform maqams; any such violations were met with severe penalties for the musician involved. This strict regulation underscores the deep respect and reverence bestowed upon maqams, highlighting their esteemed status in cultural life.

Traditionally, maqam knowledge and performance skills have been transmitted orally from master to student, ensuring the continuity of this musical heritage through generations. The transcription of maqams into written notation began relatively late, in the late 19th century, with the pioneering work of Komil Khorezmi, who developed the notation system known as the Khorezm Tanbur Line. This innovation marked a significant step toward preserving maqams in a more permanent, codified form.

In subsequent years, the efforts to document and publish maqam repertoires continued beyond Uzbekistan's borders. In Tajikistan, notable figures such as Bobokul Fayzullaev, Shohnazar Sohibov, and Fazliddin Shahobov made substantial contributions by writing down numerous maqams. Their works were later edited and published in Moscow starting from 1950 under the supervision of musicologist Viktor Mikhailovich Belyaev, bringing wider recognition to Central Asian maqam traditions on an international scale.

METHODS

The maqams transcribed by Yunus Rajabiy have played a pivotal role in preserving Uzbek traditional music. These transcriptions were published in 1959 under the title "*Bukhara Maqams*" appearing in the fifth volume of the series "*Uzbek Folk Music*" edited by Ilyos Akbarov. Later, in 1966, the monumental six-volume set of Shashmaqom was published in Tashkent, edited by Fayzulla Karomatov and based on the notations compiled by Yunus Rajabiy. The publication of these works represented a tremendous scholarly and practical effort, requiring significant dedication and meticulous attention to detail.

These pioneering research efforts and musical transcriptions have been crucial for safeguarding the unique musical characteristics of the maqam tradition and facilitating its continued development. They serve not only as a means of cultural preservation but also as foundational resources for musicians, scholars, and students of this refined musical art form.

Today, continuing this important work remains a shared responsibility. Reproducing new editions of notation books and addressing ongoing challenges related to maqam preservation and interpretation constitute some of the key tasks for contemporary musicologists and cultural institutions. Since Uzbekistan gained independence, there has been a renewed interest and revitalization of national classical music. Efforts have been made to modernize the material base of music schools and improve access to musical instruments, contributing to the growth of a new generation of musicians and enthusiasts.

A landmark moment in this revival was the recognition of Shashmaqom by UNESCO as an "*Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*" which provided a significant impetus for further development and international awareness of this musical tradition. In 2017, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed a decree aimed at promoting and developing Uzbek national maqom art, leading to the establishment of the Uzbek National Maqom Art Center. This initiative has resulted in the formation of dedicated maqom ensembles across all regions of Uzbekistan and the opening of the Faculty of Uzbek Maqom Art at the Uzbekistan State Conservatory. Additionally, a specialized department for the History and Theory of Uzbek Maqom was created to advance academic study and research in this field.

The city of Shahrisabz hosts an International Maqom Festival biennially, which includes scholarly conferences and performance competitions, attracting musicians and researchers from across the globe. Moreover, since

September 2021, the Yunus Rajabiy Institute of Uzbek National Music Art has commenced its activities, playing a vital role in advancing maqam studies and education. This institute is instrumental in fostering new achievements and breakthroughs in the research, preservation, and teaching of maqams, ensuring that this rich cultural legacy continues to thrive in the modern era.

Recent years have witnessed significant transformations and innovations within the realm of music, particularly in the rich tradition of maqam. Uzbek national maqams are increasingly gaining global recognition, showcasing their profound musical value on the international stage. Our goal is to deepen the understanding of maqams' historical, cultural, and musical significance and to promote them more widely within the global music community. Achieving this will not only elevate Uzbek musical heritage but also contribute substantially to the broader development of world musical culture.

For centuries, the art of maqam has served as a profound expression of the human spirit-its joys, sorrows, and noble aspirations-rendering it a priceless artistic legacy for us all. The maqam art form brings peace, tranquility, and spiritual purity to the hearts of its listeners. Its enchanting melodies and philosophical depth have the power to captivate audiences even beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries, drawing in foreign listeners who may not understand the Uzbek language yet find themselves deeply moved by its rich soundscape.

To ensure maqam's melodies and its underlying philosophy occupy a meaningful place in every listener's heart, particularly within the consciousness of the younger generation, we must mobilize all available resources and efforts. This will foster a vibrant continuity of tradition, enabling maqam to thrive in contemporary settings while maintaining its profound spiritual resonance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Maqam represents an invaluable spiritual treasure of our people, with its development spanning vast historical periods. Countless artists and composers have contributed to its evolution, enriching this musical form through their dedication and creativity. Understanding and truly feeling maqam requires careful preparation and a sincere passion for music, closely intertwined with personal spiritual growth. Listening to maqam alone does not guarantee full comprehension; performing maqam is an art in itself, demanding a unique blend of cultural insight, technical mastery, and heartfelt expression.

In Turkic cultures, special emphasis is placed on the climax and conclusion of a maqam performance. The climax, known as the "avj" is characterized by high-pitched melodic progressions, while the concluding part is rendered in a refined manner that brings joy and satisfaction to the listener's heart. Maqam represents a vast and complex musical genre, distinguished from other forms by its intricate system of melodies, structures, and modes. Due to its sophistication, a deep familiarity with classical literature is essential for any performer seeking to master the maqam tradition.

CONCLUSION

When a performer works on a maqam piece, full understanding of every word and phrase is crucial. If the singer fails to grasp the complete meaning of a single word in a ghazal or poetic verse, they cannot truly express the intended emotion or spirit. This disconnect creates an invisible barrier between the poet and the performer, hindering the authentic transmission of the maqam's essence. Thus, comprehending and interpreting maqam requires extensive knowledge and sensitivity.

Moreover, maqam performance should be free from the personal whims or unrefined tendencies of amateur singers. It is a heritage handed down from our ancestors, a precious treasure entrusted to successive generations. Preserving this legacy and passing it on in its purest form to today's young artists is a sacred duty. To achieve this, we must deeply understand the profound meanings embedded in the maqam and skillfully bring out its enchanting nuances in performance. Failing to fully appreciate these subtleties risks distorting the

tradition and may reflect negligence or disrespect toward this noble art.

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The art of maqom stands as a profound testament to the rich cultural and musical heritage of the Turkic and broader Eastern world. Its intricate structures, deep philosophical meanings, and emotional depth reflect centuries of artistic evolution and spiritual expression. As we have explored, understanding maqom requires not only technical skill but also a deep connection to the literary and cultural contexts from which it arises. Preserving and promoting this invaluable tradition is essential for maintaining the cultural identity and artistic legacy of our people.

In today's rapidly globalizing world, maqom holds great potential to resonate with international audiences, bridging cultural divides through its universal language of melody and emotion. Continued scholarly research, thoughtful performance practice, and institutional support are crucial for ensuring that maqom thrives and evolves while honoring its roots. By fostering greater appreciation and awareness, we contribute not only to the survival of maqom but also to the enrichment of global musical heritage.

Ultimately, maqom is more than music - it is a living spiritual heritage that connects past generations with the present and future, offering listeners a pathway to inner peace, reflection, and transcendence. It is our collective responsibility to safeguard this treasure, nurture new talents, and ensure that the enchanting world of maqom continues to inspire and uplift hearts worldwide.

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