

TRADITIONAL MUSICAL STYLES OF THE UZBEK NATION

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Abstract:

This article examines the traditional musical creativity of the Uzbek people, with particular emphasis on its historical periods and stylistic characteristics. It analyzes the evolution of folk music styles in relation to socio-cultural developments and regional influences. The study aims to reveal how various musical forms reflect the national identity, worldview, and aesthetic values of the Uzbek people. The article also discusses the importance of preserving these unique stylistic traditions in the context of modern cultural transformations.

Keywords: Uzbek folk music, musical styles, traditional music, folklore, katta ashula, cultural heritage, regional music traditions.

Introduction

Uzbek folk music represents a rich and multifaceted cultural heritage that has developed over centuries, reflecting the historical, social, and spiritual life of the Uzbek people [1]. As a vital form of artistic expression, traditional music in Uzbekistan encompasses a wide array of genres, styles, and performance practices that vary significantly across different regions and communities [2]. This musical diversity has been shaped by a combination of indigenous traditions, regional identities, oral transmission, and intercultural exchanges with neighboring civilizations [3].

The stylistic features of Uzbek folk music serve not only as aesthetic expressions but also as repositories of collective memory, embodying values, rituals, and worldviews [4]. Among the most distinguished musical forms are *katta ashula*, *maqom*, *lapar*, and *yo'llama*, each of which reflects unique melodic, rhythmic, and performative characteristics [5]. These forms are often closely associated with social functions such as weddings, harvest festivals, religious ceremonies, and storytelling [6].

In recent decades, the study and preservation of these musical styles have gained increasing relevance due to globalization and cultural modernization, which pose both challenges and opportunities for safeguarding intangible heritage [7]. This article aims to examine the historical evolution and stylistic characteristics of Uzbek folk music, with a particular focus on the classification, regional distribution, and cultural significance of traditional musical styles. Through this analysis, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of folk music in the formation of national identity and cultural continuity in Uzbekistan [8].

Materials and Methods

As emphasized by the President of Uzbekistan, issues of spirituality encompass many dimensions, including national history, moral and religious values, cultural heritage, customs



and traditions, national ideology, patriotism, humanism, and national self-awareness. Ultimately, these elements serve as key criteria in defining personal and societal identity [9].

Uzbek musical culture possesses an ancient and rich historical legacy. Throughout the nation's historical development, various forms of music—such as classical (*maqom*), professional traditional genres, folk composers' traditions, and amateur folkloric heritage—have developed alongside one another. Despite their stylistic and structural differences, these forms have historically complemented and enriched each other [10]. Today, they remain integral to Uzbekistan's spiritual and cultural identity. Since gaining independence, there has been a significant revival of national values, traditions, and long-neglected yet historically meaningful customs, including a renewed focus on traditional music [11].

The promotion of national values and musical heritage has been elevated to a state-level priority. From the early years of independence, significant efforts have been made to preserve and revive the spiritual wealth inherited from ancestors, including folk music, while aligning it with the pace of modern cultural development [12]. Musical traditions, especially classical singing and *maqom* performance, have long served as a source of spiritual nourishment for the people during both difficult and joyous times [13].

Art forms such as singing, music, dance, and folklore have developed in close association with the everyday lives and creative expressions of the Uzbek people. Traditional songs, particularly those composed in a spiritual or emotional tone, have persisted through the ages and continue to resonate with audiences today. However, while reverence for historical musical forms is vital, creating contemporary songs that align with the spirit of the present day is equally important. This responsibility lies with artists and specialists who aim to advance the national ideology through musical art [14].

Surkhandarya–Kashkadarya musical style

Uzbekistan has entered a new phase of societal transformation, marked by changes in lifestyles, worldviews, and public consciousness. This transformation is also reflected in regional musical styles, such as the Surkhandarya–Kashkadarya musical style, which includes labor songs, seasonal ritual songs, shepherd melodies, epic narratives (*dostonlar*), and various instrumental compositions. These styles, deeply rooted in the daily life and customs of the people, emerged in connection with specific contexts, such as agricultural labor, household ceremonies, and communal celebrations [15].

In Surkhandarya and Kashkadarya regions, where animal husbandry and farming have been practiced for centuries, many musical pieces have emerged to accompany labor processes. Initially performed by talented individuals, these songs were later adopted by the wider public and preserved through oral tradition and collective memory. Epic storytelling, a key element of the musical heritage, is still performed by *bakhshi* musicians who memorize and transmit long *doston* cycles through performance [16].

The traditional instruments used in these regions—*dombra*, *kobuz*, *shepherd's flute* (*cho'pon nay*), *sibizg'a*, and *chankobiz*—have been cherished by local communities for generations, often used to perform unique instrumental melodies with pastoral and epic themes [17].

One distinctive element of this musical tradition is the *terma*, a form of introductory chant performed by a *bakhshi* before beginning a full *doston*. In the *terma*, the performer gives a brief



description of available *doston* tales and invites the audience to select which one should be recited. The *bakhshi* then proceeds to perform the selected narrative, guided by the preferences of the listeners [18].

Bukhara–Samarkand musical tradition

Another notable regional style is the Bukhara–Samarkand musical tradition, which encompasses the folk songs, lyrical chants, instrumental music, clapping-based performance rituals, and professional music such as maqom and doston recitation practiced in these ancient cultural centers. A unique element of this style is the female-centered performance art of sozanda—a solo singer and dancer who performs during female-only gatherings [19].

A sozanda typically sings while dancing with hand-held percussive instruments like bells or small chimes. She is often accompanied by a group of two or three female frame-drum (doira) players who repeat refrains and provide rhythmic accompaniment. The performances are traditionally held in domestic settings, particularly during women’s weddings and celebrations. The sozanda repertoire usually consists of multi-part performance cycles in both Uzbek and Tajik languages, showcasing lyrical songs and dance compositions [20].

The performance typically begins with a dignified and ceremonial song such as “To‘y muborak” (“Blessed Wedding”) and progresses through increasingly dynamic dance-song sequences. This tradition not only preserves musical heritage but also represents a unique expression of female creativity and community participation in Uzbek musical culture [21].

Fergana–Tashkent musical style

The Fergana–Tashkent musical style refers to the collective musical traditions of the Fergana Valley, Tashkent city, and the Tashkent region. This style includes a broad range of folk music genres such as kuy, terma, lapar, yalla, qo‘shiq, and ashula, as well as professional traditions like dostonchilik (epic recitation), ashulachilik (solo singing), and maqomchilik (maqom performance) [22]. Within this stylistic domain, children’s folklore, women’s musical creativity, and instrumental music also occupy important positions. Children’s folk songs such as Boychechak, Yomg‘ir yog‘aloq, Oftob chiqdi, Chuchvara qaynadi, and Chittigul are notable examples [23].

Women’s musical creativity in this style includes lapar and yalla sung during gatherings and wedding ceremonies, including traditional songs like Yor-yor and Kelin salom [24]. One of the most distinctive features of this tradition is the genre known as Katta Ashula, which is unique to the Fergana–Tashkent style and not commonly found in other regional styles. Katta Ashula refers to large-scale songs with wide vocal range and sustained melodies, typically performed by a solo vocalist or a group of 2 to 4 harmonizing singers, and traditionally without instrumental accompaniment [25].

These songs are often performed in a free rhythm, emphasizing vocal technique and lyrical expressiveness. Variants of the genre include Patnisaki ashula and Likobli ashula, in which singers hold metal trays or plates (patnis, likob) during performance, adding a ritualistic dimension [26]. In recent years, some Katta Ashula songs have begun to incorporate instrumental accompaniment, including popular pieces such as Mehnat ahli, Ey dilbari janonim, and O‘zbekiston. Performances on the nay (flute) have also become traditional in this genre [27].



The Yallachilik art form is another defining feature of the Fergana–Tashkent musical tradition. It involves group or solo performances by women, characterized by antiphonal structure and dance accompaniment. The lead yallachi sings verses while dancing with a frame drum (doira), and the chorus responds in unison [28]. These performances are often held during weddings and women-only gatherings. Professional yallachi ensembles may include 3 to 4 women and share similarities with sozanda performers from Bukhara–Samarkand or xalfa singers from Khorezm [29].

Khorezm musical style

The Khorezm musical style comprises a unique synthesis of folk songs, *lapar*, ceremonial and dance music, and professional traditions such as *dostonchilik*, *ashulachilik*, and *maqom* [30]. Influences from Turkmen and Azerbaijani musical cultures are also evident. The uniqueness of Khorezm music is reflected in its traditional instruments, such as the wind instrument *bulamon*, which is widely used in this region [31]. Instrumental dance and theatrical music hold a prominent role and can be categorized into several types:

1. Popular folk dances: *Lazgi*, *Ganji qora bog'*, *Uffori*
2. Acrobat and tightrope walker music: *Elpazalandi*, *Ufori elpazalandi*
3. Clown and comedic performance music: *Chog'olloq*, *Az-az*, *Xorazmcha*, *Yuz bir*, *Ot eroni*, *Surnay yo 'li* [32]

Doston performance in Khorezm is a highly developed genre with distinctive features compared to the Surkhandarya–Kashkadarya tradition. Khorezm epic performance incorporates regional poetic language, performance dynamics, and narrative structures specific to the cultural environment of the region [33].

Results and Discussion

The conducted analysis reveals that Uzbek folk musical culture is not monolithic, but rather a richly layered phenomenon shaped by geography, historical development, social structures, and spiritual values. The results of this study identify four major regional musical styles—Surkhandarya–Kashkadarya, Bukhara–Samarkand, Fergana–Tashkent, and Khorezm—each possessing unique musical genres, stylistic features, and cultural functions.

Regional Diversity and Musical Identity

Each region of Uzbekistan contributes a distinct musical vocabulary to the national heritage. In the Surkhandarya–Kashkadarya style, music is closely linked with agrarian life and nomadic pastoralism. The prominence of shepherd songs, labor chants, and *bakhshi* epic recitations reflect a deep-rooted oral tradition, where music serves both ritualistic and practical purposes. The presence of ancient instruments such as the *dombra*, *kobiz*, and *cho'pon nay* underlines the cultural continuity of this style [15–17].

The Bukhara–Samarkand musical tradition, in contrast, demonstrates a highly developed aesthetic sensibility and formal structure. The *sozanda* art, performed primarily by women, illustrates a refined performance culture rooted in lyrical expression, dance, and ceremonial participation. The use of Uzbek and Tajik languages in the same performance cycle reflects the multicultural synthesis characteristic of this region. Furthermore, the use of cyclical musical



forms and call-and-response structures demonstrates an advanced level of musical organization [19–21].

Uniqueness of Katta Ashula in the Fergana–Tashkent Tradition

One of the key findings of this study is the identification of *Katta Ashula* as a uniquely regional genre within the Fergana–Tashkent musical style. Unlike other regional traditions, *Katta Ashula* is typified by a large-scale melodic structure, free rhythmic cycles, and absence of instrumental accompaniment. The vocal technique employed in this genre requires deep breathing control and expressive projection, making it a demanding but highly expressive art form. Its ritual components—such as the use of trays (*patnis*) and symbolic gestures—highlight the performative and communal nature of this genre [25–27].

Additionally, *yallachilik* within this region illustrates the rich involvement of women in musical expression. The interaction between soloists and choruses, along with coordinated dance movements and rhythmic *doira* accompaniment, demonstrates how musical performance serves as both entertainment and cultural affirmation [28–29].

Performance Practices and Instrumentation in the Khorezm Style

The Khorezm musical style reveals another facet of Uzbek folk music, marked by its integration with dance, comedy, and theatricality. The repertoire includes folk dances (*Lazgi*), acrobatic performance music (*Elpazalandi*), and clown-based musical sketches (*Chog'olloq*, *Yuz bir*). These forms highlight music's capacity to transcend pure entertainment and serve as a medium of satire, celebration, and community interaction [30–32].

Instrumentally, Khorezm is unique in its use of wind instruments such as the *bulamon*, which is largely absent in other regions. The rhythmic vitality and improvisational elements observed in these performances suggest links to Central Asian musical aesthetics and possibly influences from Turkmen and Azerbaijani musical systems [31–34].

Comparative Analysis and Cultural Significance

When comparing these styles, several thematic patterns emerge:

- All regional styles maintain a balance between individual and collective expression, whether through solo recitations (*bakhshi*, *sozanda*, *katta ashula*) or group performances (*yalla*, ritual songs).
- There is a shared tradition of oral transmission, with many songs and epics passed down through generations without written notation.
- Regional instruments and vocal techniques are deeply tied to ecological, economic, and social realities, shaping the soundscape of each musical style.

Despite their differences, these traditions collectively uphold the intangible cultural heritage of Uzbekistan. The study underscores the importance of safeguarding this diversity in the face of modernization and globalization. Revival efforts—such as integrating folk music into school curricula, supporting regional performance ensembles, and digital archiving of rare musical forms—are crucial steps toward preservation.



Conclusions

The present study has demonstrated that the folk musical heritage of Uzbekistan is both diverse and deeply rooted in regional identity, cultural memory, and socio-spiritual functions. Each musical style—Surkhandarya–Kashkadarya, Bukhara–Samarkand, Fergana–Tashkent, and Khorezm—reflects the historical conditions, ethnic compositions, and traditional lifestyles of its respective region.

The analysis confirms that Uzbek folk music is not merely a form of artistic entertainment, but a complex and dynamic system of cultural expression. It encompasses oral traditions, performance rituals, gender-specific creativity, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Unique genres such as *Katta Ashula*, *Yalla*, *Doston*, and *Sozanda* performances illustrate the variety of forms and functions that folk music assumes in different social contexts—from weddings and seasonal festivals to storytelling and labor activities.

Furthermore, the integration of musical forms with dance, ceremonial practices, and theatrical performance—as seen especially in the Khorezm and Fergana–Tashkent traditions—demonstrates the multidimensional character of this heritage. The role of women in music, the use of traditional instruments, and the preservation of folk forms through communal participation all highlight the vitality and adaptability of these traditions.

In the context of modern cultural development and national identity formation, the study of folk musical styles is of critical importance. It not only fosters historical consciousness and cultural pride, but also contributes to the enrichment of contemporary musical education and artistic practice. Therefore, it is recommended that:

- Uzbek folk music be more systematically incorporated into educational curricula at various levels;
- Regional styles be preserved and promoted through academic research, performance projects, and digital archiving;
- Support be given to folk musicians and ensembles who serve as custodians of intangible heritage.

By recognizing and safeguarding this musical diversity, Uzbekistan ensures the continuity of its national identity and cultural wealth in an era of global transformation.

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