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Article

Topic: The Concept of Uzbek Folk Instruments: Problems and Approaches

Toirov Akbar Zoir o'g'li

Head of the Database Department, Independent Researcher (PhD) at the Department of "History of Uzbek Music,"

* Correspondence:

Abstract: This study examines the concept of Uzbek folk instruments and the theoretical as well as practical challenges associated with their classification and interpretation. Over several centuries, scholars and practitioners have attempted to define Uzbek folk instruments within traditional and modern contexts, yet numerous unresolved and contradictory issues remain. The research highlights complexities such as the relationship between an instrument's origin and its practical use, the interaction between professional and folk traditions, and the influence of political and ideological processes—particularly academicization and state cultural policy. The study also addresses the integration of European instruments into Central Asian musical traditions and critiques the rigid opposition between "professional" and "folk" music. Using a historical-analytical and comparative cultural approach, this paper proposes a more flexible interpretative framework: understanding instruments within specific cultural traditions and artistic systems rather than fixed categorical definitions. Such an approach allows for a more objective representation of musical instruments in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Uzbek folk instruments; academicization; professional music; ethnic music traditions; cultural policy; musical taxonomy; Central Asian music; maqam tradition.

Introduction

The concept of Uzbek folk instruments has long been a subject of scholarly debate and practical reconsideration. Although many instruments are traditionally recognized as "folk," their classification often depends on regional, historical, and ideological factors rather than purely ethnographic evidence

Within traditional Uzbek and Central Asian musical culture, instruments are frequently associated with local aesthetic ideals and community identity.

However, defining what constitutes a "folk instrument" becomes increasingly complex when examining cross-cultural interaction, regional overlap, and historical transformation. In many cases, instruments considered "folk" today were shaped by processes of academicization, state institutionalization, and modernization. Furthermore, the binary opposition between "professional" and "folk" music—rooted largely in European musicological discourse—has influenced Central Asian music scholarship.

The incorporation of European instruments into traditional musical practice and the establishment of state orchestras, music schools, and standardized educational systems have further blurred conceptual boundaries. Thus, a re-evaluation of theoretical frameworks is necessary. This study seeks to address these conceptual problems and to

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propose a culturally contextualized approach to the classification of Uzbek folk instruments.

Materials and Methods

This research employs a qualitative, historical-analytical methodology. The primary method involves textual analysis of musical discourse concerning Uzbek and neighboring countries' instrumental traditions.

A comparative cultural approach is used to examine the interaction between European academic traditions and Central Asian ethnic musical systems. Particular attention is given to:

1. Historical processes of academicization.
2. Institutional development (schools, orchestras, cultural policy).
3. Functional analysis of instruments in traditional and professional contexts.
4. Ideological influences on musical categorization.

The study also applies a conceptual-analytical framework, focusing on redefining key terminologies such as "folk," "professional," and "imported" within specific cultural systems rather than universal definitions.

Results and Discussion

For more than several centuries, scientific research aimed at defining the concept of Uzbek folk instruments, as well as practical experience in their use, has revealed numerous, sometimes complex and contradictory issues. Even within the framework of traditional ethnic music, modern scholarship continues to face challenges: instruments included in the category of Uzbek folk instruments are often those considered by local tradition bearers as most important and characteristic for a particular regional and historical context, expressing the community's ideal of sound and aesthetic outlook. Nevertheless, many theoretical and practical questions in this field remain unresolved.

In particular, determining the relationship between the origin of a specific instrument and its actual practical application, taking into account micro-local and regional factors, or analyzing the interaction between professionalism and popular use in the activity of traditional masters, presents a rather complex picture.

An even more complicated situation arises in regions where the boundaries of arts from different territories and cultures gradually overlap over time, making it difficult to identify what constitutes a folk music instrument. This phenomenon can be observed, for example, in European countries from the Romantic era onwards, or within the maqam traditions of the Near and Middle East.

Understanding how "folk instruments" function in practice is also not straightforward. Particularly challenging is the often-used, yet scientifically unsupported, opposition between "professional music" and "folk music," which further complicates the matter. This perspective largely stems from the historical differentiation between oral and written music traditions in Europe.

In Russia and Ukraine, instruments such as the bayan, domra, and bandura (chromatic, Kiev type) are often considered folk instruments, frequently without any concrete evidence. In Belarus and Lithuania, chromatic cimbaloms and kankles are similarly categorized.

In reality, however, these instruments were not widely used in traditional folk music practice and remain rare even today. Yet they are actively employed in state ensembles and orchestras, taught in music schools, and exist as part of professional music education.

Professional instruments generally include violin, clarinet, trumpet, double bass, bass drum, and other instruments of the European symphonic tradition. Nevertheless, these instruments also function successfully within ethnic musical environments, forming the

foundation of many of the most important traditional ensemble types in Central Asian countries.

Of course, among performers on these instruments, there are many local and ethnically rooted professional musicians, but they already operate within other functional areas of art, as well as musical-stylistic systems based on direct communication.

It should also be noted that European musical instruments (chromatic clarinet, valved trumpet, etc.) were incorporated into and actively used in traditional ethnic musical practice.

Another widespread notion concerns the “academicization” of Uzbek folk instruments. Academicization primarily affected charitable organizations, clubs, schools, and later professional (state-level) instrumental music practices. Ethnic cultures, however, in various regions of Uzbekistan or neighboring countries, were largely unaffected by academicization, except in cases of active destruction under totalitarian regimes (Stalinist, Hitler-era, etc.).

It is important to understand that the development of academic performance culture for folk instruments in Asian countries occurred at a time when the European written music tradition was already well-established and highly developed. This included its adapted universal organizational and operational forms (primarily in theatre-concert settings), educational systems, imagery, genre, and structural features.

Appeals to ethnic local traditions, as well as the formation and development of artistic traditions and musical performance systems above the ethnic and regional level, were strongly influenced by various ideological and political factors. It was precisely in this context that academic art developed in instruments labeled “folk instruments.”

One of their most important functions was to strengthen state unity (including various regions and ethnic groups of the empire) through the creation of state-level artistic fields and modes of expression—art forms that could operate on a national scale. Here, the concept of “people” (folk) refers to the entire population of the country: all united within a single cultural type, sharing a common language, a common musical language, and its expressive forms. Uniting dispersed groups under a single idea and mode of expression, and integrating them through art as a unified form of self-expression, became a key task of cultural policy in building a strong state.

This can be compared to an army: an army is strong due to its uniformity and organizational structure—all wear the same uniforms, live according to the same regulations, and follow orders. At the same time, it stands in contrast to other armies, states, and supra-ethnic cultures and methods of ideological expression. Yet all of this occurs within the broader framework of a unified European civilization.

Under special circumstances—war, revolution, the threat of national disintegration, etc.—it is natural and logical for certain strata of society to seek unity and cohesion. In such periods, people’s spontaneous or naturally arising drive for consolidation emerges. During these times, various artistic associations, clubs, charitable ensembles, orchestras, theatre collectives, and similar organizations were established.

The support of these forms by state structures and cultural policy was no coincidence. Funding orchestras and charitable clubs (as E. V. Gippius noted, framing them as voluntary displays of professionalism in contrast to folklore and traditional ethnic art), creating state schools and higher education institutions, and mass-producing and distributing relevant musical instruments—all of this applied to folk instrument orchestras, as well as wind and brass orchestras in every school, factory, or kolkhoz.

Today, particular emphasis is placed on unifying instrument types, performance techniques, systems, harmony, orchestration, score types, genres, musical forms, methods of working, and musical education and teaching approaches. This is due to the development of standardized procedures, main focal points, reporting and evaluation methods, and entry into pre-prepared universal schemes, solutions, and templates.

However, art by its nature is a unique phenomenon, aiming to create miracles of spirit and form in individual works of creativity.

We believe that at present, when dealing with musical instrumental art, final decisions regarding notions such as “folk,” “professional,” “original,” “imported from abroad,” and similar concepts should be postponed. At the same time, another approach can be proposed: namely, interpreting musical instrument types within the context of a specific cultural tradition or artistic system.

Such an approach allows for a more precise and objective representation of the existence of musical instruments, while also taking into account historical and contemporary forms of musical activity across different countries and regions.

Based on this approach, a taxonomy of musical instruments might be structured as follows, emphasizing phenomena in contemporary Russia and neighboring countries’ musical culture.

Conclusion

The classification of Uzbek folk instruments remains a complex and unresolved issue. Historical processes such as academicization, state cultural policy, and ideological consolidation have significantly shaped contemporary understandings of “folk” and “professional” instruments

The rigid dichotomy between professional and folk music proves insufficient for explaining the dynamic realities of musical practice in Central Asia.

European instruments have been successfully integrated into ethnic musical traditions, while many so-called folk instruments function primarily within institutional and academic frameworks. Therefore, fixed categorizations should be reconsidered.

This study proposes an alternative approach: interpreting musical instruments within the framework of specific cultural traditions and artistic systems. Such an approach allows for greater analytical precision and accommodates both historical continuity and contemporary transformation in Uzbek musical culture.

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