

ORAL TRADITION AND ITS THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS IN MAQOM SINGING IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: This paper explores the oral tradition and its theoretical foundations in the *maqom* singing art of Uzbekistan, one of the most significant expressions of Central Asian musical heritage. As an orally transmitted system, *maqom* embodies the fusion of musical theory, performance practice, and pedagogical transmission through the *ustoz–shogird* (master–disciple) relationship. The study investigates how oral tradition functions not merely as a teaching method but as a complex epistemological framework that shapes musical cognition, style, and identity. Drawing upon ethnomusicological research, field observations, and theoretical analysis, the paper argues that the oral tradition in *maqom* singing preserves both the technical precision and the philosophical essence of the genre. Its continued vitality in modern Uzbekistan reflects a balance between heritage preservation and innovation in contemporary music education.

Keywords: Maqom, oral tradition, Uzbek music, vocal pedagogy, *ustoz–shogird*, ethnomusicology, cultural transmission, theoretical foundations

1. Introduction

Oral tradition has historically served as the backbone of musical education and transmission across many cultures. In Uzbekistan, *maqom*—the classical music system of Central Asia—relies fundamentally on oral pedagogy. The art of *maqom xonandaligi* (maqom singing) has been preserved and transmitted for centuries through direct mentorship rather than written notation (Levin, 1996).

Unlike Western classical music, where theoretical systems and notation dominate, *maqom* exists within a living continuum of memory, imitation, and spiritual understanding. The oral transmission process not only ensures the preservation of melodic and rhythmic formulas but also conveys the ethical and philosophical values embedded within the tradition (Ritter, 2015).

This paper aims to examine how the oral tradition operates within the practice of *maqom xonandaligi* and to identify its theoretical underpinnings that define learning, performance, and creativity in Uzbekistan's vocal art.

2. Historical Context of Oral Transmission in Maqom

The roots of *maqom* trace back to pre-modern Central Asian musical cultures, where oral performance was intertwined with poetry, spirituality, and social ritual. From the medieval courts of Bukhara and Khiva to the modern conservatories of Tashkent, oral transmission (*og'zaki an'ana*) has remained the dominant mode of pedagogical practice (Slobin, 1984).

The *ustoz–shogird* relationship lies at the heart of this transmission. Masters (*ustoz*) do not merely instruct technique but cultivate aesthetic awareness, discipline, and ethical values in their students (*shogird*). This mentorship reflects the Sufi notion that music is both a path to perfection (*kamolot*) and a form of inner enlightenment (Levin, 1996).

Development of intercultural ties. The study of the connection of classical music with universal values allows for a deeper understanding of its place and significance in global culture. Music is

a form of universal art, playing a large role in the development of connections between different cultures. Like the art of *maqom*, music with its own unique and deep spiritual layers serves as a bridge in intercultural communication. [1.11-b.]

During the Soviet era, the institutionalization of music education introduced written notation and musicology into the study of *maqom*. Yet oral transmission persisted as the essential pedagogical medium, demonstrating its resilience and adaptability in changing historical contexts (Ritter, 2015).

3. Theoretical Foundations of Oral Tradition

3.1 Memory and Embodied Knowledge: Oral learning in *maqom* depends on embodied cognition—learning through listening, imitation, and physical performance rather than theoretical abstraction (Nettl, 2005). Singers internalize melodic and rhythmic patterns through repetition, developing an intuitive understanding of *maqom* structures (*sho'ba*, *namud*, *talqin*).

Memory functions as both a personal and collective archive. As Feld (2000) argues, oral traditions act as “acoustic genealogies,” where every performance becomes part of an evolving lineage. Thus, oral knowledge in *maqom* is dynamic, allowing subtle innovation while maintaining structural integrity.

3.2 The Role of the Ustoz–Shogird System: The *ustoz–shogird* pedagogy represents not only a method of instruction but a moral and philosophical framework. The master transmits both *ilm* (knowledge) and *adab* (ethical conduct). This duality aligns with Sufi epistemology, in which artistic mastery reflects spiritual discipline.

In practice, lessons are based on demonstration and repetition. The student observes the master’s breath control, timbre, articulation, and emotional expression, absorbing musical subtleties through imitation (Levin, 1996). Over time, the *shogird* develops interpretative freedom—an essential hallmark of a mature *xonanda*.

3.3 Oral Theory and Modal Understanding: Although *maqom* lacks formal notation, it possesses an intricate theoretical system transmitted orally. Concepts such as *maqom*, *sho'ba*, and *usul* represent codified modal and rhythmic structures. Singers internalize modal progressions by associating melodic patterns with textual and emotional cues.

This oral theory parallels the cognitive model of “implicit musical grammar,” where rules are not explicitly stated but learned through consistent performance and exposure (Nettl, 2005). Hence, *maqom* theory exists within practice itself, blurring the line between performance and pedagogy.

4. Oral Transmission and Musical Expression

In *maqom xonandaligi*, oral tradition allows for a balance between preservation and creativity. Each performance reinterprets the canonical repertoire while maintaining respect for traditional aesthetics. The singer’s improvisational skill—known as *badihago'ylik*—depends on deep familiarity with orally transmitted melodic formulas and poetic rhythm (Ritter, 2015).

The absence of strict notation grants performers flexibility to adapt tempo, ornamentation, and dynamics according to the expressive needs of the moment. This freedom, however, is grounded in an internalized theoretical framework that ensures stylistic coherence. As Levin (1996) observes, *maqom* performance “unfolds within a matrix of remembered sound and embodied wisdom.”

5. The Oral Tradition in Contemporary Context

In modern Uzbekistan, the oral tradition continues to coexist with institutionalized forms of musical education. Conservatories in Tashkent and Bukhara integrate oral and written

approaches, recording and notating *maqom* cycles while maintaining the primacy of direct mentorship (Ritter, 2015).

The digital age has further transformed oral transmission. Audio and video recordings, online tutorials, and digital archives preserve the voices of renowned *ustozlar* such as Yunus Rajabi, Komiljon Otaniyozov, and Munajat Yulchieva, extending oral knowledge beyond traditional geographic and social boundaries.

However, scholars caution that digitization, while valuable for documentation, cannot fully substitute the experiential depth of oral pedagogy (Feld, 2000). True mastery in *maqom xonandaligi* still requires the intimate, person-to-person exchange that defines the *ustoz–shogird* ethos.

6. Oral Tradition as a Cognitive and Cultural System

The oral tradition in *maqom* reflects a broader epistemological system that unites artistic, cognitive, and ethical dimensions. It operates through what Turino (2008) calls “participatory consciousness,” where learning is collective, experiential, and embodied.

Moreover, oral transmission functions as a cultural mechanism for preserving national identity. Each generation of singers becomes a living archive, ensuring that *maqom* remains not a static relic but a living tradition that continues to evolve while retaining its historical authenticity.

This aligns with UNESCO’s recognition of *Shashmaqom* as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, emphasizing oral transmission as the key to its survival (UNESCO, 2003).

7. Conclusion

The study of oral tradition in *maqom xonandaligi* reveals that this practice is both a pedagogical system and a theoretical paradigm. Far from being a primitive or informal method, the oral mode embodies a highly structured approach to musical learning grounded in memory, ethics, and creativity.

Through the *ustoz–shogird* relationship, oral tradition transmits not only musical forms but also a worldview—linking technical mastery to moral and spiritual cultivation. In contemporary Uzbekistan, the synthesis of oral and academic systems offers a promising model for sustaining traditional music in the modern world.

Ultimately, the endurance of *maqom* singing lies in its ability to preserve oral wisdom while adapting to new cultural and technological realities—a testament to the depth and resilience of Uzbekistan’s musical heritage.

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