

SATAR INSTRUMENT: TRADITIONAL STYLE AND MODERN PERFORMANCE

AI SHAN JIANG TU ER XUN

Xinjiang Art University Performer, Musicologist

Abstract: The Uyghur folk music repertoire employs a wide variety of musical instruments, which are the result of centuries of the ingenuity and labor of our ancestors. This article provides a detailed overview of one of the modern Uyghur instruments—the satar—focusing on its shape, construction, and tuning criteria.

Keywords: satar, tuning, Uyghur instruments, organology, maqams, performer

In the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, the Uyghur ethnic group possesses a diverse array of traditional instruments, numbering over twenty types. These can be classified into four main groups:

1. String Instruments:

Plucked strings: rawap, dutor, tambur, qalun.

Struck strings: chang.

Bowed strings: satar, gijjak, xushtar.

2. Wind (Blown) Instruments: nay, surnay, baliman.

3. Percussion Instruments: dap, naghra.

4. Vocal-imitative Instruments: sopay, stone, singing (voice).

The satar belongs to the category of bowed string instruments, meaning it produces sound by drawing a bow (traditionally made from horsehair) across its strings.

The term “satar” historically appeared as “sartar” or “sardar,” originating from Persian, and in Chinese it is written as “萨塔尔 (satar),” meaning “beginner instrument.” The satar is a long-handled bowed instrument. According to the source Tavorixi Musiqiyun, its design resembles the ancient instrument created by the Greek philosopher and musicologist Pythagoras (580–500 BCE).

In Arab Music History, it is noted that during the Abbasid Caliphate (10th century CE), the Turks used a bowed instrument called “shisraq,” made from walnut wood, covered with goat skin, and played with a bow. Historical records also mention instruments named “sattar,” “sentar,” and “sitar” in Arabic, Persian, and Hindi sources, but these were plucked string instruments, sharing only a similar name with the satar.

Before the 10th century, there is no record of the long-handled satar as known today. Famous musicians from the Seyidiy era, Qedirxon and Aman Niso, were noted to use the satar. According to Turdi Akhun, who performed the Twelve Maqams in 1956, the satar at that time was played both with a bow and by plucking the strings with fingers, similar to the tambur. Based on this, it is assumed that the satar emerged around the 10th century.

Components of the Satar: head, soundboard, string holder, xarak, resonator body, frets, handle, tuning pegs, bow, and others.

The instrument is usually made from apricot, mulberry, or plane wood, with an overall length of approximately 130–140 cm. The resonator is carved in a rounded shape. The handle is made from apricot or mulberry wood.

Since the satar has multiple strings, its handle is thicker than that of a tambur. It is strung with 10–13 strings, one of which is the primary melodic string, while the others serve as resonators. In modern instruments, strings are made of steel; previously, they were made from sheep gut or horsehair.

The satar produces a soft, melodic, and resonant tone, serving as a leading instrument in Twelve Maqams performances.

Pitch Range:

Low: B (great octave) to g (small octave)

Middle: c¹ to b¹ (pleasant, resonant)

High: c² to g² (sometimes a²) (bright, expressive)

Tuning:

The tuning of the satar depends on the number of strings and the intended performance style.

Common variants include:

1. 13-string satar:

String 1 (melodic): C

Strings 2–13 (resonators): G, C, D, E, G, A, C¹, D¹, E¹, G¹, A¹, C²

2. 11-string satar:

String 1: D

Strings 2–11: E, F[#], A, B, D¹, E¹, F^{#1}, A¹, B¹, D²

3. 14-string satar:

String 1: D

Strings 2–14: G, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C¹, D¹, E¹, F¹, A¹

The choice of tuning generally depends on the style and melody of the piece being performed.

Preservation:

The satar is stored in a special protective case made of synthetic cloth in dry, ventilated locations (e.g., mounted on a wall). After each performance, the strings are loosened to prevent weakening, and retightened before the next use.

Performance posture:

The satar is placed on the performer's thigh, with the left foot slightly forward. The left hand presses the frets, while the right hand draws the bow.

The satar has historically played a crucial role in Uyghur music, especially in the introduction of maqams, and continues to be central in performances of folk songs and creative compositions. It is widely used in southern Xinjiang (Yeken, Hotan, Kashgar, Maralbeshi, Aksu) and northern Xinjiang (Turpan, Ili regions), often performed alongside dutor and tambur.

This article provides detailed information on the satar, which allows:

1. Musicians to understand its structure and role in Uyghur music.
2. Students and performers to acquire practical and theoretical knowledge of its construction, tuning, and playing technique.

3. Researchers to deepen their study of Uyghur traditional instruments by combining theory and practice.

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