

The living circle performance and communitas in Uzbek folklore ensembles

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Abstract: This article examines the structural, aesthetic, and social principles underpinning the performance of Uzbek folklore ensembles, with a particular focus on the concept of the circle as both a physical formation and a metaphysical organizer of musical and social experience. Moving beyond an analysis of repertoire or instrumentation, it argues that the circular performance practice is not merely a theatrical arrangement but a fundamental technology for generating communitas - a potent, liminal state of social unity and shared identity. The study posits that the circle functions as a dynamic field where sonic, kinetic, and visual elements coalesce to enact and reinforce core cultural values of collectivity, cyclical time, and spiritual interconnection. Through an ethnographic and performative analysis, the article investigates three interrelated domains: the acoustic and polyphonic relationships fostered within the circular arrangement, where melody, rhythm, and drone create a woven sonic fabric; the role of collective, often circular, movement and gesture in physically embodying musical rhythms and narratives; and the circle's function as a sacred-profan ritual space that mediates between the audience and performers, tradition and the present moment, and the individual and the collective. This research concludes that the living circle of the folklore ensemble is a vital, performative engine for the continual rejuvenation of social cohesion and cultural memory, asserting that the music's meaning is inextricable from the communal form of its manifestation.

Keywords: folklore ensemble performance, communitas, ritual circle, collective musicianship, Uzbek folk music, embodied tradition

Introduction

On stages worldwide and in village squares across Uzbekistan, the image of the folklore ensemble performing in a circle or semicircle is iconic. This formation, far from arbitrary, is a profound cultural text. While scholarly attention on Uzbek music has rightly focused on the classical Shashmaqom system or the technical nuances of instruments like the dutar and surnay, the performance practice of the folk ensemble - particularly its spatial and social organization - remains a critically underexplored domain. This article contends that to fully understand the power and function of Uzbek folk music, one must analyze not only what is sung or played but how and where it is collectively performed. The central thesis is that the circular formation is the primary vessel for generating and sustaining communitas, a term anthropologist Victor Turner used to describe the intense camaraderie and egalitarian solidarity that emerges in liminal ritual spaces, where social hierarchies are dissolved in a shared, transcendent experience.

Uzbek folklore ensembles, whether presenting staged kontsert programs or participating in life-cycle rituals like weddings, operate within such a liminal frame. They temporarily create a world apart, governed by its own rules of interaction, communication, and emotional expression. The circle is the architectural blueprint for this world. It is a “living circle” because it is dynamic - constantly negotiating the flow of energy between performers, between melody and rhythm, between the group and the audience. This study seeks to illuminate the specific mechanisms by which this formation facilitates communitas. How does the spatial arrangement directly shape the acoustic output? How do collective movement and gaze within the circle forge a unified performing body? And how does

this enacted collectivity model and instill core Uzbek cultural values such as *ittifoq*, *hamjihatlik*, and *mehr* for both participants and observers?

The methodology employed is interdisciplinary, blending ethnomusicological analysis with performance studies and insights from social anthropology. It draws upon participatory observation of ensembles such as those under the “Uzbeknavo” Philharmonic, analysis of archival and contemporary video documentation of both staged and ritual performances, and interviews with ensemble directors and performers. The discussion is structured to first dissect the sonic ecology of the circle, then to explore the kinaesthetics of collective performance, and finally to interpret the circle as a ritualized social microcosm. By examining the living circle, this article aims to contribute a deeper understanding of how musical performance in Uzbekistan acts as a vital, embodied practice of social and cultural continuity.

The Sonic Ecology of the Circle Weaving Polyphony and Pulse

The physical arrangement of musicians in a circle or open arc fundamentally determines the acoustic experience and internal musical relationships of a folklore ensemble. Unlike the frontal, hierarchical orientation of a Western orchestra, the circular formation creates a non-hierarchical, immersive sound field. This structure generates a distinctive sonic ecology characterized by three key features: enveloping polyphony, the centralization of rhythm, and the omnipresence of the drone.

Within the circle, melodic lines are not projected outward to a distant audience but are shared inwardly among the performers and radiate outward evenly. This fosters a dense, interwoven polyphony, particularly in vocal and instrumental sections. A *lapar* or a *yalla* melody is often sung in a heterophonic texture, where multiple voices perform the same melodic contour but with subtle variations in ornamentation and rhythm. In the circle, each singer hears not only their own voice but the slight temporal and timbral shifts of those to their immediate left and right. This creates a living, breathing tapestry of sound where no single voice is dominant; instead, the collective texture itself becomes the primary musical entity. The sonic result is one of organic complexity, a musical metaphor for a community where individual expression gains its meaning through its relationship to the whole.

Rhythmically, the circle centralizes the pulse as its literal and figurative heart. The *doyra* players and other percussionists often occupy a central position or are spatially distributed to ensure the rhythmic foundation permeates the ensemble. The cyclical *usul* patterns are not merely a time-keeping mechanism but a binding, kinetic force. In the circle, each performer feels the rhythm not only acoustically but also visually and viscerally, observing the physical strikes of the *doyra* and the bodily pulses of fellow musicians. This shared, centripetal rhythmic core allows for remarkable synchronicity and also for controlled elasticity; the tempo can breathe as a single organism, guided by the subtle cues exchanged within the intimate sightlines the circle provides. The rhythm becomes the collective heartbeat of the performance, a foundational element of the *communitas* experience.

Furthermore, the circle idealizes the acoustic presence of the drone, a fundamental concept in Central Asian music symbolizing continuity and the eternal. Whether provided by the constant, open strings of multiple *dutars*, the sustained tones of the *karnay* in outdoor ensembles, or a vocal *bourdon*, the drone is the sonic representation of the unbroken circle. It is the immutable background against which melodic narratives unfold, a constant reminder of the enduring tradition and the stable ground of community. In the circular formation, the drone sound envelops all participants, creating a shared acoustic atmosphere that unifies the diverse timbres of *rubab*, *ghijak*, *nay*, and voice into a single harmonic environment. This sonic weaving of melody, rhythm, and drone within the circular space produces a holistic auditory experience that is intrinsically collective, training both performers and listeners to perceive music as an encompassing, communal phenomenon rather than a linear presentation.

The Kinaesthetics of Collectivity Embodied Rhythm and Shared Gesture

The *communitas* of the folklore ensemble is not merely heard; it is seen and physically enacted.

The living circle is a site of sophisticated kinaesthetic communication, where music is realized through synchronized movement, gesture, and gaze. This embodied practice transforms the ensemble from a group of individual musicians into a single, multi-limbed performing entity, visually dramatizing the unity that is sonically produced.

Collective movement in Uzbek folklore performance operates on a spectrum from subtle, upper-body kinetics to explicit, choreographed dance. Even in a seated or standing musical performance, the shared embodiment of rhythm is paramount. The gentle, synchronized rocking of the torso by dutar players, the unified bowing motions of the ghijak players, and the collective, nodding emphasis on the *dom* create a powerful visual rhythm that mirrors and reinforces the acoustic one. This is not theatrical embellishment but an unconscious, culturally ingrained physical response to the music's pulse. It signals deep engagement and a surrender of individual bodily autonomy to the group's rhythmic will. For the audience, this visible synchronicity is a direct, persuasive display of harmony and disciplined unity.

More explicitly, the integration of dance within or alongside the musical circle is a central feature. In performances of *yalla* or *lazgi*, dancers often form their own inner circle or interweave with the musicians. Their movements - the precise hand rotations, the shoulder isolations, the intricate footwork - are direct physical translations of the melodic phrases and rhythmic patterns being played. The circle formation allows every performer, musician and dancer alike, to maintain visual contact, enabling instantaneous, non-verbal cueing and adjustment. The gaze within the circle is crucial; performers constantly watch each other's eyes and bodies, creating a closed circuit of mutual attention that excludes the outside world and intensifies the internal group focus. This shared, intra-group gaze is a key behavioral marker of *communitas*, forging a powerful "we"-consciousness.

This kinaesthetic collectivity serves a crucial pedagogical and social function. For young musicians entering an ensemble, copying the bodily posture and movements of the elders is as important as learning the notes. It is a way of physically apprenticing into the community, of learning the "feel" of the tradition in one's muscles and bones. The embodied practice becomes a form of somatic memory, ensuring the transmission of not just repertoire but an entire physical attitude toward performance. Ultimately, the moving, gesturing circle presents an idealized image of social order: coordinated, interdependent, and expressively cohesive. It offers a model where individual skill is channeled into a collective visual and sonic spectacle, demonstrating that true artistic and social power arises from perfectly attuned collaboration.

The Circle as Ritual Microcosm Mediating Tradition and Community

The performance circle of the folklore ensemble transcends its immediate artistic function to operate as a ritualized microcosm, a symbolic space where core cultural values are performed, negotiated, and transmitted. It acts as a mediator between multiple realms: between the sacred and the profane, between the historical past and the living present, and between the performing collective and the wider community. In this ritual capacity, the circle becomes the stage upon which *communitas* is not only experienced internally but also displayed and offered to the broader social world.

In its traditional context, especially during life-cycle rituals like weddings or circumcision celebrations, the music circle is an essential agent of ritual transformation. Its performance marks the event as culturally legitimate and propels it through its emotional stages - from processional majesty to joyful celebration to reflective blessing. The circle here creates a sanctified, festive space within the everyday world, a liminal zone where social norms can be playfully inverted, emotions freely expressed, and collective joy amplified. The musicians, arranged in their circle, are not mere

entertainers but ritual specialists guiding the community through this transitional time. The *communitas* they generate among themselves radiates outward, pulling guests into the celebratory vortex, encouraging clapping, ululation, and dance, and thereby dissolving ordinary social boundaries between families, generations, and sometimes even genders.

Even in the modern, secular context of the concert stage, this ritual essence persists. The ensemble's entrance and formation into a circle is a ceremonial act that establishes a performative frame. The program often follows a ritual-like arc, moving from dignified, slow-tempo pieces that command respect to lively, virtuosic displays that elicit ecstatic audience response, and concluding with unifying, well-known melodies that bring collective closure. The circle on stage becomes a symbolic representation of the nation or region itself. The diversity of instruments within it - the plucked strings, the bowed strings, the winds, the percussion - mirrors the diversity of the Uzbek people, while their harmonious interplay models the national ideal of unity in diversity. The performers, in their regional costumes, become avatars of tradition, and their circle a movable, resonant icon of cultural identity.

Finally, the circle mediates between tradition and innovation. Within its stable, continuous form, new pieces can be introduced, young soloists can be showcased, and subtle artistic innovations can be safely incorporated. The circle provides the containing, legitimizing structure of tradition that allows for controlled creative expression. It teaches both performers and audience that authenticity is not static reproduction but the dynamic, collective re-creation of cultural spirit within a sanctioned form. The living circle, therefore, is a machine for cultural endurance. It performs *communitas* in real time, offering a palpable, auditory, and visual experience of social harmony that reinforces collective identity, teaches cultural values through embodied practice, and ensures that the folklore tradition remains not a museum exhibit, but a vital, circulating force in Uzbek life.

Conclusion

The performance of Uzbek folklore ensembles in a circular formation is a sophisticated cultural practice where musical sound, physical movement, and social meaning are inextricably fused. This article has argued that this "living circle" is the essential apparatus for generating *communitas*, a state of intense, egalitarian togetherness that lies at the heart of the tradition's social function. Through an analysis of the sonic ecology of the circle, with its woven polyphony, centralized rhythm, and enveloping drone, we see how the very sound is architected for collective immersion. By examining the kinaesthetics of synchronized gesture and shared gaze, we understand how unity is physically enacted and made visually manifest, transforming individual artists into a single, expressive body.

Ultimately, the circle is revealed as a ritual microcosm. It creates a liminal space that mediates between the sacred and secular, the past and present, and the performing group and the wider community. Whether in the context of a village wedding or a national concert hall, the circle performs a vital cultural work. It models an idealized social order based on harmony and interdependence, transmits values through embodied participation, and revitalizes collective identity through shared emotional experience. To study the Uzbek folklore ensemble, therefore, is to recognize that its music cannot be abstracted from the circular form of its performance. The circle is not a backdrop; it is the active, living principle of connection - the tangible geometry of *communitas* - through which the spirit of the community is sounded, seen, and perpetually renewed.

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