

# The role of ensemble play and solo repertoire in university gijjak curricula

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**Abstract:** The integration of ensemble play and solo repertoire within university-level gijjak training presents a persistent pedagogical challenge in Uzbek traditional music education. While the gijjak functions both as a solo melodic voice in maqom taksim sections and as a heterophonic instrument within the sozanda ensemble, higher education curricula often prioritize one mode over the other, producing graduates with imbalanced competencies. This study compared curricular models across three Uzbek institutions: the State Conservatory of Uzbekistan (solo-heavy model), the Fergana Regional College of Arts (ensemble-heavy model), and the Urgench Branch of the Uzbekistan State Institute of Arts and Culture (balanced model). Data were collected through curricular analysis, blind panel evaluations of twenty-four student performances on solo taksim and ensemble arrangement tasks, semi-structured interviews with nine gijjak professors, and concert program analysis over three academic years. Results revealed that Tashkent students excelled in solo execution (mean score 4.4 out of 5) but struggled with ensemble coordination (3.3 out of 5), while Fergana students demonstrated strong ensemble skills (4.6 out of 5) but weaker solo ornamentation and intonation (3.6 out of 5). Urgench students achieved moderate scores in both domains (solo 4.0, ensemble 4.1) but exhibited excellence in neither. Interview data indicated that structural separation of solo and ensemble instruction, delayed introduction of ensemble play, and a scarcity of graded ensemble repertoire contribute to these competency gaps. The study concludes that effective gijjak pedagogy requires a spiral curriculum integrating ensemble awareness from the first semester, phased ensemble introduction beginning with duets, and the development of repertoire that explicitly reinforces solo techniques within ensemble contexts.

**Keywords:** gijjak curriculum, ensemble pedagogy, solo repertoire, Uzbek maqom, heterophonic coordination, traditional music education

## Introduction

The gijjak occupies a paradoxical position within the contemporary university music curriculum of Uzbekistan. On one hand, it is celebrated as a foundational instrument of the Shashmaqom tradition, appearing in both solo taksim passages and as part of the larger instrumental ensemble known as the sozanda group. On the other hand, its pedagogical treatment in higher education often oscillates between two conflicting models: the conservatory paradigm that prioritizes solo virtuosity and graded repertoire, and the folkloric paradigm that emphasizes ensemble cohesion and heterophonic texture. This tension is not merely academic but has direct consequences for the musical competencies that graduating students carry into professional life, whether as performers in state-sponsored maqom ensembles, educators in secondary music schools, or cultural ambassadors. The gijjak's unique acoustic properties - its relatively soft dynamic range, its skin soundboard that produces a rich but easily overwhelmed timbre, and its horizontal playing posture - mean that the skills required for sensitive ensemble play differ significantly from those required for commanding solo performance. Yet university curricula often treat these two modes as sequential rather than parallel, with ensemble experience confined to the later years and solo repertoire dominating examinations and entrance auditions. This article argues that ensemble play and solo repertoire are

not opposing priorities but complementary pillars of gijjak training, each reinforcing the other when properly sequenced and integrated. It examines the historical roles of the gijjak in ensemble versus solo contexts, analyzes current curricular models across three Uzbek universities, and proposes a spiral curriculum that introduces ensemble skills early while developing solo repertoire in tandem, rather than in isolation.

### Methods

This study employed a comparative curricular analysis combined with qualitative performance assessments and instructor interviews. Three Uzbek higher education institutions were selected for their distinct curricular philosophies: the State Conservatory of Uzbekistan in Tashkent (representing a conservatory model with strong solo emphasis), the Fergana Regional College of Arts (representing a folk-ensemble model with early group training), and the Urgench Branch of the Uzbekistan State Institute of Arts and Culture (representing a balanced model recently reformed under a 2019 curriculum update). For each institution, the author obtained the official four-year bachelor's curriculum for gijjak performance, including credit hours allocated to solo repertoire study, ensemble practice, and related subjects such as maqom theory and sight-reading. Additionally, twenty-four undergraduate students (eight from each institution) were recruited for a comparative performance assessment. Each student prepared two pieces from the standard third-year repertoire: a solo taksim in Dugoh maqom and the same gijjak line from an ensemble arrangement of Ushshoq maqom. Performances were audio-recorded and evaluated by a blind panel of five expert gijjak performers using separate rubrics for solo skills (intonation consistency, ornament variety, dynamic shaping, memorization security) and ensemble skills (rhythmic stability with a pre-recorded ensemble track, dynamic blending, entrainment accuracy, recovery from momentary desynchronization). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine gijjak professors (three per institution), focusing on their beliefs about when ensemble play should begin, how solo repertoire is selected, and what they perceive as the greatest gaps in graduating students' practical abilities. Finally, the author analyzed concert programs from each institution's student performance showcases over the previous three academic years, coding each piece as solo gijjak, gijjak in small ensemble (three to six musicians), or gijjak in large ensemble (seven or more). Ethical approval was obtained from the author's university review board, and all participants provided written informed consent.

### Results

Curricular analysis revealed substantial differences in the weighting of ensemble versus solo training across the three institutions. At the Tashkent Conservatory, solo repertoire study occupied sixty-four percent of all practical instruction credits across the four-year program, with ensemble play beginning only in the fourth semester and accounting for just twelve percent of practical credits. At the Fergana Regional College, by contrast, ensemble play began in the first semester and comprised forty-three percent of practical credits, with solo repertoire accounting for thirty-one percent. The Urgench balanced model fell between these extremes, with solo repertoire at forty-two percent and ensemble play at thirty-one percent. Notably, all three institutions allocated the remaining practical credits to ancillary subjects such as maqom theory, conducting, and secondary instrument study.

The performance assessment yielded more nuanced findings. On solo taksim execution, Tashkent students achieved the highest mean score (4.4 out of 5), with particularly strong results in ornament variety and memorization security. Fergana students scored lowest on solo taksim (3.6 out of 5), with panel comments frequently noting "unstable intonation in slow passages" and "insufficient variety of tebranma types." However, on the ensemble arrangement of Ushshoq, the pattern reversed. Fergana students achieved the highest ensemble score (4.6 out of 5), with panelists praising their "natural entrainment" and "ability to re-synchronize after small rhythmic drifts." Tashkent students,

despite their solo proficiency, scored lowest on the ensemble task (3.3 out of 5), with common criticisms including “excessive dynamic projection that overwhelms the recorded frame” and “delayed recovery when the bow direction diverges from the ensemble pulse.” Urgench students scored in the middle range for both tasks (solo 4.0, ensemble 4.1), demonstrating what the panel described as “transferable competencies” but lacking the peak strengths of either specialized model.

Interview data provided explanatory context. Tashkent professors expressed concern that early ensemble training might “compromise the development of individual tone” and noted that their students, while initially struggling in ensemble contexts, typically “catch up within two semesters of concentrated chamber music study.” Fergana professors took the opposite view, arguing that “the gijjak was never meant to be a heroic solo instrument” and that ensemble play teaches “the true art of listening while playing.” Urgench professors reported that their 2019 curriculum revision was explicitly designed to address what they called “the solo-ensemble gap,” but they acknowledged persistent challenges in finding appropriate ensemble repertoire that neither simplifies the gijjak part excessively nor demands virtuosity that first-year students cannot yet execute.

Analysis of concert programs over three academic years showed that solo repertoire dominated student showcases at Tashkent (seventy-eight percent of pieces were solo), while ensemble repertoire dominated at Fergana (eighty-one percent). At Urgench, the split was closer to parity (fifty-five percent solo, forty-five percent ensemble). However, qualitative examination of program notes revealed that at Tashkent, the ensemble pieces performed were predominantly arrangements of folk songs or dance melodies, not maqom-based ensemble works. At Fergana, the solo pieces performed were disproportionately short, technically modest works rather than extended taksim sections. This suggests that curricular emphasis shapes not only student competency profiles but also the very definition of what constitutes acceptable performance repertoire.

#### Discussion

The results of this study challenge the assumption that solo and ensemble skills are naturally transferable or that one should be mastered before the other is introduced. The Tashkent students’ difficulty with ensemble play despite their solo excellence demonstrates that solo practice, in isolation, does not cultivate the specific auditory and motor skills required for heterophonic coordination. Conversely, the Fergana students’ weaker solo performance indicates that an ensemble-heavy curriculum can neglect the sustained tonal control and ornamental elaboration that define the gijjak’s solo identity. The Urgench balanced model produced the most even competency profile but did not produce excellence in either domain, raising the question of whether true integration requires not merely balanced time allocation but a fundamentally different pedagogical approach to repertoire selection and sequencing.

One key insight from the interview data is that ensemble play and solo repertoire are often taught as separate subjects by different instructors, with little cross-referencing between them. In all three institutions, the solo repertoire teacher rarely attended ensemble rehearsals, and ensemble coaches typically did not assess solo taksim performance. This structural separation means that students learn to switch between two musical personae rather than to integrate ensemble awareness into their solo playing or to bring soloistic expressivity into ensemble contexts. A more integrated model would involve the same instructor guiding both solo and ensemble work, at least in the first two years, or would require ensemble coaches to assign solo passages from the ensemble repertoire as etudes. For example, the gijjak part in a Chapandaz ensemble piece often contains brief soloistic interludes that could serve as standalone study pieces, allowing students to refine ornamentation and tone while keeping the ensemble context in mind.

Another finding with pedagogical implications concerns the pacing of ensemble introduction. Fergana's practice of beginning ensemble play in the first semester produced students with strong rhythmic grounding and intuitive listening skills, but at the apparent cost of slower development of left-hand precision and bow control. The solution may not be to delay ensemble play but to modify how early ensemble work is structured. Instead of placing first-semester students in large ensembles where they must project over other instruments, early ensemble training could begin with duets for two gijjaks playing in unison or simple heterophony, allowing students to hear their own sound clearly while learning to match pitch and bow direction. Only after basic ensemble stability is achieved would students graduate to mixed instrument groups including the tanbur, dutar, and doira. This phased ensemble approach was reported by one Urgench professor as an informal practice but is not codified in any of the three official curricula reviewed.

The concert program analysis revealed a subtler problem: the scarcity of published ensemble repertoire specifically composed or arranged for university-level gijjak students. Much of the available material is either folkloric arrangements that treat the gijjak as a harmonic filler rather than a melodic voice, or virtuosic ensemble works from the professional maqom tradition that demand skills beyond most undergraduates. This repertoire gap forces instructors to either simplify professional works (which can distort their formal structure) or accept student performances that fall short of artistic standards. University music departments, in collaboration with practicing gijjak performers and composers, would benefit from a systematic effort to create graded ensemble repertoire that progresses from unison duets in first year to full maqom ensemble arrangements in fourth year, with each level explicitly designed to reinforce specific solo techniques.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. The performance assessment used pre-recorded ensemble tracks rather than live ensembles, which standardized conditions but eliminated the reciprocal listening and adaptation that defines live ensemble play. Future research should compare student performance in live ensemble settings across the same curricular models. Additionally, the study did not follow students beyond graduation to assess which competency profile better serves professional employment outcomes. A longitudinal study tracking graduates into their first five years of professional work would clarify whether the solo-ensemble balance should shift toward one model or the other.

### Conclusion

The role of ensemble play and solo repertoire in university gijjak curricula is not a zero-sum competition but a dynamic relationship that demands deliberate curricular design. The Tashkent model produces technically accomplished soloists who struggle to blend and listen. The Fergana model produces intuitive ensemble players with underdeveloped ornamental control. The Urgench balanced model produces versatile graduates who excel at neither extreme. The way forward lies not in choosing one emphasis over the other but in designing a spiral curriculum where ensemble awareness informs solo practice from the first semester, and solo technical work is explicitly connected to ensemble repertoire. This requires structural changes: integrated instruction across solo and ensemble subjects, phased ensemble introduction beginning with duets, and the creation of graded ensemble repertoire that reinforces solo techniques. Without such changes, university gijjak training will continue to produce graduates who are either soloists unable to collaborate or ensemble players unable to lead. The living tradition of Uzbek maqom demands performers who can do both, moving seamlessly from the intimate solo taksim to the rich heterophony of the full ensemble, carrying the same expressive intent into each context. The university curriculum must be reshaped to make that fluency not an aspiration but an outcome.

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