

Assessing authenticity and skill development in the pedagogy of Ferghana vocal arts within Uzbek higher education

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Abstract: The pedagogy of Ferghana vocal arts within Uzbek higher education institutions faces a fundamental evaluative challenge: how to assess student progress when the tradition's core value - authenticity - resists standardized measurement. Unlike Western conservatory models that prioritize technical precision and notational fidelity, Ferghana singing including Tanovar and Katta ashula prizes individualized ornamentation, emotional affect (hal), and fidelity to oral models rather than scores. This study examined how four Uzbek higher music institutions assess both skill development and authenticity in Ferghana vocal performance. Through qualitative analysis of assessment rubrics, examination recordings, and interviews with twenty seven vocal faculty, I identified three assessment paradigms: the technical paradigm measuring pitch accuracy, breath control, and ornament execution; the mimetic paradigm measuring resemblance to a specified master recording; and the holistic paradigm measuring audience emotional response and perceived hal. Results reveal significant faculty disagreement on the weighting of these paradigms, with Ferghana native teachers privileging holistic assessment while conservatory trained faculty favor technical measures. Skill development in core competencies (microtonal bending, ornament sequencing, text driven phrasing) showed measurable progression across four years, but authenticity assessed by external traditional practitioners correlated only weakly with grade point averages. The study proposes a dual axis assessment model separating technical skill from authentic expression, accompanied by structured peer and community jury processes. Findings suggest that Uzbek higher education can preserve Ferghana authenticity while maintaining academic rigor, but only by deliberately decoupling technical assessment from authenticity judgments.

Keywords: Ferghana vocal pedagogy, authenticity assessment, Uzbek higher education, skill development, Tanovar, oral tradition evaluation

Introduction

The Ferghana Valley vocal tradition represents one of Central Asia's most sophisticated systems of sung poetry. Unlike the architectonic Shashmaqom with its fixed instrumental cycles, Ferghana singing operates through a principle of controlled variability. A single Tanovar performance of a ghazal by Alisher Navoi may vary substantially between renditions by the same singer, let alone different singers, yet knowledgeable listeners reliably distinguish masterful performances from merely competent ones. This variability is not error but aesthetic intent. Ornament placement shifts with emotional impulse. Tempo fluctuates with poetic stress. Microtonal inflections respond to the acoustics of the performance space. The authentic Ferghana performance is therefore not a faithful reproduction of a fixed original but a faithful generation of an idiomatic event.

The problem of assessment emerges directly from this aesthetic. Within the traditional usto-z-shogird (master apprentice) system, authenticity was assessed through prolonged mimetic proximity. An apprentice sang alongside the master for years, absorbing not only pitches and rhythms but also timbral subtleties, breath placement, and the embodied knowledge of when to ornament and when to refrain. Assessment was continuous, holistic, and ultimately certified by the master's permission to

perform publicly. No grades were assigned. No rubrics were consulted. The master's word was final, and that word reflected decades of enculturated listening.

Uzbek higher education cannot replicate this system. University programs operate on fixed semester schedules, enroll multiple students per teacher, require numeric grades for transcripts, and answer to accreditation bodies demanding standardized learning outcomes. Yet faculty across Uzbekistan's four major music institutions express deep concern that conventional assessment methods distort Ferghana pedagogy. Students learn to produce technically correct but emotionally hollow performances. Authenticity, the very quality that distinguishes Ferghana singing from mere vocalization, becomes undervalued because it cannot be easily scored.

This study addresses three research questions. First, what assessment paradigms currently operate in Uzbek higher education for Ferghana vocal arts? Second, how does skill development in measurable competencies correlate with authenticity as judged by traditional practitioners? Third, what assessment model could simultaneously support skill development and authenticity preservation within the constraints of university education?

The significance of these questions extends beyond Uzbekistan. Higher education worldwide increasingly incorporates oral tradition musics, from Indian raga to Irish sean-nós singing. Every such incorporation faces the same core tension between measurable skill acquisition and culturally specific authenticity. The Ferghana case offers a fully developed example of how an oral tradition adapts - or fails to adapt - to institutional assessment.

Methods

This study employed a convergent mixed methods design conducted from January to December 2025. Data collection involved three parallel strands. The first strand consisted of document analysis. I obtained from Kokand State University all available assessment materials for undergraduate vocal performance courses that included Ferghana repertoire. This included twenty two course syllabi, fourteen final examination rubrics, thirty seven archived student examination recordings from academic years 2022 to 2025, and four official curriculum guidelines. Document analysis focused on identifying explicit assessment criteria, the weighting of different skill categories, and any mention of authenticity related terms such as *hal*, *ruh* (spirit), or *an'ana* (tradition).

The second strand involved semi-structured interviews with twenty seven vocal faculty members. Participants included fourteen women and thirteen men, with teaching experience ranging from three to forty two years. Eleven participants were native to the Ferghana Valley and had completed traditional apprenticeship (*shogirdlik*) under recognized masters before or alongside their conservatory education. Sixteen participants were trained exclusively within the conservatory system but had subsequently specialized in Ferghana repertoire. Interviews lasting forty five to ninety minutes explored faculty definitions of authenticity, their assessment practices, their satisfaction with current methods, and their suggestions for reform. Interviews were conducted in Uzbek, transcribed, and translated. Thematic analysis proceeded through initial open coding, axial coding to group codes into broader categories, and selective coding to identify core themes across the dataset.

The third strand involved external authenticity assessment. I selected twelve student examination recordings from the archive, stratified by institution and year (third year and fourth year only, to ensure sufficient training). These recordings were anonymized and presented to a panel of three traditional Ferghana practitioners who held no university affiliation. The panel included two male singers aged sixty seven and seventy one and one female singer aged sixty three, all recognized in the Ferghana Valley as authoritative bearers of the *Tanovar* and Ferghana lyrical traditions. Panel members rated each recording on a five point scale for overall authenticity and provided written comments justifying their ratings. I then compared these authenticity ratings with the original

examination grades awarded by university faculty, as well as with deconstructed skill measures extracted from the recordings by three independent musician analysts.

Results

Three principal results emerged from the data. The first result identified three distinct assessment paradigms currently operating across the four institutions, often within the same course. The technical paradigm, dominant in Tashkent and Andijan, assessed students on pitch accuracy measured against equal temperament (thirty percent of grade), breath control measured as phrase length without interruption (twenty five percent), ornament execution measured as correct number and placement compared to a reference notation (twenty five percent), and memorization of text and melody (twenty percent). Faculty using this paradigm expressed confidence in its objectivity. One Tashkent professor stated “I can give a clear number. The student hit ninety four percent of pitches correctly. That is an A minus. There is no argument.”

The mimetic paradigm, dominant in Namangan and among Ferghana native faculty elsewhere, assessed students on resemblance to a specified master recording. Instead of notation based criteria, students were assigned a reference recording by Hoji Abdulaziz, Orifkhon Khatamov, or another twentieth century master. Assessment focused on the student’s ability to match the reference in ornament timing, microtonal details, vibrato rate, and phrasing breath placement. One Ferghana native teacher explained “I tell the student, do not sing like the notation. Sing like Hoji Abdulaziz. When he bends the note, you bend. When he waits, you wait. Then I listen and say, this is close, this is far.” However, faculty disagreed on how close was close enough, and inter rater reliability among mimetic assessors was moderate at best.

The holistic paradigm, rarely official but widely used informally, assessed students on perceived emotional effect and presence of hal. Syllabi did not mention this paradigm, but seventeen of twenty seven faculty admitted to adjusting grades based on holistic impressions. Criteria included whether the performance moved the listener, whether the singer appeared internally absorbed rather than externally focused, and whether the overall shape felt coherent. One elder faculty member stated “I cannot teach hal. I cannot measure hal. But I know when it is there. And a technically perfect performance without hal is not a good performance. So I subtract points. Unofficially.” This paradigm produced the widest faculty disagreement, with conservatory trained teachers describing it as subjective or unfair.

The second result concerned skill development across the four year curriculum. Using the technical paradigm’s own metrics, students showed clear and measurable progression. Pitch accuracy improved from an average of seventy eight percent at first year final examinations to ninety one percent at fourth year final examinations. Maximum sustained phrase length increased from an average of six seconds to fourteen seconds. Ornament density (number of ornaments per minute) did not increase significantly, but ornament accuracy (correct execution of ishkala, nola, oshirma, and qaytarish as judged against notation) improved from sixty nine percent to eighty seven percent. Thus, by the technical paradigm’s own standards, the university system successfully develops Ferghana vocal skills.

The third result, however, complicated this picture dramatically. When the external traditional practitioner panel assessed the same fourth year student recordings, their authenticity ratings correlated only weakly with university examination grades. The Pearson correlation coefficient was $r = 0.34$, indicating that less than twelve percent of variance in authenticity ratings was explained by grades. More strikingly, three students who had received A grades (ninety percent or above) from university faculty received authenticity ratings of two out of five from the panel, with comments such as “correct but dead” and “the notes are right but the feeling is wrong.” Conversely, two students with

B plus grades (eighty seven percent and eighty eight percent) received the panel's highest authenticity ratings of four out of five. One panel member wrote of a B plus student "This one has listened. Not just learned. Listened until the ornaments became part of his breath."

Qualitative analysis of panel comments identified specific features distinguishing high authenticity recordings. These included variable ornament placement rather than identical repetition across similar phrases, microtonal bending that anticipated the beat rather than following it, breath sounds preceding vocal attack as audible hesitation, and terminal vibrato widening on words expressing separation or grief. High authenticity performances also tended to be slightly slower overall, with longer pauses between phrases. Low authenticity performances were described as efficient, clean, and emotionally flat. Notably, the technical measures of pitch accuracy and phrase length did not distinguish high from low authenticity recordings. Both groups achieved comparable scores on these metrics.

Discussion

The findings reveal a fundamental dissociation between skill development as measured by conventional university assessment and authenticity as judged by traditional practitioners. The university system successfully produces students who can sing Ferghana repertoire with accurate pitches, controlled breath, and correctly placed ornaments. Yet these same students, by the panel's assessment, often miss the essence of Ferghana expression. This is not a failure of student learning. It is a failure of assessment alignment. The system measures what it can easily measure and calls that learning. What it cannot easily measure - variable ornamentation, microtonal anticipation, breath as expression, emotional timing - it ignores or treats as subjective extras.

The three assessment paradigms identified in this study each capture part of Ferghana authenticity but none capture the whole. The technical paradigm captures measurable accuracy but misses expressive variability. The mimetic paradigm captures resemblance to a single reference but assumes that one master recording represents authentic Ferghana style, ignoring the tradition's inherent performance to performance variability. The holistic paradigm captures emotional effect but lacks transparency and inter rater reliability, making it unsuitable as a primary assessment tool in university contexts.

A path forward emerges from rethinking the purpose of assessment. Rather than asking whether a student's performance is authentic or not, a more useful question is whether the student has developed the competencies that enable authentic performance. The external panel's comments suggest four such competencies that are currently undervalued in university assessment. The first competency is flexible ornament timing, the ability to shift ornament placement responsively rather than reproducing fixed positions. The second competency is microtonal expressivity, the ability to bend pitches in grammatically acceptable ways that vary each performance. The third competency is breath phrasing as punctuation, using inhalation and exhalation sounds and pauses to shape poetic meaning. The fourth competency is listener directed affect, the ability to modulate vocal production based on immediate feedback from the performance space and audience.

These four competencies can be taught and assessed more systematically than the holistic paradigm currently allows. Each can be broken down into observable behaviors. Flexible ornament timing can be assessed by comparing two performances of the same passage by the same student and measuring variation within acceptable Ferghana parameters. Microtonal expressivity can be assessed using spectrographic analysis to confirm that bends fall within the quarter tone to semitone range characteristic of Ferghana style rather than either straight tuning or excessive sliding. Breath phrasing can be assessed through binary judgments of whether a breath occurs at a syntactically meaningful

poetic boundary. Listener directed affect can be assessed through structured peer feedback where fellow students rate emotional impact on Likert scales.

Based on these findings, I propose a dual axis assessment model. Axis one assesses technical skill using the existing technical paradigm but with reduced weighting, no more than forty percent of the total grade. Axis two assesses authenticity enabling competencies using the behavioral indicators described above, with forty percent weighting. The remaining twenty percent is reserved for self assessment and peer assessment of holistic effect, acknowledging that some dimensions of Ferghana authenticity resist quantification but remain pedagogically valuable. This model separates technical from expressive evaluation while giving both systematic attention. It also creates transparency without eliminating the professional judgment that Ferghana pedagogy requires.

Several limitations constrain this study's conclusions. The external practitioner panel, while authoritative, included only three individuals, all from the older generation. Younger Ferghana practitioners might assess authenticity differently. The study also did not track graduates into professional performance contexts, so the predictive validity of the proposed assessment model remains untested. Finally, the study focused exclusively on Ferghana vocal arts; findings may not transfer to other Uzbek regional traditions such as Khorezm or Surkhandarya singing.

Conclusion

Assessing authenticity and skill development in Ferghana vocal arts pedagogy within Uzbek higher education reveals a system that successfully develops technical skill but struggles to evaluate the expressive competencies that constitute authentic Ferghana style. The three assessment paradigms currently in use, technical, mimetic, and holistic, each capture partial truths but none fully align with traditional practitioner judgments. The dissociation between grades and authenticity ratings suggests that current assessment overemphasizes reproducible accuracy at the expense of flexible expression. The proposed dual axis model offers a practical path forward, separating technical measurement from authenticity enabling competencies while maintaining academic rigor. For Uzbek higher education, implementing such a model would require faculty development, revised rubrics, and institutional support for alternative assessment methods. The alternative, however, is continued production of technically proficient singers whom traditional audiences judge as inauthentic. That outcome serves neither the university, the student, nor the living heritage of Ferghana vocal arts.

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