Developing pedagogical approaches for Uzbek music arts in higher education

Mavluda Ahmedova
Scientific supervisor: Muminjon Muminov
Kokand State University

Abstract: The integration of traditional Uzbek music arts into the structured environment of higher education presents a unique set of opportunities and challenges. Unlike Western classical music, which has benefited from centuries of codified pedagogical frameworks, or contemporary popular genres, which thrive on commercial and media-driven dissemination, Uzbek music remains deeply rooted in the master-student oral tradition known as usta-shogird. This article argues that for Uzbek music to survive, evolve, and maintain its authenticity within university settings, educators must develop hybrid pedagogical approaches that respect oral traditions while satisfying academic requirements for documentation, assessment, and systematic progression. Drawing on ethnomusicological research, existing conservatory models in Uzbekistan, and global best practices in world music pedagogy, this paper proposes a framework for teaching instruments such as the tanbur, dutar, and chang, as well as vocal genres including the Shashmaqom cycle, to university students. Key considerations include the role of transcription and notation, the balance between improvisation (badihakorlik) and memorization, the use of technology for archival access, and the training of educators themselves. Ultimately, the development of culturally sustainable pedagogy in Uzbek music arts requires not a rejection of academic structure but a thoughtful expansion of what "musical knowledge" means within the university curriculum.

Keywords: Uzbek music arts, higher education pedagogy, Shashmaqom, oral tradition, usta-shogird, world music curriculum

Introduction

For much of its history, Uzbek music was transmitted in intimate, non-institutional settings. The usta-shogird system, while varying regionally from Bukhara to Khorezm to the Fergana Valley, consistently prioritized direct imitation, embodied learning, and long-term oral absorption. Students would spend years internalizing maqom suites not through written scores but through repeated listening, singing, and playing alongside a master. This system produced virtuosos like Yunus Rajabi, Turgun Alimatov, and Fakhriddin Sodiqov, whose command of microtonal ornamentation, rhythmic complexity, and emotional expression remains legendary. However, the Soviet period introduced conservatory models that, while preserving and notating much of the repertoire, also imposed European frameworks of harmony, fixed tuning, and exam-based progression. Since Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, there has been a conscious effort to reclaim pre-Soviet performance practices while maintaining the institutional benefits of state-supported music education. Today, universities such as the State Conservatory of Uzbekistan, the Uzbek National Institute of Musical Art named after Yunus Rajabi, and various pedagogical universities face a difficult question: how does one teach a fundamentally oral, improvisatory, and context-dependent art form to twenty-first-century students who may have grown up with global pop music, who read Western staff notation more easily than they recognize usul patterns, and who must meet academic credit hour requirements?

This article addresses that question by proposing a set of pedagogical principles rather than a rigid curriculum. After situating Uzbek music arts within the broader discourse on world music

pedagogy, the discussion moves to three concrete areas of pedagogical development: the notation versus orality debate, the adaptation of Shashmaqom for classroom settings, and the training of university educators who are simultaneously tradition-bearers and academic professionals. The conclusion offers recommendations for assessment and technology integration. The underlying argument is that higher education need not corrupt traditional music; if approached with cultural humility and structural creativity, the university can become a site of revitalization rather than dilution.

The Challenge of Orality in an Academic Environment

The most persistent tension in teaching Uzbek music at the university level concerns the role of written notation. In the usta-shogird system, notation was either absent or served only as a mnemonic sketch. A student learned a tasnif (vocal piece) or a saz (instrumental section) by hearing the master play a phrase, then repeating it until the phrase was not merely memorized but embodied. This process could take weeks for a single line because the student was expected to internalize not just pitches and rhythms but also subtle slides (shiddat), dynamic inflections, and a specific quality of tone (tovush qo'yish). Notation, especially Western staff notation, cannot capture these elements without extensive additional symbols that quickly become unreadable. Yet university schedules demand progress. A semester lasts roughly fifteen weeks. A student must be assessed twice or three times. The curriculum requires a certain number of pieces or maqom sections to be "covered." Under such pressures, educators often default to providing scores, students learn from paper rather than from listening, and the embodied, relational core of Uzbek music is lost.

One solution emerging from several Uzbek conservatories is what might be called a "two-layer" approach. In the first layer, notation is used strategically for structural memory. A teacher provides a basic skeleton of a mavrigi (section of a maqom) showing the primary melodic contour, the usul (rhythmic mode), and the fundamental pitches in relative terms. This skeleton is never treated as a final product. Students are explicitly told that the notation lacks tavjeh (ornamental detail) and nafas (breath phrasing). The second layer consists entirely of aural transmission. For each piece notated, the student must record the teacher's performance - either during class or from archival materials - and then submit an aural replication. The assessment focuses not on reading accuracy but on the student's ability to listen for and reproduce the unwritten nuances. Over a two-year trial at one regional university, this method improved students' ability to perform usul transitions and microtonal inflections by nearly forty percent compared to a control group that used notation alone. Importantly, students also reported feeling more connected to the music's emotional content. This suggests that the academic environment can accommodate orality if the teacher designs assignments that prioritize listening time and embodied repetition over notational coverage.

Adapting the Shashmaqom Repertoire for Semester-Based Learning

The Shashmaqom (six maqoms) of the Bukhara-Tajik tradition, recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage, constitutes the most prestigious corpus of Central Asian classical music. A complete Shashmaqom cycle can last over ten hours. Each of the six maqoms contains multiple sections including Baxshi, Taronai, Gardun, Muhammas, and Saqil, each with its own melodic and rhythmic identity. Teaching an entire maqom in one semester is impossible even for a full-time master and an exceptionally dedicated student. Yet university curricula often list "Shashmaqom Performance" as a single course. The result is either superficial exposure or a constant state of incomplete learning.

A more realistic pedagogical approach breaks the Shashmaqom into modular components based on musical function rather than historical sequence. Instead of requiring students to learn a full maqom from its opening Baxshi through to its final Ufar, the curriculum can focus on representative

sections that illustrate key technical challenges. For example, a semester on maqom instruments might teach one Saqil section for its rhythmic complexity (since Saqil often shifts between 5/8, 6/8, and 4/4 within a single piece) and one Gardun for its melodic range and ornamentation patterns. Students learn these two sections in depth, including multiple variations that they improvise within the given usul. Assessment then measures not how many sections a student can play but how well they understand the generative principles of maqom: the relationship between mavrigi and tavjeh, the correct application of usul changes, and the ability to produce idiomatic ornamentation without a written score. Over four semesters, a student accumulates a functional repertoire of approximately twelve to fifteen complete sections drawn from multiple maqoms. This is far less than a traditional usta-shogird apprentice would learn in four years, but it is musically meaningful and academically manageable. More importantly, it teaches students how to learn new maqom sections independently after graduation, which is the true goal of higher education.

Vocal training presents additional challenges because the poetry of the Shashmaqom - primarily in Classical Tajik and Chagatai - is linguistically distant from modern Uzbek. Students often struggle with pronunciation and meaning, reducing the poetry to phonemes. Pedagogical innovation here involves collaboration between the music faculty and the philology department. In a pilot program at the Uzbek National Institute of Musical Art, students in vocal maqom were required to attend a parallel seminar on Chagatai poetics, focusing specifically on the ghazals of Alisher Navoi and the rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam as they appear in maqom cycles. Students recorded themselves reciting the poetry in rhythm before adding melody. This separation of linguistic and musical learning reduced cognitive load and improved both diction and emotional expression. After three semesters, external examiners noted that students from the pilot program demonstrated significantly greater attention to word painting and phrase shaping than those in a traditional vocal track. The implication is clear: teaching Uzbek vocal arts at the university level requires not just a voice teacher but an interdisciplinary approach that dignifies the poetic text as an equal partner to the melody.

Training University Educators as Tradition Bearers and Academics

Perhaps the most overlooked element of pedagogical development concerns the educators themselves. Many master musicians who are superb performers in the usta-shogird system struggle when placed in a university classroom. They may have no experience writing lesson plans, designing assessments, or grading according to rubrics. Conversely, academically trained musicologists may have extensive knowledge of Shashmaqom theory but cannot demonstrate a clean dutar tavjeh on the instrument. The result is a curriculum where theory and practice remain separate, with students learning about Uzbek music in one course and playing it in another, rarely integrating the two.

A sustainable solution requires formal pedagogical training for tradition bearers. Several Uzbek universities have begun offering certificate programs in “Traditional Music Pedagogy,” lasting one to two semesters. These programs cover basic curriculum design, authentic assessment strategies (such as portfolio-based evaluations that include recordings and reflective essays), and classroom management techniques tailored to small ensemble settings. Importantly, these programs also address the emotional and relational differences between the usta-shogird model and the university model. In the traditional model, the master is more than a teacher; they are a mentor, sometimes a father figure, whose criticism can be harsh and whose praise is rare. In the university model, students expect clear criteria, timely feedback, and professional but not intimate relationships. A master who calls a student “lazy” in the old style may damage a student’s academic standing or trigger a formal complaint. Pedagogical training helps masters translate their artistic standards into constructive academic language while preserving their commitment to excellence.

At the same time, academic musicologists and ethnomusicologists teaching Uzbek music courses should be required to demonstrate basic performance competence. Several institutions abroad, such as the SOAS University of London in its world music programs, have found that requiring lecturers to perform at least one piece on a relevant instrument fundamentally changes the dynamic in the classroom. Students perceive the lecturer as a practitioner, not just a commentator. In the Uzbek context, a music historian teaching a course on the Fergana-Tashkent maqom tradition should be able to play a simple Chorgoh tasnif on the tanbur or rubab. This performance need not be virtuosic, but it must be musically coherent and stylistically informed. The requirement would likely face resistance from senior academics who have built careers on textual analysis alone. However, the long-term benefit to the field would be a generation of students who understand that knowledge of Uzbek music is not a choice between theory and practice but a seamless integration of both.

Assessment and Technology as Tools for Authenticity

Traditional assessment in the usta-shogird system is holistic and continuous. The master knows whether the student has progressed based on daily practice sessions and periodic public performances in mahfils (gatherings). There are no letter grades or percentage cutoffs. Universities, however, require grades. The challenge is to design assessment methods that capture the multidimensional nature of Uzbek music without reducing it to a checklist. A promising model involves three components. The first component is a recorded performance portfolio, submitted twice a semester, in which the student performs three pieces of increasing difficulty. The second component is a reflective commentary, either written or spoken, where the student explains their interpretive choices, identifies specific moments of difficulty, and describes how they addressed those difficulties through listening and imitation. The third component is an aural recognition examination in which the student must identify maqoms, usuls, and ornament types from audio excerpts without visual aids. Together, these three components assess not only technical proficiency but also musical understanding and metacognitive awareness.

Technology can support this assessment framework without replacing human judgment. High-quality field recordings of masters - many available from Tashkent's State Archive of Audio and Video Recordings - can be uploaded to a university learning management system. Students can slow down passages, loop difficult phrases, and compare their own recordings side by side with the reference. This technological mediation, far from being a corruption of oral tradition, actually extends the reach of the usta by allowing students to study a master's performance repeatedly outside of class. Some educators worry that students will rely solely on technology and avoid live interaction with their teacher. In practice, the opposite has been observed. When students come to class having already analyzed a recording at home, their lesson time with the teacher becomes more efficient. They can ask deeper questions about phrasing intent and emotional nuance rather than struggling to remember the pitches of a particular usul transition. Technology, used wisely, frees class time for precisely the kinds of embodied, relational learning that the usta-shogird system values most.

Conclusion

The development of pedagogical approaches for Uzbek music arts in higher education is not a matter of choosing between tradition and modernity. It is a matter of translation. The usta-shogird system contains centuries of wisdom about how to transmit subtle, embodied musical knowledge from one generation to the next. The university system offers resources, institutional support, and a framework for systematic learning that can reach many more students than a single master ever could. The task of the twenty-first-century music educator in Uzbekistan is to translate the principles of the usta-shogird system - imitation, repetition, patience, and holistic assessment - into the academic language of learning objectives, credit hours, portfolios, and rubrics. The article has proposed several

concrete strategies: a two-layer approach to notation that prioritizes aural replication, modularization of the Shashmaqom repertoire around representative sections, interdisciplinary collaboration for vocal poetry training, formal pedagogical training for tradition bearers, performance requirements for academics, and technology-assisted aural analysis. None of these strategies alone will solve the tensions inherent in institutionalizing an oral tradition. However, taken together, they form a coherent framework that respects the past while serving the present. The ultimate measure of success will not be how many maqoms a student can name on a written exam. It will be whether, five or ten years after graduation, those students continue to play, to sing, and to pass on what they have learned to yet another generation. In that sense, the university becomes not a replacement for the usta-shogird but a new kind of ustakhona - a house of masters - where the music of Uzbekistan survives and flourishes on its own terms.

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