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PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS IN TRANSCRIBING UZBEK FOLK MELODIES AND MAQOMS INTO STAFF NOTATION

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ABSTRACT:

The article is devoted to the problems that arise when Uzbek folk melodies and maqom compositions are written down in modern five-line staff notation. Staff notation developed historically from medieval neumes through Guido of Arezzo's lines and clefs and mensural notation to the modern system of staff, bar lines and time signatures, and it reflects the structure of Western European music: equal-tempered pitch, regular metre and clearly fixed durations. Uzbek traditional music, transmitted for centuries orally from master to pupil (ustoz–shogird), possesses features that this system does not fully capture, including flexible intonation, rich ornamentation, free rhythm in vocal sections, the cyclic structure of doira usuls and the particular role of the performer's interpretation. The article reviews the history of maqom notation from the works of V. A. Uspensky and Yunus Rajabiy to modern publications, classifies the main difficulties of transcription and proposes a set of solutions: a system of supplementary signs, the combination of prescriptive and descriptive notation, the use of audio and video recordings alongside scores and the application of digital notation tools. The results may be useful for musicologists, teachers and performers working with Uzbek musical heritage.

Introduction

Musical notation is a system of recording musical sounds by means of special signs. Its emergence was caused by a practical need: as melodies multiplied, it became necessary to

preserve them without loss, to transmit them to others and to perform them together. In Europe the earliest notation appeared in the ninth and tenth centuries in the form of neumes, which indicated only the general direction of a melody. In the eleventh century Guido of Arezzo introduced staff lines and clefs and named the degrees ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la; later ut was replaced by do and si was added. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries mensural notation fixed the durations of sounds, and by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the five-line staff, bar lines and time signatures had become established. The modern notation system is therefore the result of a long evolution closely tied to the development of European polyphony and harmony.

Uzbek music, by contrast, was preserved for many centuries mainly through oral tradition. Melodies, songs and the large maqom cycles were passed from master to pupil by ear. Medieval scholars of Central Asia, including al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and Abdurahman Jami, wrote treatises on music theory and described modes and rhythmic cycles, and there existed historical systems of recording such as the tablature-like notation of Khiva (the so-called Khorezm tanbur notation), but staff notation became widespread in the region only in the twentieth century. Writing down folk melodies and maqoms in staff notation has made it possible to preserve them, to study them and to transmit them to new generations. At the same time it has raised a serious question: to what extent can a system created for one musical culture adequately represent another?

The relevance of this question has increased in connection with the state programme for the development of the art of Uzbek national maqom, adopted by the Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017, and the regular organisation of the International Maqom Art Forum in Shahrisabz. Educational institutions need reliable scores for teaching, and performers and researchers need editions that reflect the living tradition as accurately as possible. The purpose of this article is to identify the main problems of transcribing Uzbek folk melodies and maqoms into staff notation and to propose ways of solving them.

Literature review

The first systematic notation of the Bukhara Shashmaqom was made by the Russian composer and ethnographer V. A. Uspensky, who recorded the maqoms from the performance of the tanbur player Ota Jalol Nosirov and published them in 1924. Abdurauf Fitrat, in his book on Uzbek classical music and its history (1927), discussed the structure of the maqoms and stressed the importance of recording them. The most complete edition was prepared by the outstanding musician and scholar Yunus Rajabiy, whose six-volume Shashmaqom was published in 1966–1975; his multi-volume collection of Uzbek folk music also contains a vast body of transcribed songs and instrumental pieces. Later the Shashmaqom was published in new editions and studied by O. Matyakubov, F. Karomatov and other researchers. Karomatov's study of Uzbek instrumental music provides a detailed analysis of genres, instruments and usuls.

In international ethnomusicology the problem of transcription has been discussed for a long time. C. Seeger distinguished prescriptive notation, which tells the performer how to produce music, from descriptive notation, which records how a particular performance actually sounded.

He argued that Western staff notation is mainly prescriptive and presupposes a performer who knows the tradition. T. Ellingson analysed the history of transcription and showed that every transcription is an interpretation shaped by the transcriber's purposes and cultural background. B. Nettl noted that transcription inevitably simplifies music but remains an indispensable tool of analysis. T. Levin's study of Central Asian music demonstrated the deep connection between the maqom tradition and the oral teaching process. Practical guides to modern notation, such as the works of E. Gould and G. Read, describe the standard system of signs, which serves as the starting point for any adaptation.

Materials and methods

The study uses historical and comparative analysis of published notations of Uzbek folk music and the Shashmaqom; theoretical analysis of ethnomusicological literature on transcription; a comparison of the expressive means of Uzbek traditional music with the capacities of standard staff notation; and generalisation of the experience of teaching music notation and solfeggio in music schools and higher education institutions. The material includes the editions of Uspensky and Rajabiy, as well as general principles of modern notation described in reference literature.

Results and discussion

The analysis made it possible to identify five main groups of problems that arise when Uzbek traditional music is transcribed into staff notation. They are summarised in Table 1.

Problem	Essence	Consequence in a score
Intonation	some degrees are performed with pitches that deviate from equal temperament	the score shows only an approximate pitch
Ornamentation	melodies are rich in grace notes, slides, trills and vocal nuances (nola, qochirim)	the score is either overloaded or simplified
Free rhythm	vocal sections, especially the opening phrases, have flexible durations	strict note values distort the character
Usul structure	the doira usul forms a long cyclic pattern that does not always coincide with bar lines	metre may be written inconsistently
Interpretation	each master performs the same melody differently	one score cannot represent the whole tradition

Table 1. Main problems in transcribing Uzbek traditional music

The first problem concerns intonation. Standard staff notation, together with the system of alteration signs (sharp, flat and natural), is designed for twelve-tone equal temperament, in which the octave is divided into twelve equal semitones. In Uzbek maqom performance, as many musicians and researchers note, certain degrees, especially in particular modal contexts, are performed slightly higher or lower than the equal-tempered pitch. Fretted instruments such as the tanbur and dutar have fret positions that reflect the tradition, and singers follow the intonation of their masters. When such music is written with ordinary signs, the score suggests a pitch that does not match the actual sounding.

The second problem is ornamentation. Uzbek vocal and instrumental performance contains numerous melismas, grace notes, slides, vibrato and specific vocal techniques. Some of them can be written with standard signs for grace notes, trills and mordents, but many nuances have no precise equivalent. If the transcriber tries to write down every detail, the score becomes difficult to read; if the ornaments are omitted, the score loses the stylistic identity of the music. Rajabiy in his editions often chose a middle path, recording the main melodic line and the most characteristic ornaments.

The third problem is connected with rhythm. Many vocal sections of the maqoms, especially introductory phrases and the culminating high-register passages (avj), are performed with flexible rhythm, in which durations depend on the text, breathing and expressive intention of the singer. Staff notation requires each sound to be assigned an exact value, such as a quarter or an eighth note. As a result, the written rhythm can look much more regular than the performed one, and a student who reads the score literally may produce a mechanical performance.

The fourth problem concerns metre. In European music the metre is indicated by a time signature and organised by bar lines that separate measures with regular strong and weak beats. In Uzbek classical music the rhythmic foundation is the usul, a cyclic pattern of strokes on the doira consisting of low central sounds and high rim sounds. An usul cycle may be long and may contain an asymmetric internal structure. When transcribers try to fit it into ordinary measures, they sometimes use changing time signatures or long composite measures, and different editions may notate the same usul in different ways.

The fifth problem is the diversity of interpretations. In the oral tradition there is no single "correct" version of a maqom: each school and each master has its own variant. A printed score inevitably fixes one version and may be perceived as the only authoritative one. This contradicts the living nature of the tradition, in which variation and improvisation within established rules are essential.

On the basis of the analysis, a set of solutions is proposed. They do not reject staff notation but adapt it to the character of the music and supplement it with other means (Table 2).

Solution	Content
Supplementary signs	arrows or small signs above notes to indicate raised or lowered intonation; special signs for characteristic ornaments, explained in a legend
Two-level notation	a simplified main score for reading and learning, accompanied by a detailed descriptive transcription of a specific performance
Notation of usul	writing the doira usul on a separate rhythmic line with stroke syllables above the melody, so that the relation between melody and usul is visible
Audio and video support	publishing scores together with recordings of recognised masters, with QR codes or links in the edition
Variant editions	presenting several versions of the same piece by different performers or schools
Digital tools	using notation software and audio analysis to measure pitch and timing and to create interactive scores

Table 2. Proposed solutions for transcribing Uzbek traditional music

The use of supplementary signs is already common in the notation of many non-European traditions and of contemporary music, where arrows, quarter-tone accidentals and other symbols indicate microtonal deviations. The essential condition is that each sign is clearly explained in the preface of the edition and used consistently.

Two-level notation follows Seeger's distinction between prescriptive and descriptive writing. A simplified prescriptive score is useful for teaching, solfeggio exercises and the initial study of a piece, while a detailed descriptive transcription of a concrete performance serves research and advanced performers. Together they show both the structural basis of the music and its living sound.

Notating the usul on a separate line is especially important for education. When the doira pattern is written under or above the melody with stroke syllables, students see how the melodic phrases are related to the rhythmic cycle and do not confuse the usul with a European metre. This approach also connects the study of notation with the study of rhythm, metre and measure in the music theory course.

The publication of scores with audio and video recordings is perhaps the most effective solution in modern conditions. Notation then becomes not a replacement for oral transmission but

a supplement to it: the student learns the structure from the score and the style from the recording. Digital editions with links or QR codes make this approach inexpensive and accessible.

Finally, digital tools open new possibilities. Pitch-analysis software can measure the actual intonation of a performer and help to choose appropriate signs; notation programs make it possible to create interactive scores in which the listener can switch between versions; and online archives can preserve both transcriptions and recordings. These tools must be used carefully, with the participation of experienced performers, so that technical measurement does not replace the musical understanding of the tradition.

For music education, the results suggest several practical conclusions. When teaching music notation, it is useful to explain to students not only the rules of standard notation but also its historical origin and limitations. Exercises on transcribing short Uzbek folk melodies by ear can be included in solfeggio classes; they develop hearing and at the same time show students the problems discussed above. Students should also be taught to read existing editions critically, comparing the score with recordings.

Conclusion

Staff notation is a powerful tool that has played a major role in preserving and studying Uzbek folk music and the Shashmaqom. Thanks to the work of Uspensky, Rajabiy and later scholars, a large part of the national heritage has been written down and made available for teaching and research. At the same time, the system developed for European music does not fully reflect such features of Uzbek traditional music as specific intonation, ornamentation, free rhythm, the cyclic usul structure and the variety of performers' interpretations. These problems can be solved not by abandoning staff notation but by adapting it: introducing supplementary signs, combining simplified and detailed transcriptions, writing the usul on a separate line, publishing scores together with recordings, presenting variant versions and applying digital tools. Such an approach makes it possible to preserve the national musical heritage more faithfully and to use it more effectively in music education.

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