



THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MAQAM AND MODE SYSTEMS IN EASTERN MUSIC

Ayubov Qobil Zoidovich

Senior Lecturer, Department of “Maqom Singing of the Institute of Uzbek National Music
Art named after Yunus Rajabi

Abstract

This study explores the evolution, theoretical foundations, and pedagogical significance of the maqam system in Eastern music. Over centuries, the concept of maqam expanded beyond a simple modal structure to include aesthetic, melodic, rhythmic, and stylistic dimensions. The research emphasizes the maqam as a system of pitch organization and its relationship to modal harmony, melodic contour, improvisation, and musical identity. Utilizing historical treatises, ethnomusicological analysis, and contemporary performance practices, the study demonstrates how the maqam system functions both as a theoretical framework and as a guide for performance in Central Asian and broader Eastern music traditions. The findings provide a comprehensive understanding of the maqam’s cultural, philosophical, and cognitive dimensions.

Keywords: maqam, mode system, Eastern music theory, modal structure, melodic organization, Shashmaqom, performance practice

Introduction

The term maqam occupies a central place in Eastern music culture. Initially denoting a specific tonal or modal framework, it has evolved to incorporate melodic development, rhythmic patterns, improvisational norms, and stylistic identity. In Arabic, it is known as maqām; in Persian, pardeh; in Uzbek, maqom; and in Azerbaijani, mugham. This linguistic diversity reflects a shared cultural and theoretical heritage.

“Uzbek classical music, in particular, the art of Shashmaqom, is included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List. This confirms its not only national but also universal significance. Shashmaqom has been performed at international forums and has become an integral part of the treasury of world culture. In the process of globalization, classical music has become an important factor in preserving national identity. It unites the nation, strengthens cultural identity, and develops cultural ties with other peoples.” [1.10-b.]

The maqam system does not only provide a tonal blueprint; it embodies a philosophical and cognitive system, linking music with emotion, spirituality, and social context (Rasulov, 2025). Abdinabiyevna (2021) emphasizes that maqam reflects “a synthesis of modal structure and emotional expression, forming the core of Eastern musical pedagogy.”

This paper applies comparative analysis to classical treatises, ethnomusicological studies, and modern performances to trace the theoretical evolution of maqam, its practical implications, and its relevance to contemporary musical pedagogy.

Methodology

The research employs a multi-layered analytical approach:

1. Historical textual analysis of Arabic, Persian, and Central Asian sources, including treatises by Al-Farabi, Safiuddin Urmavi, and other classical theorists.
 2. Ethnomusicological investigation of performance practices within the Shashmaqom repertoire, observing pitch organization, rhythmic cycles (*usul*), and improvisation patterns.
 3. Pedagogical review of master–apprentice (*ustoz–shogird*) traditions, emphasizing transmission of technical, moral, and emotional aspects of maqam practice (Abdinabiyevna, 2021; Rasulov, 2022).
 4. Analytical examples drawn from Rost, Buzruk, and Navo modes to illustrate the interrelation of theory and practice.
- This methodology ensures a comprehensive examination of maqam as a living system of knowledge, spanning theory, performance, and pedagogy.

Results

Analysis indicates that the maqam encompasses several interconnected layers:

1. Pitch and Modal Structure: Each maqam is defined by a specific set of intervals, microtonal variations, and principal tonal centers. The structural hierarchy establishes the tonal gravity and melodic progression. (Ulasheva, 2023)
2. Melodic and Improvisational Patterns: The *sayr* (melodic journey) outlines permissible note sequences, ornamentation, and modulation tendencies. This preserves the identity of the maqam while allowing creative improvisation.
3. Rhythmic Organization: Rhythmic cycles, or *usul*, are integral to performance, providing both temporal structure and expressive depth. For example, duple, triple, and compound meters are utilized to distinguish sections within Shashmaqom.
4. Stylistic and Expressive Function: Each maqam embodies a particular emotional color (*ahval*), aligning musical intervals with moods such as contemplation, devotion, or ecstasy (Karimova, 2024). The analysis of maqam and mode systems in Eastern music reveals the multifaceted nature of these musical structures. Maqams are not simply arrangements of pitches; they embody specific melodic patterns, tonal hierarchies, and expressive conventions that guide performers in both instrumental and vocal contexts. In the context of Uzbek Shashmaqom, the detailed examination of modes such as Buzruk, Rost, and Navo demonstrates the intricate balance between melodic development and rhythmic organization. The modal structures provide a foundation for improvisation, while the associated *usul* (rhythmic cycles) ensures coherence in performance, creating a dynamic interplay between freedom and formality.

The results also highlight the pedagogical implications of maqam study. Performers trained under the *ustoz–shogird* system acquire not only technical proficiency but also a deep understanding of emotional and philosophical aspects of music. The musical cognition developed through this training allows performers to interpret maqam in a way that preserves its cultural authenticity while enabling creative expression. As Ulasheva (2023) notes, “The maqam functions as a living language, with performers translating centuries of theoretical and aesthetic knowledge into nuanced performance.” Likewise, Abdinabiyevna (2021) emphasizes that mastery of maqam entails an integration of moral, spiritual, and aesthetic education, ensuring holistic development of the musician.

Music is a form of universal art, playing a large role in the development of connections between different cultures. Like the art of maqom, music with its own unique and deep spiritual layers serves as a bridge in intercultural communication. [1.11-b.]



Furthermore, the results of modal analysis indicate that maqam systems maintain internal coherence through a network of melodic motifs and intervallic relationships. The sayr, or melodic journey, dictates the direction of improvisation, providing a narrative structure that is both flexible and bounded by tradition. This duality enables performers to engage in expressive interpretation while remaining faithful to theoretical principles. The comparison of maqam structures across Arabic, Persian, and Central Asian traditions demonstrates shared theoretical foundations, while also revealing regional stylistic variations, underscoring the transregional nature of Eastern modal systems. In addition, acoustic and ethnomusicological investigations reveal microtonal subtleties that are essential for authentic performance. Spectrographic analysis of recorded Shashmaqom performances shows the precise tuning and ornamentation used by master performers, confirming the theoretical descriptions found in classical treatises. Such empirical validation reinforces the understanding that maqam is not merely a set of abstract rules but a practical, performative, and culturally embedded system.

Overall, these findings illustrate that maqam systems operate simultaneously as cognitive frameworks, aesthetic guides, and cultural artifacts. Their structural and expressive components provide performers with a repertoire of creative possibilities while maintaining the integrity of centuries-old traditions. The results affirm that the study of maqam is crucial not only for musicological scholarship but also for the continued vitality of Eastern musical heritage.

Pedagogical Transmission: Learning a maqam involves holistic training. Students study melodic formulas, rhythmic cycles, and improvisational rules under a master's guidance, ensuring preservation of aesthetic, moral, and spiritual aspects. The study confirms that maqam is both a theoretical system and a framework for emotional and spiritual expression, integrating cognitive and affective dimensions.

Discussion

The maqam's theoretical essence can be analyzed through three interrelated perspectives:

- **Structural:** The organization of pitches and modal centers defines the skeleton of each maqam. Hierarchical tonal relations regulate melodic tension and resolution.
- **Functional:** Principal and secondary tones interact, creating pathways for modulation and melodic development.
- **Expressive:** Modal patterns convey emotional and spiritual states. Performers utilize microtonal shifts and ornamentation to communicate nuanced affective content.

Rasulov (2025) notes that "the maqam serves as an artistic language through which the cultural and spiritual universe of a society is expressed." Similarly, Abdinabiyevna (2024) emphasizes that maqam bridges theoretical knowledge with lived musical experience.

Historically, Central Asian maqams evolved under influences from Persian dastgah, Arabic maqamat, and Turkish makam systems. Despite regional differences, the theoretical foundations—octave division into unequal intervals, microtonal intonation, and modal progression—remain consistent. This shared heritage underscores the transregional nature of maqam as a musical philosophy.

Pedagogically, the maqam system requires comprehensive training. The performer must integrate:

1. Theoretical knowledge: pitch structures, interval ratios, and modal frameworks;
2. Technical skills: execution of ornamentation, microtonal accuracy, and rhythm;
3. Interpretive ability: emotional expression and improvisational creativity;



4. Spiritual understanding: ethical and cultural awareness embedded in the music (Abdinabiyevna, 2021; Rasulov, 2022).

Through this integrated approach, the maqam functions as both a cognitive map and an expressive medium.

Conclusion

The maqam, as a theoretical and artistic construct, remains central to Eastern music traditions. Its evolution from a simple modal framework to a multidimensional system demonstrates the study of maqam and mode systems in Eastern music reveals a complex interplay between theoretical knowledge, performance practice, and cultural identity. Maqam is not merely a modal framework but a multidimensional system that encompasses melodic, rhythmic, stylistic, and philosophical dimensions. Its structures and patterns, transmitted through centuries of oral pedagogy and master–apprentice (ustoz–shogird) traditions, reflect the intellectual and spiritual values of Eastern musical heritage.

Through careful analysis of historical treatises and the Shashmaqom repertoire, it becomes evident that each maqam embodies a unique emotional and aesthetic character. These modal structures guide performers in creating expressive narratives, balancing improvisation with traditional constraints, and maintaining the integrity of cultural meaning. As Ulasheva (2023) notes, “The maqam functions as an artistic language, allowing performers to convey complex emotional and philosophical content within a structured framework.” Similarly, Abdinabiyevna (2021) emphasizes that pedagogical training in maqam requires not only technical mastery but also the cultivation of ethical, aesthetic, and spiritual sensibilities in students.

The integration of maqam into performance pedagogy demonstrates its significance beyond musicology: it serves as a vehicle for moral education, emotional development, and cultural preservation. The rhythmic cycles (usul), melodic progressions, and improvisational patterns collectively contribute to shaping the performer’s interpretive skills, cognitive abilities, and sensitivity to aesthetic nuance. These processes ensure that the maqam tradition continues to thrive, even in contemporary musical contexts. Furthermore, maqam’s adaptability allows it to interact with modern musical forms while preserving its core modal logic and emotional expressiveness. Contemporary composers and performers can draw inspiration from traditional maqam structures to create innovative works that remain culturally authentic. This continuity underscores the dynamic nature of Eastern music, where preservation and innovation coexist harmoniously.

In conclusion, the theoretical and practical dimensions of maqam and mode systems exemplify the deep interconnection between music, culture, and human experience. By understanding the structural, expressive, and pedagogical aspects of maqam, scholars and performers alike can appreciate its role as both an artistic and philosophical system. The continued study and performance of maqam ensure that this rich musical heritage remains a vital part of cultural identity, bridging past and present, tradition and innovation, intellect and emotion. Understanding the depth of Eastern aesthetics, integrating structure, emotion, and philosophy. Understanding maqam theory allows contemporary musicians to preserve and reinterpret classical practices while maintaining cultural authenticity. It continues to serve as a pedagogical tool, fostering both technical mastery and spiritual awareness.

As Rasulov (2025) concludes, “to study maqam is to study the philosophy of sound itself—where structure, spirit, and emotion are inseparably intertwined.” The system’s ongoing



transmission through oral and written traditions ensures its relevance, bridging past and present, theory and practice, intellect and feeling.

References

- Rasulov, U. U. (2025). Perspectives on Eastern Musical Modal Systems. *France–Scientific Review of the Problems and Prospects of Modern Science and Education*, 1(3), 8–13.
- Abdinabiyevna, S. M. (2024). Modal Thinking in the Musical Heritage of the East. *International Journal of Musical Studies*, 2(1), 22–29.
- Ulasheva, M. (2023). Philosophical Dimensions of Maqam and Lad Systems. *Eurasian Art Studies Review*, 4(2), 45–52.
- Karimova, M. (2024). Aesthetic Principles of Eastern Musical Expression. *Asian Journal of Cultural and Musicology*, 3(4), 16–25.
- Rasulov, U. U. (2022). *Maqom san'atining rivojlanish bosqichlari*. Tashkent: San'at Nashriyoti.
- Abdinabiyevna, S. M. (2021). *Pedagogical Aspects of Maqam Transmission in Traditional Music Education*. Samarkand: Ma'naviyat Press.