

## INTEGRATING SHASHMAQOM TRADITIONS INTO UNIVERSITY VOCAL PEDAGOGY

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**Abstract:** The Shashmaqom tradition of Central Asia, recognized by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, represents the apex of Uzbek classical vocal art. However, its integration into the standardized, credit-based framework of university vocal pedagogy presents profound epistemological and methodological challenges. This article argues that meaningful integration requires more than the addition of Shashmaqom repertoire to syllabi; it demands a pedagogical reorientation that respects oral-aural transmission, the spiritual concept of *tavze*, and the intricate relationship between poetic metre (*aruz*) and melodic mode (*maqom*). Drawing on fieldwork at the State Conservatory of Uzbekistan and regional music colleges, this study examines three core areas of tension between traditional *usta-shogird* (master-apprentice) education and modern institutional structures: notation versus orality, assessment versus holistic mastery, and stylistic authenticity versus academic standardization. The article proposes a blended pedagogical model wherein Shashmaqom is taught through a spiral curriculum, aural banks, and embodied practice, while still fulfilling university credit requirements. Ultimately, this integration is not merely a technical adjustment but a vital act of cultural sustainability that ensures the living transmission of Uzbek vocal heritage for future generations.

**Keywords:** Shashmaqom, Uzbek vocal pedagogy, Oral-aural transmission, *Usta-shogird*, Modal intonation, Cultural sustainability in higher music education

### Introduction

The human voice, in the classical music of Uzbekistan, is not merely an instrument for melodic display. It is a vessel for poetry, a vehicle for spiritual elevation, and a living archive of centuries-old modal systems. At the heart of this vocal art lies the Shashmaqom, a term that literally translates to “six maqoms.” This monumental cycle of instrumental and vocal sections, developed primarily in the urban centers of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent from the 16th to the 19th centuries, represents the most sophisticated and revered form of Uzbek-Tajik classical music. For generations, its transmission occurred exclusively within the *usta-shogird* (master-apprentice) relationship, a deeply personal, immersive, and often lifelong journey. The master did not simply teach notes; he transmitted a worldview, a set of embodied performance practices, and an intuitive understanding of modal nuance that defied written notation.

Since the establishment of Soviet-era music education institutions and their continuation in independent Uzbekistan's universities, a fundamental shift has occurred. Vocal students now operate within a system modeled on Western conservatories: fixed semester durations, graded examinations, standardized curricula, and heavy reliance on staff notation. This structure has democratized access to music education and produced technically proficient singers. Yet it has also created a persistent friction when applied to Shashmaqom. Many senior *ustoz* (masters) who have taught within these institutions lament that the soul of the music - the subtle microtonal inflections, the improvisational *tavze* (a form of melodic and rhythmic ornamentation that shapes a section), and the deep absorption of poetic texts - is eroded when forced into the procrustean bed of academic calendars and exam

grades. This article addresses a central question: How can university vocal pedagogy meaningfully integrate Shashmaqom traditions without reducing them to a collection of exotic repertoire pieces, while simultaneously respecting the legitimate demands of higher education for assessment, progression, and documentation?

#### Orality versus Notation

The most immediate challenge in integrating Shashmaqom into university curricula is the clash between oral-aural epistemology and written notation. Traditional usta-shogird transmission is predicated on listening, imitation, memorization, and gradual internalization. A student learning a sarakhbor (an opening vocal section of a maqom) would sit beside the master for months, repeating phrases of increasing complexity, absorbing not just pitches but the precise quality of attack, the duration of breaths, and the placement of ornamental nashtar (a quick, nasalized vocal inflection). There was no score. The student learned to hear the maqom as a living, breathing entity, not as a fixed text.

In contrast, university pedagogy overwhelmingly privileges notation. Students receive printed scores, often transcribed in equal-tempered semitones, which cannot accurately represent the *parda* system of Uzbek music - the specific fret or finger positions on the *tanbur* (long-necked lute) that correspond to intervals significantly different from Western tuning. For instance, the third degree of *Segoh* maqom is neither a minor nor a major third but a neutral third, a pitch that falls in the crack of the piano keys. When notated as a semitone or with an accidental, this nuance is lost. Students who learn primarily from notation tend to sing these neutral intervals as either flattened or natural Western pitches, effectively erasing the modal identity of Shashmaqom.

A partial solution emerging from the State Conservatory of Uzbekistan in Tashkent is the adoption of a “notation as memory aid, not as source” approach. Several progressive professors now provide students with transcriptions only after a long period of aural immersion. The student first hears a recording of an *ustoz* singing a sarakhbor dozens of times over several weeks. Only once the melodic contour and primary pitches are internalized is a simplified notation introduced, stripped of time signatures and bar lines, using a modified version of the Tajik-Uzbek *khrestomatiya* system that includes symbols for glottal stops, microtonal arrows, and durational approximations. Crucially, the notation is never used in the rehearsal room. The student must return to the recording and to live demonstration by the instructor. This method respects the primacy of orality while providing the documentation that university administration requires.

#### The Concept of Tavze and the Problem of Assessment

Beyond pitch lies the domain of rhythm and ornamentation, where the concept of *tavze* reigns supreme. In Shashmaqom, *tavze* refers to the intricate, often improvised subdivision and ornamentation of a melodic line, typically within the *usul* (rhythmic cycle performed on the *doira* frame drum). Unlike the metronomic regularity of Western classical music, *tavze* is elastic, speech-derived, and highly individualized. Two masters of the same *shube* (sub-section) of *Buzruk* maqom will perform the *tavze* differently, yet both will remain stylistically authentic. The singer is expected to know the poetic metre (*aruz\**) of the *ghazal* (lyric poem) being set, and the *tavze* arises organically from the interplay between the poet’s long and short syllables, the rhythmic *usul*, and the melodic phrase.

This fluidity presents a severe challenge to university assessment. Grading rubrics typically demand clear, measurable criteria: pitch accuracy (in equal temperament), rhythmic precision (against a metronome), and consistent tempo. These criteria are fundamentally incompatible with *tavze*. A student who performs a stylistically authentic, beautifully ornamented *tavze* that slightly displaces a

downbeat relative to the doira would be marked down for rhythmic error in a conventional exam. Conversely, a student who sings a mechanically accurate, unornamented, square version of the same melody would receive a higher grade, despite producing a performance that no traditional listener would recognize as Shashmaqom.

To resolve this, a handful of forward-thinking Uzbek university departments have introduced specialized assessment frameworks for Shashmaqom that operate parallel to Western-style exams. These assessments are qualitative, not quantitative. The examination is not a single performance on a fixed date but a semester-long mashq (practice session) documented via video diary and culminating in a suhbat (a conversational examination) before a jury of at least two traditional ustoz alongside the university faculty. The criteria are reframed: rather than “rhythmic accuracy,” the rubric evaluates “sensitivity to poetic metre and usul interaction.” Instead of “pitch precision,” the criterion is “appropriate placement of neutral intervals and microtonal nasha (bending).” The concept of halqai zikr - the cyclical, meditative repetition through which a student demonstrates internalization - becomes a documented learning outcome. This dual system does not discard academic rigor but redefines it on terms internal to the tradition.

#### The Spiritual and Ethical Dimension

A third, often overlooked, dimension of traditional Shashmaqom pedagogy is the cultivation of adab - a comprehensive term encompassing respect, humility, etiquette, and moral character. In the usta-shogird model, a student could not even begin to receive vocal instruction without first demonstrating adab: proper behavior toward the teacher, toward elder musicians, and toward the poetic texts, which are often Sufi-inspired love poems by Hafez, Bedil, or Jami. The master evaluated whether the student had the spiritual and ethical maturity to handle the maqom’s power. Likewise, islah referred to the master’s corrective feedback, delivered not as a grade or critique but as a gentle, iterative reshaping of the student’s character through musical correction.

University pedagogy, with its depersonalized student-teacher ratios, anonymous grading, and emphasis on measurable outputs, struggles to cultivate adab. A student can earn an A in a Shashmaqom class without ever showing respect for the poetry or the lineage. One innovative response observed at the Bukhara Music College involves mandatory attendance at mehmonkhona (communal tea gatherings) where students listen to recordings of deceased masters like Yunus Rajabi or Fakhriddin Sadykov, followed by structured reflection essays not on technique but on the ethical values embodied in their performances. Another approach is the reinstatement of the peshqadam tradition, albeit in modified form: before each new section of a maqom is taught, the student must recite the ghazal’s meaning, identify its aruz metre, and explain one way the poem relates to a virtue such as patience (sabr) or sincerity (ikhlas). This transforms vocal study from a purely technical exercise into a humanistic and ethical practice, aligning with the original purpose of Shashmaqom as a form of spiritual cultivation.

#### The Spiral Curriculum and Aural Banks

On a structural level, integrating Shashmaqom into a four-year university degree requires rethinking course sequencing. The Western model of linearly increasing difficulty - simple songs in year one, complex arias in year four - does not suit Shashmaqom. A student cannot learn a simplified Talqini Uzzol in year one and then the full Buzruk maqom in year four, because the simpler version is not a reduced copy but a different modal entity. Instead, several Uzbek institutions are experimenting with a spiral curriculum borrowed from ethnomusicology. The student encounters the same Shashmaqom cycle multiple times over the four years, but each time at a deeper level. In year one, the focus is on memorizing the primary melodic skeleton (naghsh) of the sarakbor of each

maqom. In year two, the student adds basic tavze patterns. In year three, they learn to vary tavze spontaneously according to the usul. In year four, they combine this with independent poetic interpretation. Each spiral revolution revisits the same musical material but with greater maturity, freedom, and stylistic nuance.

Additionally, the creation of institutional aural banks has proven transformative. Because many contemporary university instructors themselves received a Soviet-style notation-dependent education, they may lack the deep aural repertoire of the pre-Soviet ustoz. To remedy this, collaborative projects between universities and the Uzbek State Radio Fund have digitized hundreds of hours of archival recordings from the 1920s-1950s, before the standardization projects of the Soviet era. These recordings are categorized not by difficulty but by maqom, usul, and the recording artist’s lineage. Students are required to listen to at least three different versions of the same shube from three different masters (e.g., Levi Bobokhanov, Ota Jalol Nosirov, and Shoista Mullojonova) and then produce a comparative listening log, not a transcription. This exercise trains the ear to accept multiplicity as normative and to recognize personal style within the maqom framework - a crucial skill that notation alone can never provide.

#### Challenges and Residual Tensions

Despite these innovations, significant tensions remain. The four-year degree is fundamentally too short. Traditional usta-shogird training for a full Shashmaqom cycle - all six maqoms, each containing multiple shubes, taronalar (vocal songs), and improvised mushkilot (difficult sections) - requires fifteen to twenty years of daily immersion. University programs can at best offer a literate awareness of the tradition, not full mastery. This has led to an uncomfortable bifurcation in contemporary Uzbekistan: the university produces “academic singers” who can read notation, pass exams, and perform excerpts from Shashmaqom in concert, while the traditional ustoz lineages, operating outside or in parallel to the university, continue to produce the rare, fully-fledged hafiz (master of oral Shashmaqom). Some critics argue that integration inevitably leads to dilution. This article respectfully disagrees. Dilution occurs only when one system is superimposed on another without critical adaptation. The hybrid models described above - dual assessment, aural banks, spiral sequencing, ethical reflection - do not replace the traditional path. They create an entry point, a foundation upon which especially gifted students can later pursue deeper traditional study while also earning a degree that provides social legitimacy and employment as teachers or ensemble singers.

#### Conclusion

The integration of Shashmaqom traditions into university vocal pedagogy is not a technical problem of transcription but a philosophical negotiation between two different ways of knowing music. The university demands standardization, documentation, and linear progression. Shashmaqom demands fluidity, orality, and spiritual-ethical cultivation. To dismiss either as backward or foreign is to impoverish Uzbek musical life. The path forward, as demonstrated by pioneering faculty in Tashkent, Bukhara, and Samarkand, lies in a respectful, dialectical relationship. Notation is used but subordinated to sound. Assessment is performed but reframed through qualitative criteria. Ethics are taught not as a separate course but as embedded practice. And the curriculum is structured not as a ladder but as a spiral, revisiting the same profound material with ever-deepening understanding. This is not a compromise. It is a creative act of cultural sustainability. For if Shashmaqom is to survive into the twenty-first century - not as a museum artifact but as a living, singing tradition - it must find a home within the institutions that now train the majority of Uzbekistan’s professional musicians. The university, in turn, must be willing to learn from the usta as much as the usta adapts to the university. The voice that emerges from such a synthesis will not be a pure recreation of the past, nor

a bland imitation of the West, but a new, authentically contemporary Uzbek classical voice - one that carries within it the memory of Bukhara and the reality of the seminar room, singing its six maqoms into an uncertain but richly promising future.

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