FOSTERING ARTISTIC IDENTITY THROUGH UZBEK MUSIC PEDAGOGY AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL

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Abstract: Artistic identity, understood as the musician's sense of who they are in relation to their artistic heritage, their creative agency, and their professional community, is not automatically transmitted through technical training. A student may graduate from a university music program possessing considerable instrumental or vocal skill yet remain uncertain about their place within the Uzbek musical tradition or their capacity to contribute meaningfully to its future. This article argues that fostering artistic identity should be recognized as a central, explicit goal of Uzbek music pedagogy at the university level, rather than a hoped-for byproduct of skills acquisition. Drawing on theories of identity formation in educational psychology and ethnomusicology, as well as case studies from the State Conservatory of Uzbekistan and regional pedagogical universities, the article proposes that artistic identity emerges from the integration of three interconnected dimensions: historical continuity, creative agency, and community belonging. For each dimension, the article describes pedagogical practices that strengthen identity formation, including genealogical repertoire study, guided improvisation within maqom and folk frameworks, ensemble participation with intergenerational components, and reflective writing assignments that ask students to articulate their evolving relationship to Uzbek musical heritage. The article also addresses challenges specific to the Uzbek context, such as the lingering prestige of Western classical training, the fragmentation of traditional master-student lineages, and the pressure on students to achieve measurable performance outcomes at the expense of deeper identity work. The conclusion offers practical recommendations for curriculum design and assessment that prioritize artistic identity without sacrificing technical rigor.

Keywords: artistic identity, Uzbek music pedagogy, higher education, creative agency, historical continuity, community belonging

Introduction

What does it mean to be an Uzbek musician in the twenty-first century? For a university student who has grown up with global streaming platforms, who may speak Russian or English more comfortably than literary Uzbek, and whose exposure to traditional music might have come primarily through state-organized festivals rather than family or neighborhood gatherings, this question is not rhetorical. It is a genuine uncertainty that affects motivation, practice habits, career choices, and ultimately the quality of musical performance. A student who feels like an outsider to Uzbek musical tradition will approach learning as an act of mimicry, striving to reproduce sounds that seem foreign. A student who feels a deep, earned sense of belonging will approach learning as an act of inheritance, bringing their full creative and emotional self to the music. The difference between these two orientations is what this article calls artistic identity, and it argues that fostering such identity should be a primary objective of Uzbek music pedagogy at the university level.

The current structure of university music education in Uzbekistan, while producing technically proficient graduates, often neglects identity formation. Curricula are organized around skill domains: instrumental technique, ensemble playing, music theory, history, pedagogy. These are valuable and necessary. But they treat the student as a vessel to be filled with knowledge rather than a person to be

formed as a particular kind of musician. The assumption seems to be that artistic identity will emerge automatically from sufficient exposure to repertoire and technique. Evidence from student interviews conducted across three Uzbek universities suggests otherwise. Many students report feeling that they have learned to play or sing Uzbek music correctly but do not feel it as their own. They can execute a Shashmaqom section with accurate pitches and rhythms yet experience it as an exercise, not an expression. This gap between technical competence and personal ownership is the problem that a pedagogy of artistic identity seeks to close.

The Three Dimensions of Artistic Identity

To foster something, one must first understand its components. Drawing on existing research in music education psychology and adapting it to the Uzbek context, artistic identity can be understood as the integration of three dimensions. The first dimension is historical continuity, the musician's sense of being connected to a lineage of performers and composers who came before, not as distant historical figures but as living influences whose artistic choices resonate in the student's own playing. The second dimension is creative agency, the musician's confidence in their ability to make meaningful artistic decisions, including variations, interpretations, and original compositions, that are recognized as legitimate within the tradition. The third dimension is community belonging, the musician's sense of being recognized and valued by other musicians, teachers, and audiences who share the tradition. A student who possesses all three dimensions experiences Uzbek music not as an external requirement but as a central fact of their artistic self. They practice not because they must but because they have something to say through the music, and they know that other musicians will hear and respect that saying.

Each dimension can be fostered through specific pedagogical practices, and each dimension can also be damaged by common but misguided teaching approaches. For example, exclusive focus on error correction without attention to expressive intent damages creative agency. A student who hears nothing but criticism of their rhythm and pitch will eventually stop offering interpretive ideas, falling back on safe, mechanical reproduction. Similarly, a curriculum that presents Uzbek music only as finished masterpieces for emulation, without revealing the improvisational processes that produced them, damages historical continuity by making the tradition seem static and authored rather than dynamic and collective. The remainder of this article examines each dimension in depth, offering concrete pedagogical strategies for fostering it within the constraints of university teaching.

Fostering Historical Continuity Through Genealogical Repertoire Study

Historical continuity is not the same as historical knowledge. A student who can list the names of Yunus Rajabi, Turgun Alimatov, and Fakhriddin Sodiqov and recite their dates of birth and major compositions has historical knowledge but not necessarily historical continuity. Continuity requires the student to experience a personal link to these figures, to feel that their own fingers pressing the tanbur strings are continuing a line that those fingers began. One effective pedagogical strategy for fostering this feeling is genealogical repertoire study. Instead of teaching a piece as a static composition from a textbook, the teacher presents it as a transmission chain. The student learns who taught the piece to the teacher, who taught it to that teacher, and so on, as far back as the lineage can be traced. For many Uzbek pieces, this lineage can be surprisingly long. A tanbur piece taught today at the Tashkent Conservatory may trace back through the director to a student of Turgun Alimatov, who learned from his father, who learned in turn from a master in the Fergana Valley in the late nineteenth century. The student is not just learning notes. They are entering a chain of living relationships.

The teacher can make this lineage tangible by incorporating recordings of earlier performers into the learning process. Before teaching a piece, the teacher plays a recording of the student's own

teacher lineage from twenty or thirty years ago, when that teacher was a student themselves. Students report that hearing their teacher as a young musician, perhaps with less polished technique but palpable energy, humanizes the lineage. It shows that mastery is not a fixed state but a process, and that the student is simply at one stage of a journey that others have traveled before. The teacher can also assign students to research the lineage of a piece as a small project, interviewing older musicians, consulting archive recordings, and constructing a transmission map. This research project does more than build knowledge. It builds the student's sense of being a historian and steward of their own tradition, which is a core component of artistic identity.

Another powerful practice involves what might be called comparative generational listening. The student learns a short section of a Shashmaqom piece from a contemporary recording. Then the teacher provides an older recording of the same section, perhaps from a 1960s Soviet vinyl pressing. The student listens for differences in ornamentation, tempo, tuning, and phrasing. The teacher does not present the older version as correct and the newer as degraded, or vice versa. Instead, the teacher treats both as legitimate expressions of the same underlying musical structure, each shaped by its historical moment. The student then attempts to perform the section in the style of the older recording, then in the style of the newer recording, and finally in a personal style that synthesizes elements of both. This exercise teaches that tradition is not a single, frozen artifact but a continuous conversation across time. The student is not merely receiving the tradition but entering that conversation, which is the essence of historical continuity.

Fostering Creative Agency Through Guided Improvisation Within the System

Creative agency is perhaps the dimension most frequently undermined by conventional university music teaching. The emphasis on accurate reproduction of notated or memorized pieces, the time pressure of semester examinations, and the teacher's legitimate desire to maintain stylistic standards all push toward a pedagogy of imitation rather than creation. Yet the Uzbek musical tradition itself is deeply improvisatory. A maqom performance in its full, authentic form includes extensive sections of badihakorlik (improvisation) where the performer generates new melodic material within the modal and rhythmic framework of the maqom. Even within fixed compositions, performers are expected to add personal ornamentation and subtle rhythmic nuances that vary from one performance to the next. A student who never practices creative agency is being trained to perform a pale, frozen version of the tradition, not the tradition as it lives.

The solution is not to abandon imitation but to integrate graduated improvisation exercises throughout the curriculum, starting from the very first semester. In beginning instrumental instruction, even before the student can play a full piece, the teacher can introduce simple improvisation games. The teacher plays a short melodic fragment of perhaps three to five notes, using a specific usul. The student plays it back. Then the teacher asks the student to change one thing, perhaps the last note or the rhythm of the third beat. The student attempts the variation. The teacher then plays a new fragment that incorporates the student's variation, creating a call-and-response loop where student and teacher co-create. This is not free improvisation requiring genius. It is constrained improvisation with clear rules, and it can be done by beginners. Over time, the constraints loosen. By the third year, students should be able to take a known maqom section and improvise a thirty-second transition between two of its phrases, maintaining the maqom scale and usul throughout. By the fourth year, students should be able to perform a short solo improvisation on a given maqom without any pre-composed material, a skill directly transferable to professional performance contexts.

Assessment of creative agency requires a shift from product to process grading. A student's improvised solo should not be judged against an idealized model, because no model exists for an improvised solo. Instead, assessment should focus on whether the student's choices respect the

constraints of the maqom or folk style. Did they stay within the prescribed scale except for occasional, intentional modulations? Did their rhythmic variations respect the usul even when syncopated? Did their ornamentation follow the characteristic patterns of the regional style? These are objective criteria that a knowledgeable teacher can assess. The student should also write a brief reflective commentary explaining their improvisation choices: why they chose a particular melodic turn at a particular moment, how they responded to an unexpected shift in the ensemble, what they were listening for as they played. This reflective component deepens creative agency because it requires the student to articulate an artistic rationale, moving from intuitive to intentional creation.

Fostering Community Belonging Through Intergenerational Ensemble Participation

The third dimension of artistic identity is community belonging, the sense of being recognized and valued by other musicians. In the traditional usta-shogird system, belonging was automatic. The student was part of the master's circle, performed at family and community gatherings, and received direct feedback from audiences. In the university setting, however, many students experience their musical study as isolated. They practice alone in small rooms, perform primarily for graded examinations rather than live audiences, and interact mostly with peers who are at the same beginner or intermediate level. This isolation erodes community belonging, leaving students with the sense that their music making is a private exercise rather than a social act.

University pedagogy can counter this isolation by creating structured opportunities for intergenerational ensemble participation. The simplest and most powerful method is to invite older, non-university musicians to rehearse and perform with student ensembles. In many Uzbek cities, there exist retired or semi-professional folk musicians who learned their craft outside the conservatory system. These musicians may not read notation and may have idiosyncratic technique, but they possess deep stylistic knowledge and a lifetime of performance experience. A student string ensemble might invite an older doira player who learned his usuls from village weddings. The first rehearsal may be awkward, as the student's notated parts do not align with the elder's fluid sense of rhythm. This awkwardness is pedagogically valuable. The students must learn to listen, to adjust, to follow the elder's lead, and to find a common musical ground. After several rehearsals, the ensemble develops a hybrid approach that respects both the written parts and the oral tradition. The culminating public performance becomes a genuine community event, attended by the elder's family and friends as well as university faculty and students. The student leaves that performance feeling not like a student fulfilling a requirement but like a musician who has earned a place in a living community.

Beyond performance, community belonging can be fostered through peer mentoring structures within the university. Advanced students can be assigned to coach beginning students in specific folk or maqom pieces, not as teaching assistants but as musical elders in training. The advanced student must explain ornamentation choices, demonstrate phrasing, and offer constructive feedback. This act of teaching powerfully reinforces the advanced student's own sense of belonging, because they are positioned as a carrier of knowledge, not just a recipient. Meanwhile, the beginning student receives instruction from someone close to their own age and experience level, which can reduce the anxiety often associated with learning from a formidable master. The university can formalize this peer mentoring as a credit-bearing course in pedagogy, with faculty supervision to ensure quality and provide feedback to the mentors. Over four years, a student might cycle through roles from mentee to mentor, experiencing firsthand the continuity of transmission that defines artistic community.

Challenges Specific to the Uzbek Context

Fostering artistic identity through university pedagogy faces several challenges particular to contemporary Uzbekistan. The first is the lingering prestige of Western classical training. Many music students and their families still regard Western instruments and repertoire as the path to professional

success, while Uzbek traditional music is seen as a lesser, provincial pursuit. This hierarchy damages artistic identity by making students ashamed of their heritage. The pedagogical response is not to denigrate Western music but to demonstrate that mastery of Uzbek tradition requires comparable skill, knowledge, and creativity. Inviting guest artists who have achieved international recognition playing Uzbek music, such as the tanbur virtuoso Abduvali Abdurashidov, can shift student perceptions by showing that Uzbek musicianship commands global respect.

The second challenge is the fragmentation of traditional master-student lineages due to Soviet-era disruptions and post-Soviet migration. Many of the great twentieth-century masters have died without training successors, and their lineages have gaps or uncertainties. A student who tries to trace the genealogy of a piece may hit a dead end in the 1940s or 1950s, when oral transmission was interrupted or documentation was lost. Rather than ignoring this fragmentation, the teacher can make it an object of study. Students can be assigned to interview elderly community members, search regional archives, and reconstruct lineages as best they can. The gaps become research problems rather than failures, turning the student into an active participant in the work of repair and recovery. This is a different kind of historical continuity, one based not on unbroken transmission but on conscious reconstruction, and it can foster a deeper, more critical artistic identity than passive inheritance.

The third challenge is institutional pressure for measurable outcomes. University administrators expect clear metrics such as recital completion rates, examination scores, and student retention. Artistic identity is difficult to measure, and therefore easy to ignore. The solution is to develop proxy metrics that correlate with identity formation without reducing it to a number. For historical continuity, the metric might be the student's ability to articulate the lineage of three pieces in a recorded oral examination. For creative agency, the metric might be the submission of three recorded improvisations with written commentaries, rated on adherence to stylistic constraints. For community belonging, the metric might be attendance and active participation in intergenerational ensembles, tracked through rehearsal logs and peer evaluations. These metrics are not perfect, but they are better than the current system, which measures nothing related to artistic identity at all.

Conclusion

Fostering artistic identity through Uzbek music pedagogy at the university level is not an addition to the curriculum. It is a reorientation of the entire curriculum. Every choice about repertoire, every teaching method, every assessment design, and every extracurricular opportunity either strengthens or weakens students' sense of historical continuity, creative agency, and community belonging. Too much current practice weakens these dimensions, producing graduates who can reproduce sounds but do not feel them as their own. The pedagogical strategies described in this article, genealogical repertoire study, graduated improvisation exercises, intergenerational ensemble participation, peer mentoring, and reflective commentary, are all feasible within existing university structures. They require no additional funding, only a shift in teacher training and curriculum design. What they do require is a conviction that technical proficiency without artistic identity is a hollow achievement. The goal of Uzbek music pedagogy should not be to produce students who can play like someone else. It should be to produce musicians who can play as themselves, drawing on their heritage with confidence and contributing to it with creativity. That is artistic identity, and it is worth fostering.

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