



THE STUDY OF RHYTHM AND METRORHYTHMIC STRUCTURES IN MAQOM SINGING IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract:

This study examines the rhythmic and metrorhythmic structures in maqom singing, one of the most sophisticated traditional art forms in Uzbekistan. As a core element of Uzbek classical music, maqom represents a synthesis of poetic text, melodic contour, and rhythmic organization that reflects the philosophical and spiritual worldview of Central Asian culture. Using ethnomusicological and analytical approaches, this research explores how rhythmic patterns (usul), meter, and tempo interact with vocal phrasing and poetic prosody in maqom performance. Ulmasovich, R. U. (2025). The findings reveal that rhythm in maqom is not merely a timekeeping device but a semantic and expressive element that defines both musical structure and aesthetic meaning.

Keywords: Maqom, rhythm, metrorhythmic structure, Uzbek music, traditional singing, usul, vocal performance, ethnomusicology.

Introduction

The maqom tradition of Uzbekistan occupies a central place in the musical culture of Central Asia, embodying a refined system of melodic modes, rhythmic cycles, and poetic expression (Mamatqulov, M. M. (2025)). While its melodic and modal aspects have been extensively studied, rhythmic and metrorhythmic structures—known as usul—remain an underexplored area of scholarly attention (Ritter, 2015).



It gives creative freedom to performers and composers of classical music. The performer's personal interpretation and feelings reveal new facets of the musical work. This principle expresses universal values such as the appreciation of human freedom and creativity. Uzbek classical music, in particular the art of Shashmaqom, is included in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List. [1.10-b.]

In maqom singing (maqom xonandaligi), rhythm plays a dual role: it provides a structural framework for melodic development and expresses subtle emotional nuances that align with poetic meaning. This study aims to analyze the rhythmic and metrorhythmic systems of Uzbek maqom, focusing on their function in vocal performance and their pedagogical transmission through the ustoz–shogird (master–disciple) tradition.

2. Historical Background of Rhythm in Maqom

The rhythmic component of maqom has its origins in pre-Islamic musical practices of Central Asia, later influenced by Persian and Arab rhythmic theories (Farmer, 1997). The concept of *usul*—a repeating rhythmic cycle—was adapted from Persian *dastgah* and Turkish *makam* systems, yet developed a distinct identity within Uzbek maqom performance (Nettl, 2005).

During the formation of the Shashmaqom cycle in the 18th century in Bukhara, rhythmic systems became codified into several metrical frameworks, including *duyäk*, *sanoqi*, and *gardun* patterns. These cycles vary in length and accentuation, shaping the temporal flow of each maqom section.

3. Theoretical Foundations of Metrorhythmic Structure

Rhythm in maqom is governed by an intricate relationship between meter (*vazn*), poetic rhythm, and melodic phrase. The metrorhythmic structure is defined by periodic stress points that align with poetic prosody and emotional expression (Levin, 1996).

According to Turino (2008), traditional rhythmic systems in non-Western music function not only as a metric base but also as a social and interpretive framework. Similarly, in maqom, rhythmic cycles are flexible and adaptive, allowing the



singer (xonanda) to manipulate timing for expressive phrasing — a concept known as rubato-like improvisation. Karimova, M. (2025).

The rhythmic-melodic relationship is thus dialogic: the singer articulates poetic rhythm through vocal ornamentation while maintaining alignment with the instrumental ensemble (tanbur, dutar, doira). The doira (frame drum) player holds a crucial role in articulating the usul, guiding both singers and instrumentalists through cyclical rhythmic progression. Borieva, K. R., & Burieva, K. R. (2022).

4. Structural Analysis of Rhythmic Patterns

4.1 The Usul System: The usul system in Uzbek maqom consists of recurring cycles of strong and weak beats that define the structural identity of each musical section. For instance:

- **Usuli Duyək (2/4)** – simple duple meter, often used in lyrical sections (saraxbor).
- **Usuli Sanoqi (3/4 or 6/8)** – compound rhythm, suitable for dynamic and expressive passages.
- **Usuli Gardun (10/8 or 12/8)** – complex cyclic pattern used in instrumental preludes and extended vocal improvisations.

Each rhythmic pattern interacts with the text and melodic contour, influencing phrase length and emotional intensity. In performance, singers often anticipate or delay rhythmic accents to heighten expressive effect — a hallmark of maqom xonandaligi.

4.2 Metrorhythmic Flexibility

Unlike Western metrical rigidity, maqom allows fluid shifts between rhythmic cycles, often within a single performance (Slobin, 1984). This flexibility reflects the oral tradition's improvisatory nature. The singer, guided by the ustoz, learns to internalize rhythmic feeling rather than count beats. As Levin (1996) notes, this internalization reflects a “spiritual embodiment of rhythm” central to Central Asian performance aesthetics.

5. Rhythm and Poetic Prosody

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In maqom, rhythm is inseparable from the poetic meter of classical Uzbek and Persian poetry (aruz). The alignment between syllabic length and musical accent defines the natural flow of melody. The poetic rhythm dictates the vocal phrasing, while the usul provides temporal organization (Ritter, 2015).

For example, in the Bayot or Buzruk cycles, long syllables coincide with downbeats, emphasizing semantic meaning, while short syllables correspond to offbeats or ornamented melismas. This synthesis of metrical precision and poetic freedom creates the unique rhythmic identity of maqom xonandaligi.

6. Pedagogical and Performance Aspects

The transmission of rhythmic knowledge in maqom is primarily oral. Students internalize rhythmic cycles through repetition, vocal exercises, and guided performance with the doira player (Nettl, 2005). The ustoz–shogird system emphasizes listening, imitation, and embodied understanding rather than theoretical notation.

Modern conservatories in Tashkent and Bukhara now combine traditional oral methods with academic notation, allowing for analytical study and preservation of rhythmic traditions (Ritter, 2015). This integration ensures that rhythmic complexity remains accessible to new generations of performers while maintaining authenticity.

7. Conclusion

The study of rhythm and metrorhythmic structures in maqom singing reveals a complex interplay between temporal organization, poetic structure, and emotional expression. Unlike Western metric systems, maqom rhythm embodies both structural discipline and expressive flexibility. The usul system serves as a temporal backbone while allowing artistic improvisation that connects performer and listener on a spiritual level.

In contemporary Uzbekistan, the continued practice and academic study of maqom rhythm demonstrate the resilience of cultural heritage amid modernization. As technology and pedagogy evolve, maintaining the balance

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between traditional rhythmic authenticity and modern analytical interpretation remains vital for the sustainability of maqom xonandaligi.

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