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THE YUNUS RAJABIY MAQOM ENSEMBLE: ARTISTIC HERITAGE, PERFORMANCE TRADITIONS AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

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Abstract



The Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble represents a cornerstone in the development and preservation of the classical maqom tradition in Uzbekistan. “As an institution devoted to the study and performance of national music, the ensemble serves as both a guardian of historical authenticity and a creative laboratory for artistic renewal” Rasulov, U. U. (2024).

“Its activity reflects the synthesis of musical scholarship, performance practice, and cultural mission aimed at transmitting maqom to future generations”. Karimova, M. (2025). This article examines the ensemble’s historical background, its structural and pedagogical organization, and its contribution to the interpretation and dissemination of maqom art within contemporary cultural life. Special attention is given to the artistic methods used in performance, the ensemble’s role in education, and its influence on modern perceptions of traditional music.

Keywords: Maqom, ensemble, heritage, performance practice, pedagogy, Uzbek music, tradition, culture.

Introduction

The maqom art of Uzbekistan stands as one of the most refined manifestations of Eastern musical thinking. It is not merely a musical form but a complex philosophical and aesthetic system that reflects centuries of cultural evolution. The maqom tradition has served as a unifying factor in the history of Central

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Asian musical culture, integrating poetic creativity, modal systems, and emotional expression into a single artistic phenomenon.

Among the numerous initiatives dedicated to the preservation of this heritage, the Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble occupies a particularly important place. Named after the great composer, performer, and researcher Yunus Rajabiy (1897–1976), the ensemble was created to ensure the continuity of the maqom tradition and to present its spiritual and artistic value to the public. Established within the framework of state cultural policy and academic research, the ensemble functions as both a performing body and an educational institution.

The ensemble’s repertoire encompasses all major Uzbek maqom cycles — Shashmaqom, Fergana-Tashkent maqoms, and regional styles of Khorezm. By collecting, systematizing, and performing these masterpieces, the ensemble has preserved the authentic melodic and rhythmic architecture of maqom while adapting its interpretation to modern concert formats.

The aim of this study is to explore the ensemble’s contribution to the professionalization of maqom performance, its influence on the formation of artistic taste, and its pedagogical value in the training of young musicians. The research also emphasizes the cultural significance of the ensemble as a symbol of national identity and an essential component of Uzbekistan’s intangible cultural heritage.

The establishment of the Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble was a natural continuation of the creative legacy of the eminent Uzbek composer and musicologist Yunus Rajabiy. His lifelong work was dedicated to the collection, notation, and analysis of the maqom repertoire, which had previously existed only in oral form. Recognizing the risk of losing this invaluable heritage in the modern era, the government of Uzbekistan and leading musicians took steps to institutionalize maqom practice.

The ensemble was formed under the auspices of the Uzbek State Philharmonic Society in the mid-20th century. It brought together outstanding vocalists, instrumentalists, and researchers whose shared goal was to restore the classical maqom cycles in their original modal and rhythmic form. The ensemble’s activity was not limited to performance; it also carried out scientific documentation and

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theoretical studies of maqom, contributing to the publication of transcriptions and scholarly materials.

Initially, the ensemble’s repertoire consisted of traditional Shashmaqom cycles, including Buzruk, Rost, Navo, Dugoh, Segoh, and Iroq. Each cycle was performed in its canonical order, preserving the integrity of both instrumental and vocal sections. Over time, the ensemble expanded its scope, including regional maqom styles such as Khorezm maqoms and Fergana-Tashkent maqoms, thereby representing the full spectrum of Uzbekistan’s classical music heritage.

The ensemble’s performance structure was modeled on traditional forms, with a combination of vocalists (xonanda) and instrumentalists (jo‘rnavoz). The use of national instruments such as tanbur, dutor, gijjak, nay, and doira created an authentic sound palette reflecting centuries-old timbral aesthetics. Through its systematic approach, the ensemble established a model of professionalism in maqom performance that remains influential in music education and concert practice today.

The artistic identity of the Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble is rooted in a balance between authenticity and innovation. While strictly adhering to the canonical principles of maqom — such as modal purity, rhythmic structure, and textual fidelity — the ensemble has also developed a distinctive style of interpretation characterized by emotional depth and intellectual clarity.

The ensemble’s performance aesthetics are guided by three main principles:

1. Preservation of Authenticity – ensuring that every maqom piece retains its traditional modal and rhythmic integrity.
2. Expressive Communication – achieving a deep emotional connection with the audience through nuanced dynamics, phrasing, and diction.
3. Pedagogical Transmission – using performance as a means of teaching and perpetuating the maqom tradition for younger generations.

In ensemble performance, great importance is placed on intonation, rhythm, diction, and dynamics as primary expressive means. The delicate use of dynamics — from soft piano passages to powerful forte climaxes — allows the performers to express the inner emotional development of each maqom. The combination of



instrumental ornamentation and vocal flexibility produces a multi-layered sound structure typical of Uzbek classical music.

According to Karimova (2025), the ensemble's interpretation of maqom reflects a "living continuity of musical thought," where the ancient forms are preserved not as museum artifacts but as active, evolving expressions of the national soul. This statement underlines the ensemble's ability to adapt traditional elements to the aesthetic demands of modern audiences while maintaining scholarly precision and spiritual sincerity.

The ensemble's pedagogical model also deserves special attention. It functions as an informal conservatory for maqom performers, where young musicians learn not only the technical aspects of performance but also the philosophical and ethical foundations of the tradition. Teachers and performers emphasize that maqom is not merely music but a moral discipline — an art form that shapes inner harmony, patience, and respect for heritage.

The educational role of the ensemble is further reinforced through master classes, academic conferences, and collaborations with the Yunus Rajabiy State Institute of Uzbek National Music Art. Students are introduced to maqom not as a static subject but as a living system of creative and spiritual development.

The Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble has always viewed education as one of its fundamental purposes. Beyond the concert stage, its activity is deeply intertwined with academic research, curriculum development, and methodological innovation. The ensemble serves as a living laboratory where theoretical knowledge and practical performance coexist harmoniously.

Within the broader framework of Uzbek musical education, the ensemble has pioneered pedagogical methods for teaching maqom that combine aural transmission, notation-based study, and interpretative analysis. These methods are designed to help students internalize not only the melodic and rhythmic structure of maqom but also its expressive and philosophical essence. Through close interaction between students and professional performers, the educational process becomes a form of apprenticeship, echoing the traditional ustoz-shogird (master-disciple) system that has long defined Eastern musical pedagogy.



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A distinctive feature of the ensemble's educational philosophy lies in its holistic approach. The training process integrates elements of music theory, poetry, vocal technique, and stage ethics. Students learn that performing maqom is not a matter of technical display but an act of spiritual communication. Each tone, phrase, and poetic line must be rendered with mindfulness, respect, and sincerity. This conception aligns with the view of Rasulov (2024), who describes maqom as "a sacred dialogue between sound and spirit, where every melodic gesture carries ethical responsibility."

The pedagogical mission of the ensemble also contributes to the revitalization of traditional instruments. Through workshops and collaborations with instrument makers, the ensemble ensures the preservation of authentic timbral characteristics. The use of instruments such as tanbur, gijjak, nay, chang, dutor, and doira is not only a matter of sound reproduction but a continuation of cultural memory. Each performance thus becomes a practical lesson in history, connecting contemporary musicians with centuries of craftsmanship and artistic devotion.

In recent years, the ensemble's pedagogical influence has extended to regional centers and universities across Uzbekistan. Its members have conducted training programs for music teachers, organized youth festivals, and established partnerships with local conservatories. These initiatives strengthen the position of maqom within modern education and ensure that future generations of artists understand their role as custodians of national culture.

The global recognition of the Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble is a testament to its artistic excellence and cultural diplomacy. Through its performances at prestigious festivals and international forums, the ensemble has become a symbol of Uzbekistan's intangible heritage. Its participation in events organized by UNESCO, the International Music Council, and numerous cultural foundations has significantly contributed to the promotion of Central Asian classical music on the world stage.

The ensemble's concerts abroad are not mere showcases of national art; they serve as intercultural dialogues that foster mutual understanding between civilizations. In performing maqom, the ensemble conveys the universal values



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of beauty, harmony, and spirituality that transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries. For many international audiences, these performances provide a profound insight into the philosophical depth of Eastern music — where every sound is imbued with meaning and emotion.

According to Abdinabiyevna (2023), the ensemble’s international success lies in its ability to “translate the metaphysical language of maqom into a universal human experience.” This perspective highlights the ensemble’s dual function as both a national treasure and a global ambassador of culture. Its work aligns with Uzbekistan’s broader cultural diplomacy goals, emphasizing dialogue, tolerance, and shared human values through artistic expression.

Furthermore, the ensemble’s international collaborations have opened new academic perspectives. Joint projects with scholars and performers from Iran, Turkey, Tajikistan, and Europe have facilitated comparative studies of maqom, dastgah, and mugham systems. These exchanges enrich the scientific understanding of modal traditions and demonstrate the common cultural roots of the Islamic world’s musical heritage.

Through such intercultural initiatives, the Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble continues to affirm its position as a vital contributor to global musicology. It stands not only as a performing group but also as a source of intellectual inspiration, illustrating how tradition can coexist with innovation in a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

The maqom tradition, as embodied by the Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble, represents far more than a musical phenomenon — it is a philosophy of being expressed through sound. The maqom is rooted in centuries of metaphysical thought that links the act of musical creation with spiritual self-awareness. Within this tradition, each melodic movement is seen as a reflection of the human soul’s journey toward divine harmony. In the maqom worldview, sound (sado) is not merely an acoustic event but a spiritual vibration. This idea finds its roots in Sufi philosophy, which perceives music as a bridge between the material and transcendental realms. The ensemble’s performance philosophy, therefore, is deeply intertwined with notions of inner discipline, purification of emotion, and the search for balance between external form and internal meaning. The

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performers of the Yunus Rajabiy Ensemble approach maqom as a meditative process. Every tone, ornament, and rhythmic pulse carries symbolic weight. The alternation between dynamic contrasts — from the intensity of forte to the intimacy of piano — symbolizes the dual nature of human existence: passion and restraint, joy and contemplation, sound and silence. Through this dynamic dialogue, the maqom achieves its unique power to elevate both performer and listener to a state of spiritual awareness.

Ulasheva (2024) notes that the maqom structure embodies “a metaphoric ascent of the soul,” where melodic development mirrors the inner growth of consciousness. The Yunus Rajabiy Ensemble’s interpretive mastery lies in its ability to translate these metaphysical concepts into audible form, enabling audiences to experience music not only as entertainment but as revelation.

The performers’ psychological state plays a crucial role in this process. In maqom, technical precision alone cannot achieve artistic truth. The musician must cultivate emotional intelligence, concentration, and humility. During performance, the mind, heart, and breath must function in unity, creating a flow of energy that transcends ordinary communication. This holistic integration of mental and physical faculties is what makes maqom performance a deeply transformative act.

The aesthetic system of maqom performance is based on balance, proportion, and the gradual unfolding of emotion. The ensemble’s musicians are trained to perceive sound not as an isolated event but as part of a continuous narrative. Each phrase must grow organically out of the previous one, maintaining an unbroken emotional thread. This principle, known in Eastern musical theory as *ittisāl* (continuity), defines the maqom’s inner logic and beauty.

In this context, the psychology of performance becomes essential. The performer must establish a deep connection with the composition’s emotional content while remaining in full control of vocal and instrumental technique. Emotional excess or superficial display contradicts the maqom’s aesthetic ideals, which favor subtlety, restraint, and sincerity. The Yunus Rajabiy Ensemble embodies this philosophy through a style that is both disciplined and expressive — a balance that distinguishes Uzbek maqom from other regional traditions.

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Furthermore, the aesthetic of maqom emphasizes the concept of tawazun — equilibrium. This balance manifests in the relationship between performer and accompanist, between rhythm and melody, and between individual creativity and collective harmony. The ensemble’s performances demonstrate how the delicate coordination of voices and instruments can evoke a profound sense of unity, both musical and spiritual.

An equally important dimension is the role of silence. In maqom, pauses and rests are not empty spaces but moments of reflection and anticipation. The ensemble uses silence as a compositional element, allowing the listener’s imagination to complete the emotional trajectory of the piece. This approach cultivates deep listening and transforms the concert experience into a shared act of contemplation.

Finally, the maqom’s aesthetic system serves as a mirror of Uzbek cultural values — harmony, modesty, respect for tradition, and spiritual refinement. The Yunus Rajabiy Ensemble, through its faithful adherence to these principles, continues to shape the moral and aesthetic consciousness of contemporary audiences.

The Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble occupies a unique position within the framework of Uzbekistan’s national cultural identity. It functions as both a guardian of ancient traditions and a beacon of modern creativity. Through its consistent dedication to maqom performance and research, the ensemble has contributed to shaping the collective cultural consciousness of the nation.

In the post-independence period, Uzbekistan has witnessed a cultural renaissance that revalued the significance of traditional art forms. The ensemble played a central role in this revival by reintroducing maqom as a living art, not confined to historical archives but continuously renewed through performance. Each concert, broadcast, or educational project organized by the ensemble reaffirms the idea that maqom is not merely a remnant of the past but a vital, dynamic element of national self-expression.

Maqom embodies the moral and aesthetic values of the Uzbek people — sincerity, patience, emotional depth, and harmony between intellect and feeling. By performing these works in their authentic form, the ensemble reinforces these

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values in the collective memory of society. In this way, it serves as a cultural mirror that reflects the spiritual essence of the nation.

The ensemble’s influence extends beyond music into literature, philosophy, and social thought. Many Uzbek poets and scholars have drawn inspiration from maqom’s structural and emotional richness, using it as a metaphor for the balance between human passion and divine order. This interdisciplinary resonance demonstrates that maqom is not limited to an artistic domain but permeates all levels of cultural consciousness.

An important aspect of the ensemble’s cultural mission is its inclusive approach to gender within traditional performance. Historically, maqom was predominantly a male domain, particularly in the court and ceremonial contexts. However, the evolution of performance practice in the 20th and 21st centuries has seen an increasing number of female vocalists and instrumentalists contributing to this art form.

The Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble has been instrumental in promoting women’s participation in maqom performance, demonstrating that mastery of this tradition is not determined by gender but by spiritual and artistic devotion. The presence of female performers has brought new emotional nuances to maqom interpretation — a softer timbre, greater lyrical sensitivity, and an expanded expressive range.

This development aligns with broader trends in Uzbek cultural life, where women’s artistic contributions have gained recognition and institutional support. Karimova, M. (2025). In recent decades, female maqom singers have become ambassadors of national art on international stages, representing both artistic excellence and the evolving image of modern Uzbek identity.

From an educational perspective, the inclusion of women in maqom performance also enriches the pedagogical environment. Female teachers and students bring diverse interpretive insights and contribute to a more holistic understanding of maqom’s expressive possibilities. This inclusion has transformed the ensemble into a microcosm of cultural balance — where tradition and modernity, masculinity and femininity, merge in a shared artistic vision.

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The contemporary mission of the Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble extends beyond preservation to innovation. While maintaining fidelity to classical principles, the ensemble actively explores new forms of presentation, integrating maqom into symphonic, theatrical, and multimedia contexts. Such projects aim to introduce maqom to younger audiences and adapt its philosophical message to the realities of the 21st century.

Collaborations with modern composers and international artists have opened new creative pathways. Experimental arrangements that combine maqom with orchestral textures, electronic soundscapes, or cross-cultural improvisations illustrate the adaptability of this ancient art.

However, the ensemble remains cautious not to dilute maqom’s essence — innovation is guided by reverence for the original tradition rather than by commercial trends. In the digital age, the ensemble has also embraced technological platforms for documentation and dissemination. High-quality recordings, online archives, and virtual concerts ensure that maqom reaches a global audience while preserving its authenticity. These initiatives strengthen the ensemble’s position as both a national institution and a modern educational center for traditional music. Ultimately, the Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble represents the synthesis of continuity and change — a living symbol of Uzbekistan’s cultural resilience and creativity. Its ongoing mission is not only to perform maqom but to embody its timeless values: harmony, devotion, and the pursuit of beauty through sound.

Conclusion

The Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble stands today as one of the most influential institutions in the cultural and musical history of Uzbekistan. Its artistic mission embodies a delicate synthesis of preservation and innovation, uniting deep respect for traditional forms with the creative spirit of contemporary performance. By safeguarding the maqom repertoire, the ensemble ensures that the spiritual and philosophical values of this art form continue to enrich the collective consciousness of modern society. Through its educational and cultural initiatives, the ensemble has established a sustainable model of transmission that bridges

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generations. It demonstrates that maqom is not a static relic of the past, but a living, evolving art capable of inspiring moral reflection, artistic sensitivity, and intercultural understanding. The ensemble's emphasis on authenticity, emotional sincerity, and intellectual depth has made it a cornerstone of national identity and an emblem of Uzbekistan's contribution to world musical heritage. Ulasheva, M. (2024). Moreover, the ensemble's international presence has transformed maqom into a medium of cultural diplomacy — a universal language that communicates the beauty, discipline, and spiritual wisdom of Eastern civilization. Its ongoing collaborations with global institutions, scholars, and musicians highlight the enduring relevance of maqom as a source of inspiration in both artistic and academic domains. Looking forward, the ensemble faces the challenge of maintaining its authenticity while engaging with modern forms of creativity and technology. Yuldashev, M. U. (2025). Yet this challenge is also an opportunity: by embracing new educational methods, digital documentation, and intercultural dialogue, the Yunus Rajabiy Maqom Ensemble will continue to serve as a living testament to the timeless power of music to unite humanity through beauty, harmony, and truth.

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