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THE ROLE OF WOMEN VOCALISTS IN UZBEK TRADITIONAL MUSIC: A STUDY OF FEMALE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE MAQOM ART OF UZBEKISTAN

Dilfuza Rahimova

Uzbek National Institute of Musical Art named after Yunus Rajabi
Associate Professor of the Department of Vocal and Instrumental Performance

Abstract:

Women vocalists have played a critical, though often underrepresented, role in the evolution of Uzbek traditional music. Their contributions span musical performance, repertoire innovation, transmission of oral tradition, and preservation of regional styles within the maqom heritage. Despite historical limitations imposed by socio-cultural norms, female singers have emerged as essential figures in the shaping of Uzbek vocal aesthetics, particularly in genres such as katta ashula, folkloric songs, and, increasingly, maqom performance. This article examines the artistic, socio-cultural, and pedagogical impact of women vocalists within Uzbekistan's maqom tradition. Drawing on ethnomusicological scholarship, archival recordings, and contemporary performance practices, the study demonstrates that women singers not only preserved regional musical identities but also expanded the expressive possibilities of maqom through unique timbral qualities, interpretative strategies, and stylistic innovations. The research seeks to reposition women vocalists as central actors in the continuity and development of Uzbek traditional music.

Keywords: Maqom; Women vocalists; Uzbek traditional music; Gender and music; Oral tradition; Performance practice; Cultural heritage; Shashmaqom; Ethnomusicology.



Introduction

Uzbek traditional music, particularly the maqom art, has historically been shaped by diverse cultural, social, and aesthetic influences. Although male performers dominated public musical spheres, women played a vital role in the transmission, preservation, and innovation of vocal traditions in Uzbekistan. However, their artistic contributions were frequently undocumented due to cultural constraints, limited access to formal institutions, and gender-restricted performance settings (Sukhareva, 1962).

Recent ethnomusicological studies and archival findings have begun to reveal the depth of women's involvement in traditional music. Women vocalists contributed significantly to:

- ✓ repertoire formation,
- ✓ regional stylistic identity,
- ✓ household and communal performance traditions,
- ✓ pedagogical continuity,
- ✓ the emotional and expressive aesthetics of Uzbek vocal culture.

This article aims to examine the place and influence of women vocalists in Uzbek traditional music, particularly within the context of **maqom**, using Uzbekistan as a case study.

2. Historical Overview of Women in Uzbek Musical Culture

2.1. Early roles in folk and ceremonial contexts

I believe that the work of Munojot Yolchiyeva, the national hero of Uzbekistan, should also be recognized in the promotion of Uzbek classical music. Because for several years, the female singer who has worked the most to introduce our makoms to the whole world is Munojotkhan Yolchiyeva. "A few years ago, an Uzbek audience who went to Munojot Yolchiyeva's concert at the famous Queen Elizabeth Hall in London was surprised that even people from Paris came to this concert", said one of the social networks. It's not for nothing. This singer's magical voice, unique performance, and appearance, which always radiates nationalism, will captivate any audience. [7;57-b]



Women historically occupied central roles in **household rituals, lament traditions (yo‘l-yo‘lakay), lullabies (alla)**, and celebratory gatherings. These genres formed the foundation of women’s vocal style, emphasizing:

- ✓ emotional expressiveness,
- ✓ improvisation,
- ✓ narrative delivery,
- ✓ microtonal intonations.

These stylistic traits later influenced women's participation in more formal musical genres.

2.2. Emergence of women performers in public settings

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, female performers such as Toshmomo, Sultonxon Isroilova, and later Munojot Yo‘lchiyeva gained wider recognition. Their performances bridged the gap between domestic singing and professional artistry, bringing women's voices into formal musical environments (Beyler, 2006).

2.3. Soviet-era institutionalization. The Soviet period introduced:

- ✓ music schools and conservatories,
- ✓ state ensembles,
- ✓ standardized repertoire,
- ✓ opportunities for women to perform publicly.

These institutions allowed talented women to enter professional music, including maqom ensembles (Broughton, 2010).

3. Women in the Maqom Tradition

3.1. Vocal qualities and interpretative styles. Women possess unique timbral characteristics—clarity, emotional vibrato, lyrical sensitivity—that enriched the maqom vocal palette. Female vocal interpretation often emphasized:

- ✓ smooth legato phrasing,
- ✓ heightened emotional nuance,
- ✓ delicate ornamental patterns,
- ✓ expressive poetic delivery.

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These qualities brought new dimensions to maqom genres such as Talqin, Nasr, and lyrical sections of Shashmaqom.

3.2. Contributions to repertoire preservation. Women played a vital role in:

- ✓ memorizing and transmitting maqom pieces,
- ✓ maintaining regional variants,
- ✓ preserving poetic texts through singing,
- ✓ safeguarding rarely performed genres.

Many archival recordings of traditional songs owe their survival to women's oral transmission practices (Nettl, 1987).

3.3. Influence on regional maqom styles. Women contributed significantly to regional stylistic diversity:

- ✓ In Bukhara, women preserved soft, melismatic intonations.
- ✓ In Xorazm, they maintained rhythmically dynamic songs.
- ✓ In Fergana–Tashkent, women strengthened lyrical traditions, influencing the aesthetics of maqom performance.

These contributions helped maintain regional authenticity within the national musical identity.

4. Case Studies of Influential Uzbek Women Vocalists

4.1. Sul-tonxon Isroilova. Known for her powerful yet refined vocal delivery, Sul-tonxon Isroilova's performances of lyrical maqom pieces made her one of Uzbekistan's most respected female artists. Her work helped integrate women's voices into formal maqom performance.

4.2. Munojot Yo'ichiyeva. Arguably the most internationally recognized Uzbek female vocalist, Yo'ichiyeva's interpretations of Shashmaqom demonstrated how a woman's voice could bring new expressive richness to classical maqom performance. Her UNESCO appearances helped globalize Uzbek musical heritage.



4.3. Contemporary female maqom performers. Modern female vocalists trained in conservatories continue to expand the maqom repertoire with:

- ✓ scholarly research,
- ✓ experimentation with timbre,
- ✓ fusion of traditional and contemporary performance methods.

These artists illustrate the evolving role of women in the maqom landscape.

5. Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Women's Participation

5.1. Gender norms and restrictions. Historically, women faced:

- ✓ limitations on public singing,
- ✓ gender-segregated performance spaces,
- ✓ lack of access to formal training,
- ✓ cultural expectations of modesty.

Despite these barriers, women preserved musical traditions through household performances and private gatherings (Sukhareva, 1962).

5.2. Institutional support and modern opportunities

Today, the Uzbek government, UNESCO, and cultural organizations support:

- ✓ female performers in maqom competitions,
- ✓ academic research on women's roles,
- ✓ inclusion of women in national ensembles.

This institutional backing has increased visibility and recognition.

5.3. Transmission of tradition. Female vocalists remain crucial in:

- ✓ teaching younger generations,
- ✓ maintaining oral heritage,
- ✓ interpreting poetic and emotional content,
- ✓ ensuring stylistic continuity.

Their pedagogical influence often surpasses their public recognition.



6. Discussion

The analysis shows that women vocalists hold an indispensable place in Uzbek traditional music. Their involvement goes beyond singing; they act as:

- ✓ **culture bearers,**
- ✓ **innovators,**
- ✓ **educators,**
- ✓ **preservers of intangible heritage.**

Although historical narratives have often excluded women from formal histories of maqom, their contributions are foundational to the survival and development of this art form. The contemporary revival of maqom highlights the importance of documenting and valuing women's artistic work.

7. Conclusion

Female vocalists are essential to the cultural, artistic, and pedagogical fabric of Uzbek traditional music. Their influence on maqom performance, repertoire preservation, regional stylistics, and oral transmission confirms their central place in Uzbekistan's musical heritage.

Recognizing women's contributions enriches our understanding of maqom as a dynamic, evolving tradition shaped by both male and female artists.

Future research should explore:

- ✓ comparative studies of female performers across Central Asia,
- ✓ gendered vocal aesthetics in maqom,
- ✓ archival reconstruction of forgotten female repertoires,
- ✓ ethnographic documentation of contemporary female performers.

This will make it easier for foreign audience who follow the work of Uzbek female singers, and through this, the world will get to know about the art of Uzbek classical music. [7;58-b]

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