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THE PHENOMENON OF PERFORMANCE INTERPRETATION IN TRADITIONAL MAQOM PERFORMANCE: THE HARMONY OF TRADITIONAL NORMS AND CREATIVE INDIVIDUALITY

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Abstract

This article examines the phenomenon of performance interpretation in traditional maqom practice through the interaction between inherited norms and the creative individuality of the performer. Maqom is approached as a complex professional system shaped by oral transmission, the master-apprentice tradition, modal and intonational memory, rhythmic-usul awareness, the culture of working with poetic text, and living performance experience. The concept of talqin is interpreted not as a mechanical reproduction of a fixed musical text, but as a creative process that unfolds within historically established boundaries. It becomes evident through the performer’s vocal capacity, breathing, phrasing, construction of climactic points, sensitivity to rhythmic support, and spiritual communication with the listener. Drawing on the works of I. Rajabov, O. Matyokubov, O. Ibrohimov, and Sh. Ayxodjayeva, the article analyzes continuity in maqom performance, the normative role of local schools, and the challenges of contemporary stage interpretation. The study argues that creative freedom in maqom does not imply a departure from tradition; rather, it represents a responsible artistic mode achieved through deep mastery of the canon, listening culture, and practical knowledge transmitted through ustoz-shogird pedagogy. The conclusion formulates methodological implications for maqom education, concert performance, and future research in traditional music studies.

Keywords: Maqom, performance interpretation, traditional performance, ustoz-shogird, performance school, usul, avj, creative individuality, maqom pedagogy.

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Introduction

Traditional maqom performance is one of the highest professional layers of Uzbek musical culture, in which historical memory, artistic thought, poetic text, the modal-pitch system, usul, and performance etiquette appear as a unified artistic phenomenon. To understand maqom merely as a melody or a vocal piece narrows its essence. The living form of maqom is manifested, above all, in the process of performance, in the performer’s inner auditory experience, in the assimilation of criteria received from the master, and in the ability to create a new interpretation on the basis of these criteria.

In maqom studies, the term talqin has a two-layered meaning. On the one hand, it denotes the name of a particular vocal section within Shashmaqom. On the other hand, in a broader scholarly sense, it refers to the performer’s approach to a work and to the process of bringing it to life through artistic content, style, voice, breath, avj, usul, and spiritual state. In this article, talqin is studied precisely in the second sense, that is, as a phenomenon of performance interpretation. Therefore, the title of the article is also clearly delimited through the phrase “performance interpretation.”

In maqom performance, tradition and a creative approach are not mutually contradictory concepts. On the contrary, a creative approach assumes a meaningful form only in a performer who has deeply mastered tradition. If the performer has not sufficiently assimilated the modal-pitch system, usul, form, poetic text, and the melodic qualities specific to a school, his or her freedom turns into randomness. If, however, the performer is limited to repeating only external norms, maqom ceases to be a living art and becomes a museum-like specimen. Thus, the central issue in maqom performance is to determine the natural proportion between traditional stability and creative individuality.

When interpreting maqoms as high examples of professional music, O. Ibrohimov demonstrates the complex meaning of the concept of maqom in relation to pitch, mode, melody, and vocal structures [3, p. 8]. This approach makes it possible to understand maqom interpretation not as mere vocal performance, but as a phenomenon of artistic thinking shaped on the basis of a particular modal-pitch foundation.

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The aim of the study is to provide a scholarly analysis of the phenomenon of performance interpretation in traditional maqom performance on the basis of the interrelationship between tradition, ustoz-shogird transmission, performance school, and creative individuality. The objectives of the study are as follows: to define the meaning of the concept of interpretation in performance practice; to reveal the influence of oral tradition and the ustoz-shogird system on interpretation; to determine the boundaries between norm and freedom in maqom performance; and to analyze the relationship between creative approach and maqom tradition under contemporary stage conditions.

Literature Review and Methodology

The article employs historical-musicological, comparative-analytical, structural, performance-oriented, and hermeneutic approaches. The historical-musicological approach served to examine the process of formation of maqom traditions, while comparative analysis helped identify the similarities and differences in interpretative criteria across various performance schools. Structural analysis focused on the order of maqom sections, the development of *usul* and *avj*, artistic dramaturgy, and the process through which poetic text is transformed into musical expression. The hermeneutic approach made it possible to interpret the inner relationship between the maqom text, melody, and performance meaning.

The study takes as its main theoretical foundation I. Rajabov's *Maqomlar*, O. Matyoqubov's *Maqomot*, O. Ibrohimov's *Maqom asoslari*, and Sh. Ayxodjayeva's *O'zbek maqomi tarixi va nazariyasi*. In addition, the editions of *Shashmaqom* transcribed by Yu. Rajabiy and UNESCO's official information on *Shashmaqom* were used to determine the international intangible heritage status of maqom. UNESCO records *Shashmaqom* as a tradition inscribed in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity [7]. This fact shows that maqom performance has not only national, but also international scholarly and cultural significance.

I. Rajabov historically and theoretically substantiated the maqomot system and studied the layers of maqoms related to form, pitch, *usul*, and performance

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practice. O. Matyoqubov, in turn, examines maqomot as a general cultural-historical system and illuminates the interrelations among the Bukhara, Khorezm, and Fergana-Tashkent maqom traditions [4, pp. 10-11]. O. Ibrohimov explains the educational and practical aspects of maqom performance and places particular emphasis on the role of masters, ensembles, and performance schools in preserving maqom in live performance [3, pp. 144-147].

From a methodological point of view, the article is based on the quartet “text - tradition - performer - listener.” This quartet reveals the main mechanism of maqom interpretation: the text provides the performer with a historical basis; tradition determines norms and boundaries; the performer creates an individual artistic solution within these criteria; and the listener determines the sphere of influence and spiritual reception of the interpretation.

The Theoretical Boundaries of the Concept of Performance Interpretation.

Performance interpretation is the process of bringing a work preserved in notation or oral memory into a living artistic state. In this process, the performer does not merely sing or play a prescribed melodic line; he or she reveals the inner content of the work through breath, melody, phrase, rhythmic stroke, vocal color, textual articulation, and the construction of avj. For this reason, although the performer’s personality is important in maqom interpretation, the performer never acts as an absolutely free creator. His or her freedom is governed by traditional pitch, usul, cycle, and school norms.

In maqom performance, interpretation consists of two principal layers. The first is the normative layer. It includes the pitch system, usul, the form of the work, the poetic text, points of avj and descent, and the performance rules received from the master. The second is the creative-individual layer. It includes vocal timbre, breath distribution, phrasing, spiritual state, artistic accentuation, communication with the listener, and adaptation to the performance situation. The art of interpretation emerges precisely in the balance between these two layers.

If the performer disregards the normative layer, the historical style and artistic logic of maqom are disrupted. Conversely, if the creative layer is completely

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restricted, the performance turns into lifeless repetition. Therefore, the criterion of maqom interpretation is not determined by the question “How freely was it performed?”, but rather by the question “To what extent was freedom manifested in accordance with the inner laws of tradition?”

Explaining the existence of maqoms in oral tradition, O. Ibrohimov notes: “Maqoms mainly lived in the form of oral tradition, that is, they were transmitted from master to apprentice through the ‘oral method’” [3, p. 44]. This observation reveals the theoretical basis of performance interpretation: in maqom performance, the primary “text” is preserved not only in writing, but also in the master’s performance, auditory memory, and the process of practical repetition. Thus, maqom interpretation is a creative process that relies more on auditory and practical experience than on written culture. Notation can record this process, but it cannot fully encompass all of its subtle aspects. In particular, micro-intonational inflections, the inner fluctuation of *usul*, the natural expansion of breath, the spiritual preparation for entering *avj*, and the merging of the word into melody are understood more fully in live performance.

Tradition and Ustoz-Shogird Transmission as the Basis of Interpretation.

For traditional maqom performance, the ustoz-shogird system is not merely a form of instruction, but the principal mechanism for transmitting artistic norms. The master teaches the apprentice not only the title, text, or melody of a work, but also how to feel the melody, how to place emphasis on words, where to breathe, how to prepare for *avj*, how to sense *usul* internally, and how to establish spiritual communication with the listener. These aspects may be described in general terms in textbooks, but their true form is revealed in practical performance.

In the ustoz-shogird tradition, imitation is an important initial stage. At first, the apprentice strives to reproduce the master’s performance as accurately as possible. At this stage, the aim is not creative novelty, but the absorption of school norms into inner hearing. At the next stage, on the basis of the assimilated criteria, the apprentice creates an independent interpretation through his or her

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own voice, breath capacity, and artistic intuition. Thus, creative individuality is formed not in opposition to tradition, but as a state matured within tradition.

The concept of the school in maqom performance is also of great importance here. A performance school is a combination of a particular lineage of masters, local auditory culture, repertoire selection, manner of vocal production, instrumental accompaniment, and interpretative etiquette. O. Ibrohimov notes that local performance schools with distinctive styles were established in the history of maqom, listing among them the Bukhara, Samarkand, Khorezm, Kokand, Khojand, Andijan, and Tashkent schools [3, p. 145]. This information confirms the significant role of regional and school memory in maqom interpretation.

One of the most delicate issues in ustoz-shogird transmission is the boundary between norm and individuality. Blind imitation of the master's performance does not turn the apprentice into an independent performer. Yet striving for excessive freedom at an early stage also weakens the foundations of the school. Therefore, maqom education must preserve the sequence of first listening and repetition, then understanding and analysis, and only after that independent interpretation.

In today's educational environment, opportunities to use notation, audio, video, and digital archives have expanded. This process facilitates the learning of maqom, but it cannot fully replace the experience of ustoz-shogird transmission. A video or recording preserves the external form of performance; the master, however, explains the reason for the performance, its inner support, the logic of breath, and its artistic task. For this reason, contemporary maqom pedagogy must harmonize technological tools with the ustoz-shogird tradition.

The Harmony of Creative Individuality and Traditional Norms. In maqom performance, creative individuality should be connected not with the performer's desire for self-display, but with the need to reveal the content of the work more deeply. The natural color of the performer's voice, breath capacity, spiritual experience, and artistic background influence the interpretation of maqom. However, this influence must not distort the pitch system, *usul*, *avj*,

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poetic text, or the style of the school. In this sense, creativity in maqom is creativity based on inner discipline.

O. Ibrohimov emphasizes that the “principle of creative approach” is also observed in ensemble performance of maqom [3, p. 145]. This idea shows that a creative approach is not alien to maqom tradition. On the contrary, throughout the history of maqom, every mature hafiz or instrumentalist has left a distinct artistic trace through his or her performance. Yet their creativity did not reject the norms of the school; rather, it enriched them through personal mastery.

One of the most important markers of creative individuality is phrasing. The same maqom line may be interpreted by different hafiz performers through different divisions of breath, accents, silences, ways of entering avj, and methods of return. These differences do not change the pitch and usul foundation of the work, but they allow its artistic impact to be perceived in a new way. Therefore, in maqom performance, phrasing is not merely a technical device, but an aesthetic phenomenon that reveals meaning.

The second important factor is the culture of working with poetic text. In maqom vocal genres, a ghazal or another poetic text is not an external ornament of the melody, but the inner support of musical meaning. If the hafiz does not understand the meaning of the word, the expressiveness of the melody remains superficial. Understanding the text determines pronunciation, accent, semantic pauses, and emotional color. Thus, literary competence and the ability to feel classical poetry constitute an integral part of performance mastery in maqom interpretation.

The third factor is the culture of sensing usul. In maqom, the doira usul is not merely a rhythmic meter, but the inner support of melodic movement. Performing the usul only by counting makes the performance dry; sensing it internally ensures the natural flow of the melody. The performer should not struggle against the usul, but should breathe together with it. Only then are avj sections heard not as artificial rises, but as natural dramaturgical peaks.

The fourth factor is vocal capacity. Not every hafiz possesses the same range, timbre, or power. In traditional interpretation, the performer adapts his or her vocal capacity to the demands of the work, but does not completely subordinate

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the work to personal capabilities. Balance is crucial here: knowing the demands of maqom and using the natural possibilities of one's own voice correctly are the primary conditions of creative individuality.

Issues of Interpretation in Contemporary Stage Practice. The contemporary stage has brought new opportunities to maqom performance, along with certain problems. Microphones, sound amplification equipment, short concert formats, festival regulations, and the demands of mass audiences influence the form of performance. Under such conditions, the cyclic nature of maqom, its slowly developing dramaturgy, and its inner spiritual preparation are sometimes presented in shortened form. This process is not always negative, but it must be guided by scholarly and performative responsibility.

O. Ibrohimov notes that in recent times the tradition of performing maqoms in cyclic form has not always been observed and that the practice of presenting separate sections on concert stages has become more widespread [3, p. 146]. The scholar's observation is an important warning for contemporary stage practice. The profound content of maqom is often revealed precisely through cyclic development, gradual intensification toward avj, and the logic of final descent. At the same time, the performance of an individual maqom line on stage should not in itself be assessed as incorrect. The problem lies not in shortening the work, but in carrying out such shortening without artistic logic. If the performer knows the selected section's place within the cycle, its modal relationship, usul characteristics, and poetic content, the spirit of maqom can be preserved even in a shorter form. Otherwise, stage effect displaces the inner essence of maqom. It would be mistaken to understand modernity in maqom performance only through arrangement or technical embellishment. Contemporary interpretation is, above all, the ability to connect traditional heritage meaningfully with the listener of today. In doing so, the performer must find a way to communicate the work to the audience without simplifying it. This can be achieved through an informative introduction, appropriate repertoire selection, balanced sound quality, proper stage culture, and fidelity to the main performance norms.

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Another topical issue is the increasing role of visual stage presentation in maqom interpretation. National costume, stage movement, and ceremonial appearance may lend a certain degree of expressiveness to maqom performance. However, they must not replace melody, word, *usul*, or interpretation. In maqom performance, the principal artistic center must remain in the inner auditory culture and spiritual preparation of the hafiz or instrumentalist.

Under contemporary stage conditions, maqom ensembles are also of particular importance. In ensemble performance, a creative approach may be manifested through expanding the proportion of instruments, finding a balance between voice and instruments, and adapting certain lines for the stage. Yet in this process, the maqom-related functions of traditional instruments such as the *tanbur*, *dutar*, *ghijjak*, *nay*, and *doira* must be preserved. The task of the ensemble is not merely to enrich the performance, but to support the modal-*usul* structure and artistic dramaturgy of maqom.

Systematizing the Criteria of Interpretation. A systematic view of interpretative criteria in maqom performance is important both theoretically and practically. In many cases, evaluations such as “good performance” or “traditional performance” are expressed in general terms, while their precise indicators are not disclosed. In scholarly analysis, however, every performance should be assessed on the basis of specific criteria. Such criteria rely on the pitch, *usul*, form, text, and performance culture of maqom.

The following table summarizes the main layers of performance interpretation in traditional maqom performance. The table may be used as a practical criterion for maqom education, stage performance, and scholarly analysis.



Layer of Interpretation	Main Criterion	Manifestation in Performance	Scholarly and Practical Significance
Modal-intonational layer	Mode, supporting pitch, micro-melody	Natural inflection of the melody; movement toward avj through modal-pitch support	Distinguishes the maqom style from other genres
Usul-rhythmic layer	Doira usul, inner pulse, meter	Directs melodic movement, breath, and phrasing	Ensures the dramaturgical continuity of performance
Poetic-semantic layer	Content of the ghazal, pronunciation, accent	Unity of word and melody, semantic pauses	Reveals the spiritual and philosophical content of the vocal genre
School-related layer	Ustoz-shogird, local style	Seen in vocal production, ornamentation, phrasing, and performance etiquette	Preserves the criterion of traditionality
Creative-individual layer	Voice, breath, temperament, artistic intuition	Individual interpretation, construction of avj, communication with the listener	Continues the heritage as a living art

Discussion

In maqom performance, the issue of interpretation is directly connected with the problem of preserving and developing heritage. If maqom is studied only as recorded examples, notated texts, or archival materials, the most subtle layers of its live performance nature remain outside the field of attention. At the same time, relying solely on oral performance while neglecting theoretical analysis and source studies also weakens scholarly precision. Therefore, in studying maqom interpretation, oral tradition and written-theoretical sources must be used together.

The main danger in performance interpretation is the proliferation of uniform, emotionless repetitions under the guise of traditionality, or the violation of maqom's inner laws under the name of modernity. In the first case, the performance may appear to preserve the historical form, yet it is deprived of artistic vitality. In the second case, novelty may be present, but if it does not

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correspond to the modal, usul, and spiritual-aesthetic foundations of maqom, it cannot be accepted as genuine maqom interpretation.

O. Ibrohimov notes that performance art is almost decisive in conveying the content of maqoms to the listener [3, p. 144]. This idea is extremely important for maqom studies: if the theoretical perfection of maqom is not brought to life in performance, it does not become a full-fledged artistic phenomenon in the consciousness of the listener. Thus, the performer is not simply the executor of maqom heritage, but the principal subject who keeps it alive in the present day. The most appropriate path of creative approach in maqom performance is artistic responsibility. In his or her interpretation, the performer must respect the tradition of masters, regional style, poetic content, pitch, and usul, while at the same time giving the work vitality through personal voice and spiritual experience. Such interpretation is neither archaic repetition nor superficial modernization; it becomes a form of naturally continuing tradition in the present era.

From this point of view, the scholarly standard required by international impact-factor journals in relation to maqom is also determined by the accuracy of sources, the definition of concepts, methodological consistency, and analytical novelty. An article on maqom should not remain merely a collection of definitions; it must formulate a problem, substantiate it on the basis of sources, and draw scholarly conclusions. In the present article, the issue of interpretation has been examined precisely as such a problem.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of performance interpretation in traditional maqom performance consists of the complex harmony between tradition and creative individuality. Interpretation is not the mere re-singing of a prepared melody or vocal text; it is the unification of pitch, usul, poetic content, ustoz-shogird experience, school memory, and the performer's personality in a living artistic process. Therefore, genuine creativity in maqom performance emerges not by moving away from tradition, but by deeply mastering it.

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The results of the study show that the normative layer of maqom interpretation is determined by pitch, usul, form, cyclic dramaturgy, and the performance rules transmitted by masters. The creative layer, in turn, is manifested through vocal color, breath, phrasing, construction of avj, artistic understanding of the text, spiritual communication with the listener, and adaptation to the performance situation. When the balance between these two layers is disrupted, the artistic integrity of maqom performance weakens.

Under contemporary stage and educational conditions, maqom interpretation must be approached with particular responsibility. Shortened concert forms, festival requirements, technical sound amplification equipment, and the needs of mass audiences are influencing maqom performance. Under such conditions, performers, pedagogues, and researchers alike must preserve the principal criteria of maqom - pitch discipline, the sense of usul, the meaning of poetic text, school-specific melodic qualities, and the experience of ustoz-shogird transmission.

In maqom education, it is advisable to teach performance interpretation as a separate educational-analytical direction. Students should not be limited to memorizing the text of a work; they should learn to listen comparatively to the performances of different masters, analyze breath and phrasing, sense usul internally, understand the content of the ghazal, and find an artistic solution suited to their own vocal capacity. Only then will traditional maqom performance continue not merely as historical heritage, but as a high professional art living in contemporary performance practice.

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