

TRADITIONAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS IN THE LIGHT OF MUSEUM INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

How to explain Azerbaijani traditional music, especially musical instruments, to museum visitors, be they children or adult amateurs, musicians or researchers, locals or foreigners? This article shares the experience of the State Museum of Musical Culture of Azerbaijan in a multilayered approach to interpreting musical instruments, focusing on those that were common in the Muslim world in the Middle Ages and have largely disappeared. Reconstructed by Professor Majnun Kerimov, they have taken their place in the museum's exposition and in the concert practice of the museum's Ensemble of Ancient Eastern Musical Instruments.

Keywords

Folklore, replicas of medieval musical instruments, State Museum of Musical Culture of Azerbaijan, Majnun Kerimov, museum visitors.

INTRODUCTION

The Museum of Musical Culture of Azerbaijan is sometimes called the Museum of Musical Instruments, which we are unhappy about, as it does not reflect the full content of the museum. Musical instruments, we think, are available to all peoples, even those at a primitive stage of tribal development, but some may not have a richness of traditional music, a developed school of composition, outstanding achievements in genres of musical theatre, a well-established and proven system of musical education, and advanced musicology. Therefore, combining the above, the museum is called the Museum of Musical Culture. Of course, the pearls of the collections are Azerbaijani folk musical instruments and everything related to the musical folklore of Azerbaijan.

Museum interpretation of musical folklore differs not only by its characteristic museum visibility but also by the fact that it gives an opportunity to listen, touch, and interact with the museum content, which is not the case at concerts or conferences devoted to folklore. Moreover, the interpretation should be different.

Usually, books, reference books, encyclopaedias, atlases of musical instruments, conference papers, and the like are addressed to specific age groups (e.g., colouring books for the very young or a children's encyclopaedia for schoolchildren), as well as to people with different levels of musical knowledge: those visitors who have no musical literacy, music lovers, pupils of music schools, students of music universities, professional musicians, scientists, organologists, music historians, acoustic specialists, restorers, and the like. Children and amateurs do not attend scientific musicology conferences, but the doors of the museum are open to everyone. Therefore, the museum is obliged to satisfy all visitors with its multilevel interpretation of museum collections.

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ACTIVITIES REGARDING MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Let us consider this on the example of the interpretation of Azerbaijani traditional musical instruments, with a special focus on instruments of the Middle Ages.

Children in the museum are shown the instruments' names, shown how to play them on video and live, and allowed to touch the instruments that are specially prepared for this purpose, but not registered in the main collection, such as specimens of the tar, the kamancha, the gaval, and the saz. They are also photographed with them in traditional costumes, to dance to the music and to colour pictures on musical themes, reproducing images of the exhibits in the museum.

For those who are older, we also suggest solving easy crossword puzzles about traditional musical instruments in different languages (Figures 1a and 1b).



Figure 1a and 1b. The museum's products for children. (a) An example of crossword puzzles on traditional musical instruments (in Azerbaijani); (b) drawing notebook with images based on museum collections (in particular, on the cover is a sketch for Kara Karaev's ballet *The Seven Beauties* by Natalia Kirillova).

Museum guides inform them that the basis of the museum's collection of musical instruments was the collection of instruments of the artist Ahmedkhan Bakikhanov (1892–1973), which included 23 Azerbaijani folk instruments of the 19th and 20th centuries. At present, the collection of traditional musical instruments totals 335 units, of which 222 units are Azerbaijani. Tour guides pay attention to which instruments are used by Azerbaijani ashigs and which instruments are the most characteristic for mugham performance, and they talk about the traditional finishing of Azerbaijani musical instruments. The oldest museum instrument dates back to the 18th century – a clay gosha-nagara (double drum) (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Gosha-nagara, 18th century. (Photograph by courtesy of the State Museum of Musical Culture of Azerbaijan.)

KERIMOV AND HIS WORK

The musical culture and instrumentation of Azerbaijan in the previous centuries were characterized by their diversity, as evidenced by numerous sources. Therefore, the story would be extremely scarce if the museum interpretation were limited to the last two or three centuries only. Therefore, starting from the late 1980s, the museum began to acquire replicas of disappeared, forgotten musical instruments, which were widespread in the Middle Ages in a wide area of the Muslim East and eventually disappeared everywhere or were preserved somewhere, but not in Azerbaijan. These instruments have been recreated and are on display in the museum.

It is more advanced to explain that the author of these replicas was Majnun Kerimov (Figure 3), a teacher of the tar class at Children's Music School No. 3 in Baku, who began work on their restoration in 1975.



Figure 3: Majnun Kerimov (1945–2013), Prof. Dr. habil. in Arts, the People's Artist of Azerbaijan, working on creating the nuskhe (2009).

In 1976, his first instrument, the chang, appeared [Kerimov 2009]. A total of 10 musical instruments were recreated between 1976 and 2010:

- chang, a harp-like musical instrument played by both men and women;
- chagane, a bowed instrument;
- rubab, a plucked instrument;
- rud, a plucked instrument;
- chogur, plucked instrument;
- barbad, plucked instrument;
- Shirvan tanbur, plucked instrument;
- qopuz, plucked instrument;
- nuskhe, a stringed percussion instrument invented by Safiaddin Urmevi; and
- santur, a string percussion instrument, which has not survived in Azerbaijan (Figures 3 and 7).



4a



4b

Figure 4a and b: (a) The chagane (a spike lute) made by Kerimov, 1982; (b) Munis Sharifov, the People's artist of Azerbaijan, the head and concertmaster of the Museum Ensemble of Old Oriental Musical Instruments since 2013, is the only chagane performer.



Figure 5: Barbad made by Kerimov, 1980.



Figure 6: Rubab made by Kerimov, 1984.

In his work, Kerimov relied on the data drawn from four types of sources given as follows:

- Eastern medieval book miniatures, known in English as Islamic miniatures, from 13th to 18th centuries, which depicted musical instruments in abundance;
- treatises by medieval Azerbaijani musicologists Safiaddin Urmevi (1217–1294) and Abdulkadir Maraghi (1353–1437);
- testimonies of foreign travellers; and
- works of Azerbaijani medieval literature (e.g., the epic “Kitabi Dede Gorgud,” poetry of the Middle Ages).

Having recreated the above-mentioned instruments, Kerimov returned them to musical practice, having created in 1988 an amateur ensemble playing them, which since 1996 has been functioning as the Ensemble of Ancient Oriental Instruments of the State Museum of Musical Culture of Azerbaijan, which consists of 13 instrumentalists and two singers (Figure 7).



Figure7: The Museum Ensemble of Old Oriental Musical Instruments.

There are 23 recreated instruments in the museum, as they were made by Kerimov in two or three copies, so that they could be demonstrated in the main exposition and at the Permanent Exhibition of Folk Instruments (one of the branches of the museum, located in the former flat of Bakikhanov), as well as used in the ensemble, which can be listened to directly at rehearsals in the museum twice a week and at concerts.

In interpreting these instruments, we use the iconography of musical instruments, showing visitors’ reproductions of miniatures and enlarged fragments of them that depict musicians.

THE HARP CHANG

The most sophisticated and interesting explanation for the visitors, musicologists, musical instrument makers, and art historians is that the iconography of musical instruments makes it possible to note both their identity with the existing museum replicas and obvious differences, for example, in instruments such as the chang, the only harp-shaped instrument in Azerbaijani folklore. The three chang replicas (Figure 8) made by Majnun Kerimov, who became the head of the Laboratory for Restoration and Improvement of Musical Instruments of the Baku Music Academy, Doctor of Art History, Professor, and creator of the Museum Ensemble of Ancient Musical Instruments, the People’s Artist of Azerbaijan, differ from the instrument on oriental miniatures by two important characteristic details:

- 1) the absence of a strut characteristic of the Muslim harp;
- 2) the presence of a crossbar in the body of the harp.

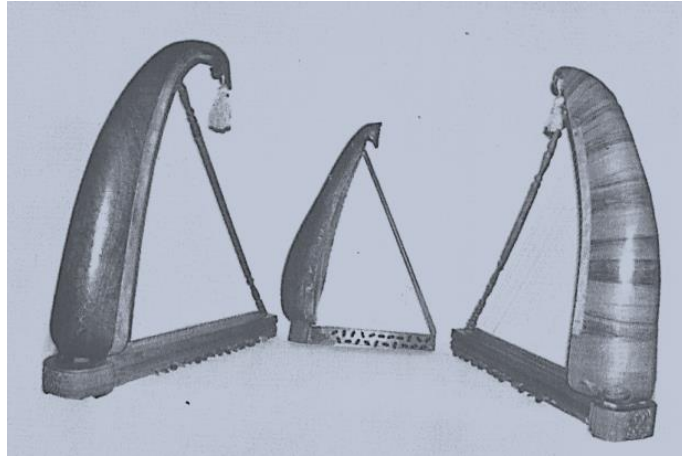


Figure 8: The chang replicas by Majnun Kerimov, 1976–1978.

DISCUSSED DIFFERENCES

Here are comments on these differences.

1) World iconography of harp-like instruments shows that unlike Egyptian, Greek, Japanese, Chinese, and other harps, the chang, common in the Muslim Middle Ages, had a support (foot, suckle, or strut). In China, as researcher Li Mei from the Music Research Institute, Chinese National Academy of Arts, Beijing, noted, along with the traditional Chinese harps, another harp, considered to originate from Persia, was widespread in the Chinese Western regions (in Chinese called 西域, Xiyü):

Li Mei says that there are musicians in sitting, standing, marching, and even flying positions. The musician represented on the 7th-century wooden box, inserted the socle of the harp under his belt, and plays it while walking. Such practicality of the instrument might have been the reason for its wide dissemination and longevity (Li Mei, 2014).

In this and other pictures of such a harp, presented by Li Mei in her article, we can indeed recognize “a socle,” a shortened strut (Figure 9a–b).



9a



9b

Figure 9a and b: (a) Harp depicted in the Mogao grotto no. 255 (8th century), Dunhuang, Gansu province; (b) drawing of the scene on the painted casket found at Subashi near Kuqa, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China (7th century). Provided by courtesy of Tokyo, National Museum (東京国立博物館), TC577 (Li Mei, 2014).

The chang's strut could be straight or curved. Medieval Islamic miniatures abound with such evidence, as well as depictions of two positions for playing this instrument (Figure 10a and b), of which the second one, the less common one, seems to be rather awkward. Nevertheless, it is present in a number of examples of the art of miniature painting, characterized by the precision of the details. With the help of a maquette produced by the museum, visitors to the museum can try both positions of an authentic chang with a prop when playing it themselves.



10a



10b

Figure 10a and b: Two positions of performance on the chang derived from Islamic book miniatures.

2) While some folklore harps and modern harps have such a detail as a column or a front strut, the chang had no such detail, as evidenced by its numerous pictures. By the way, in Turkey, masters of musical instruments make and use modern changs without this support.

The above-mentioned discrepancies with the authentic chang are also present in all copies of chang replicas made in recent years by engineer Mammadali Mammadov, head of the Laboratory of Musical Instruments of the Azerbaijan National Conservatory, who, in his work on the restoration and improvement of ancient musical instruments, was inspired by the works of Kerimov. Despite the fact that we have been publishing the results of our research on the historical chang for the last 10 years (Bayramova 2021, 2020, 2014), until now, Azerbaijani musical instrument makers have not made chang as close to the original as possible. We can only hope that in the future, the Scientific Laboratory of the Baku Music Academy, where Professor Majnun Kerimov, the “discoverer” of the chang, worked earlier, or the laboratory of the Azerbaijan National Conservatory will realize this fact.

A similar diversified approach is applied in the interpretation of other spheres of folklore, such as *ashiq* creativity, *mugham*, folk songs, and dances, as well as composers' creativity, for example, expressed in jazz.

REMARK

All depictions are either owned by the respective museum and provided by courtesy, made by the author, or since long time in the public domain.

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