

REVIEWING ENSEMBLE FORMS IN KAZAKH MUSIC-MAKING

Ayaulym Zhumkenova [Аяулым Жумкенова]¹

Abstract

For the first time this review examines the evolution of ensemble forms in Kazakh traditional musical performance from the 20th to the 21st century, transitioning from monophonic to polyphonic textures. The historical prerequisites for the emergence of collective music-making in Kazakhstan are analyzed, beginning with the early Kazakh traditional instrumental ensembles of the 1930s and continuing to the present day. Particular attention is paid to the outstanding figures of Kazakh musical art, such as Akhmet Zhubanov and Bolat Sarybayev, who made significant contributions to the development of ensemble and orchestral performance forms. A distinct section of this study focuses on the transformation of instrumental composition and repertoire of ensembles, as well as their functional features. As a specific musical example demonstrating the synthesis of tradition and innovation has been chosen the analysis of the *kyui* “Qairan Elim” by Bauyrzhan Aktaev performed by *Astana Sazy*—the State Ensemble of Kazakh Traditional Instruments. This study highlights the profound significance of Kazakh traditional ensembles as a universal performance genre that reflects the unparalleled richness of Kazakhstan’s national musical heritage.

Keywords

Folk ensemble, traditional music, ethnomusicology, cultural heritage. kuy [күй]

INTRODUCTION

Kazakhstan, officially the Republic of Kazakhstan, is a state in Central Asia. It has a wide ethno-cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity. Kazakhstan is officially a democratic, secular, unitary, constitutional republic. Its terrain includes plains, steppes, taiga, mountains, and deserts. Kazakhstan has a population of about 20 million people estimated for 2023, and its territory is about 2.7 million square kilometers, making it the ninth largest state in the world in terms of territory and 62nd in terms of population.



Figure 1: Map of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

It is known that Kazakh traditional music is monodic in nature (Keteganova & Nusupova, 2015). Kazakh traditional music has distinctive features that are not typical for both European

¹ Ayaulym Zhumkenova is a PhD doctoral candidate at the Kazakh National University of Arts, Department of Musicology and Composition, senior lecturer at the Faculty of Traditional Musical Performance at the Kazakh National University of Arts, soloist of *Astana Sazy*—the State Folk Ensemble of Kazakh Traditional Instruments, Kazakhstan, Astana. Additional information: zhumkenovawork@gmail.com.

and Eastern cultures. And yet, some exceptional features of Kazakh traditional music made it possible to master and join new performing forms in a relatively short period of time.

BACKGROUND

The first experience of musical professionalization of the European type in Kazakhstan initiated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many scholars, such as Erzakovitch, Pallas, Vinogradov, Vyzgo, Belyaev, Zataevitch, Vertkov, Aravin, and Zhubanov, among others, paid serious attention to identifying the common and distinctive features of Kazakh traditional national culture in these terms.

Historically, since the beginning of the last century, cultural and political reforms have impacted many vocal textures in the Western European sense into the musical fabric of the Kazakh people. In this connection, the soundscape began to change from monody to a multivoiced texture.

Scholars such as Shakhnazarova, Yelemanova, Mukhambetova, Amanov, and Nedlina noted that the Western (European) model of professional composer music in Eastern cultures was mastered increasingly, yet still very fruitfully.

The purpose of this article is to reveal the peculiarities of the development of the ensemble music-making forms of Kazakh traditional music from monodic thinking to polyphonic on the example of performance practices. It is commonly known that in traditional Kazakh culture historically there was no collective music-making. All musical heritage was solo performance—song, instrumental, and epic performance, although sometimes there were numerous competitions of contested forms—*aytys*² (competition of improvisational poets), *kuy*³ *tartys* (competition of *kuyshi*-performers), in which take part *zhyrau*⁴ (folk poet and singer in Kazakh poetry), *zhyrshy*⁵ (Kazakh folk singer-storyteller), poet-improvisers, *kuyshi* (performer of *kuys*), but all of them performed sequentially, one after another. And only in the 20th century, a new joint form of performing art began to appear. In this regard, ensemble performance is considered, which appeared in Kazakhstan in the first half of the 20th century as the most organic form of transition to multi-voice texture ensemble.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ZHUBANOV AND SARYBAYEV TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERFORMANCES OF KAZAKH TRADITIONAL MUSIC

Since the 1930s, Kazakhstan has seen significant developments in musical professionalism, particularly in the creation of new musical genres and forms including ensemble, chamber, choral music, opera, symphony, and ballet. One of the outstanding figures in organizing collective music-making on traditionally Kazakh instruments was the musicologist, composer, and conductor Zhubanov (1906–1968). Initially, in Almaty, at the Musical and Dramatic Technical School (now Almaty Musical College named after P. I. Tchaikovsky) there was a *dombyra* ensemble consisting of eleven musicians (Kozybayev, 1983). Later, in 1934, the ensemble was renamed by Zhubanov as the ensemble named after “KazTsIK”.⁶ Now it has

² A musical competition of Kazakh poets performing impromptu songs on a common topic.

³ The Kazakh word “*kuy*” has several meanings. The first means “mood, state.” The second meaning of the word “*kuy*” is a genre of Kazakh instrumental music. In traditional music, there were and are still *kuys* for all groups of instruments—chordophones, aerophones, membranophones, and idiophones.

⁴ *Zhyrau* is not only a performer, but also an author of musical-poetical pieces.

⁵ Unlike *akyn* and *zhyraum*, *zhyrshy* is a performer, not a creator of popular pieces.

⁶ The Kazakh Central Executive Committee (KazTsIK) was the organ of state power during the period of Soviet rule in Kazakhstan. It was responsible for directing and managing a number of important issues in the republic, such as conducting elections, approving laws and policies, and coordinating the activities of state bodies.

grown up to 81 musicians and is called “The Kazakh State Academic Orchestra of Folk Instruments” named after Kurmangazy. In 2022, due to its wide-established popularity, the Orchestra received the status of “National”.

So, slowly but surely, the ensemble forms of Kazakh traditional instruments acquired more specific forms. The decisive role in this process was played by the Kazakh scholar, organologist, and public figure Sarybayev (1927–1984) (Shakarim, 2013). Based on his own creative and research activity, Sarybayev had shown the possible diversity of forms of performance on Kazakh folk instruments. Since ensemble performance did not exist in the Kazakh music tradition in the past, it was Sarybayev who became the founder of the new repertoire and forms of Kazakh folk ensembles’ performance.

Along with the inclusion of new instruments in the ensemble, changes were introduced in the interpretation of the original melody of the kuy. For example, a long melody from a folk kuy was first performed only on the *sybyzgy*—a wind musical instrument. Later, when new instruments such as the *sherter* (a three-stringed plucked instrument) and the *kyl-kobyz* (a two-stringed bowed instrument) were added to the ensemble, the extended melodies began to be played alternately on each of these instruments.

In parallel with the formation of ensemble music-making, there was work related to the modification of Kazakh folk instruments, as a result of which by 1972 the ensemble “Otyrar Sazy” grew up to 20 people.

As Sarybayev noted: “In order to expand the ensemble tradition we perform kuy ‘Boken zhargak’ (‘Antelope skin cape’) (*sybyzgy*—B.S. and *dombyra*—K. Akhmediyarov). It was more difficult to reinforce the joint performance on *sybyzgy* and *kyl-kobyz*. And only in 1969, when Daulet Myktybayev and I, imbued with interest in the work of folklore ensemble, managed to execute a duet of *sybyzgy* and *kyl-kobyz*...” (Sarybayev, 1978: 172-173).

Sarybayev’s incredible intuitive vision and unique scholarship, aiming to “determine and scientifically substantiate all that is the identity of the Kazakh orchestra,” and to introduce “all kinds of Kazakh musical instruments, preserving their timbre and performance traditions,” expressed in his monograph, brought well-deserved results (Sarybayev, 1978).

Therefore, thanks to the creative cooperation of Akhmet Zhubanov and Bolat Sarybayev, two types of collective music-making on traditional music instruments—ensemble and orchestral—have bloomed in Kazakhstan.

THE ORCHESTRAL AND ENSEMBLE FORMS OF KAZAKH MUSIC PERFORMANCE: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

If we compare special features of these two forms in Kazakhstan, as a rule, orchestras, as large music bodies that combine different families of instruments, are sponsored by state institutions and exist on the basis of state philharmonic, concert, and educational organizations. A modern orchestra of Kazakh folk instruments has up to 100 members.

Kazakh folk instrument ensembles, in contrast, have often formed independently and are characterized by greater mobility. They have developed through various forms of music-making and performance, sometimes integrating traditional musical instruments with modern musical culture.

Broadly speaking, two types of Kazakh traditional ensembles are prevalent in the Republic today. These can be categorized as stable and mobile formations. The first type evolves over time with the support of state institutions, while the second type is more flexible, forming spontaneously to accommodate significant social events. The latter is often marked by its adaptability and improvisational nature.

Figure 2: Part of the score of the kuy “Kairan Yelim”, B. Aktayev. Printed with permission of the composer and the score publisher.

The first stable forms include those well-known ensembles that have an official status: “Murager” (founded in 1980), “Sazgen” (1981), “Folk Music Ensemble of the Presidential Orchestra of the Republic of Kazakhstan” (1992), “Ak Zhauyn” (1997), “Saryarka” (1998), “Arka Sazy” (2004), “Turan” (2008), “Astana Sazy” (2017), “Sarmad” (2017), “Korkyt” (2018), and others.

Stable forms follow a strictly fixed order of Kazakh traditional musical instruments, including the dombyra, sherter, prima-kobyz, kyl-kobyz, zhetigen, dangyra, shankobyz, and sybyzgy.

The repertoire of stable ensembles may include a diverse range of works, such as arrangements of Kazakh traditional music and folk songs, compositions by Kazakh composers, *popular* Russian and Western melodies, as well as pop songs, dance music, and film scores. These ensembles have an extensive repertoire. For example, in 2022, the “Astana Sazy” ensemble released an album titled ZAMAN, featuring 18 tracks from its regular repertoire.

As a representative example of the stable ensemble format described above, we present to the reader the contemporary Kazakh kuy *Kairan Yelim* [Oh, My People], composed by Bauyrzhan Aktayev specifically for the Kazakh State Folk Ensemble “Astana Sazy.” The nine-page score consists of an introduction, development, and climax. However, when introducing his work to the ensemble, Aktayev encouraged musicians to adopt an improvisational approach to its performance. This unique perspective infused the piece with a dynamic, improvisatory character, blending elements of traditional Kazakh folk kuy with contemporary compositional techniques.

Unlike stable ensembles, mobile ensembles emerge spontaneously, forming in response to festive events that require groups of 3–13 musicians. They perform at various occasions, from official receptions to weddings, adapting to the event’s setting, equipment, and budget. Their repertoire includes pop songs, Kazakh kuys, remakes, remixes, and other popular genres. A

typical lineup consists of 3–4 musicians playing dombyra, kobyz, accordion, and occasionally sherto or zhetigen.

CONCLUSION

Today in the 21st century, ensembles of Kazakh folk instruments have evolved into a dynamic model of transition toward polyphonic textural fabric. Their rich timbral diversity and expressive depth make them highly accessible to audiences, earning the attention of both listeners and scholars alike.

Collective forms of music-making first emerged in Kazakhstan in the early 20th century. Now, a century later, it is essential to reflect on the evolution of this tradition. The widespread popularity of Kazakh folk ensembles today, both domestically and internationally, underscores their cultural significance. These ensembles not only preserve and showcase the richness of traditional Kazakh music but also contribute to its ongoing development. Their growing influence highlights the need for further academic inquiry into their artistic, historical, and theoretical dimensions.

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⁷ Nearly all authors' names are used without full given names as in the original writing.

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