

## THE ROLE OF THE TANBUR IN SHAPING VOCAL PHRASING IN UZBEK CLASSICAL MUSIC

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**Abstract:** The tanbur, a long-necked fretted lute, occupies a central position in Uzbek classical music, particularly within the Shashmaqom tradition. While extensive scholarship has addressed the tanbur's role as a solo and ensemble instrument, comparatively little attention has been paid to its function as a pedagogical and performance tool for shaping vocal phrasing. This article investigates how the tanbur's physical construction, tuning system, and performance techniques influence the way singers articulate maqom melodies. Through analysis of traditional teaching methods, examination of the tanbur's fretted fingerboard as a visual map of modal structure, and consideration of the instrument's timbral relationship to the human voice, this study demonstrates that the tanbur serves not merely as an accompaniment but as a primary model for vocal phrase design, ornamentation, and rhythmic articulation in Uzbek classical singing.

**Keywords:** tanbur, Shashmaqom, Uzbek classical music, vocal phrasing, maqom, instrumental-vocal relationship

### Introduction

The classical music tradition of Uzbekistan, known most fully through the twelve-part Shashmaqom, represents a sophisticated synthesis of melodic modes (maqom), rhythmic cycles (usul), and poetic forms. Within this tradition, the relationship between instrumental performance and vocal expression is particularly intimate. Unlike Western classical traditions in which accompaniment typically subordinates itself to a solo voice, Uzbek classical practice conceives of instruments and voice as operating within a shared conceptual framework, each reinforcing and illuminating the other. Among the instruments of the Uzbek tanbur ensemble, which includes the tanbur, dutar, and sato, the tanbur occupies a position of special importance in relation to the singing voice.

The tanbur is a long-necked lute with three strings, traditionally fretted with gut ligatures that produce the quarter-tone intervals characteristic of Uzbek maqom. Its history in Central Asia extends back many centuries, with the instrument appearing in miniature paintings and literary sources from the Timurid period onward. The contemporary Uzbek tanbur, while sharing a common ancestry with Iranian and Afghan tanburs, has developed distinctive features including its specific fret placement, playing technique, and repertoire. These features have direct bearing on the instrument's relationship to vocal performance.

This article examines the role of the tanbur in shaping vocal phrasing in Uzbek classical music. The central argument is that the tanbur functions simultaneously as an accompanying instrument, a pedagogical tool, and an acoustic model for the singing voice. The physical layout of the tanbur's fretted fingerboard provides singers with a spatial representation of melodic relationships that is more tangible than abstract modal theory. The characteristic tanbur techniques of plectrum articulation and finger vibration offer models for vocal ornamentation.

And the timbral qualities of the tanbur, particularly its bright, penetrating sound in the middle and upper registers, establish acoustic ideals that singers strive to emulate.

Three primary research questions guide this investigation. First, how does the tanbur's fret system encode the modal structures of Shashmaqom in ways that influence vocal pitch production and melodic contour? Second, what specific tanbur performance techniques find direct analogues in vocal ornamentation and phrasing? Third, how does the traditional ustoz-shogird (master-apprentice) pedagogical system utilize the tanbur as a teaching instrument for developing vocal skills? Addressing these questions requires integration of organological analysis, performance practice study, and pedagogical observation.

### Materials and Methods

This study employs a multi-method qualitative approach combining instrument analysis, ethnographic description, and musicological analysis of recorded performances. The primary materials examined include historical and contemporary tanburs from Uzbek instrument collections, pedagogical texts and manuals from Uzbekistan's specialized music institutions, and commercial and archival recordings of Shashmaqom performances by both instrumentalists and vocalists.

Organological analysis focused on the fret placement of the tanbur relative to the acoustic requirements of Shashmaqom modal structures. Measurements were taken from three instruments: a tanbur from the collection of the Tashkent State Conservatory dated to the early twentieth century, a contemporary instrument from the workshop of master luthier Usmanov in Tashkent, and a tanbur used in instructional settings at the Yunus Rajabi Institute of Uzbek National Music. Fret positions were measured relative to string length and compared to the theoretical intervals of the twelve maqom.

Analysis of pedagogical practice drew upon published teaching materials from the Uzbek conservatory system, including vocal etudes and instrumental exercises designed to coordinate tanbur playing with vocal production. Additionally, observational descriptions of traditional ustoz-shogird lessons were obtained from published ethnographic accounts and from interviews with contemporary practitioners conducted between 2015 and 2020. These sources provided detailed information about how the tanbur is used in the transmission of vocal repertoire and technique.

Musical analysis examined a selection of Shashmaqom recordings from the mid-twentieth century to the present. The sample included performances by master tanbur players (tanburists) and master singers (hofiz), both separately and in ensemble contexts. Particular attention was paid to passages where the tanbur and voice perform the same melodic material, as well as passages where the tanbur executes ornaments or phrasing that vocalists subsequently imitate. Spectrographic analysis of selected recordings allowed visualization of pitch and timing relationships between instrumental and vocal performances.

A significant limitation of this study is the scarcity of systematic physiological data regarding how singers internalize instrumental models. While extensive anecdotal and pedagogical evidence supports the claim that tanbur playing influences vocal phrasing, direct measurement of singers' vocal production in relation to tanbur stimuli remains a direction for future research rather than a component of the present investigation.

### Results

### The Tanbur Fret System as a Modal Map

The tanbur's fretted fingerboard provides a spatial representation of the Shashmaqom modal system that profoundly influences vocal pitch production. The instrument typically carries between fourteen and sixteen tied gut frets along its neck, with additional unfretted positions above the highest fret producing the upper range of the instrument. Each fret corresponds to a specific pitch within the maqom scale system, with the intervals including the quarter-tones that distinguish Uzbek classical music from equal-tempered systems.

Measurement of fret positions reveals that the spacing follows the logical structure of the maqom mode being performed. For the maqom Buzruk, for example, fret placement produces a scale with characteristic intervals of approximately 150 cents (neutral second), 200 cents (major second), and 350 cents (neutral third) at specific positions. The physical distance between frets decreases predictably as the hand moves up the neck, but the intervallic relationships remain constant. This means that a singer watching a tanburist's left hand during performance or rehearsal sees a direct spatial representation of the melodic distances they must produce with their voice.

The pedagogical implications of this spatial representation are significant. In traditional teaching, the ustoz plays a melodic phrase on the tanbur while the shogird (apprentice) watches both the hand position on the fingerboard and listens to the resulting pitch. The apprentice then attempts to sing the same phrase, using the memory of the hand position as an additional cue for pitch accuracy. This visual-auditory integration proves particularly valuable for the quarter-tone intervals that singers from other musical backgrounds often find challenging. The tanbur's frets make the quarter-tones physically discrete, with a visible gap between frets that the singer can internalize as a spatial as well as an aural distance.

Beyond basic pitch production, the tanbur fret system models the hierarchical organization of pitches within each maqom. The open strings of the tanbur are tuned to the fundamental pitches of the mode, typically with the highest string providing the tonic and the lower strings offering dominant or subdominant relationships. The positioning of frets relative to these open strings encodes the relative importance of different scale degrees, with the tonic, dominant, and important modal markers receiving prominent fret placements while passing tones occupy secondary positions. Singers internalize this hierarchy through repeated exposure to tanbur performance, developing an intuitive sense of which pitches function as structural anchors and which serve as ornamental or transitional elements.

### Timbral Modeling and Vocal Production

The tanbur's characteristic timbre exerts a powerful influence on the vocal sound idealized in Uzbek classical singing. The instrument produces a bright, focused tone with strong upper partials, particularly in the middle and upper registers where much vocal melody lies. The plectrum (typically a thin strip of plastic or horn) attacks each note with a clean, precise onset, producing minimal noise and maximum fundamental frequency energy. This attack characteristic establishes a model for vocal onset that singers emulate, avoiding breathy or glottal attacks in favor of clean, focused initiation of each pitch.

The sustain of the tanbur, while limited compared to bowed instruments, is sufficient to allow clear perception of pitch and timbre throughout the duration of a note. For longer notes, tanburists employ a technique called titrash (tremolo) in which the plectrum rapidly alternates up

and down strokes, producing a sustained, shimmering tone. This tremolo technique has a direct analogue in vocal production, where singers produce a similar effect through rapid, small-amplitude pitch oscillation known as tebranish. Both techniques serve the same musical function, sustaining interest on long notes while maintaining connection to the underlying modal framework.

The tanbur's dynamic range and articulation capabilities provide models for vocal phrasing at the phrase level. The instrument can produce sharp accents through forceful plectrum strokes, gentle releases through controlled decay, and a variety of articulations between these extremes. The characteristic tanbur technique of playing melody on the highest string while allowing lower strings to ring sympathetically creates a complex texture in which a clear melodic line emerges from a resonant harmonic field. This texture models the relationship between the vocal melody and the implied harmonic and modal context that singers must maintain in their own performance, projecting a clear line while remaining aware of the broader modal environment.

Perhaps most significantly, the tanbur's pitch flexibility in the hands of a master musician provides a model for microtonal nuance in vocal performance. While the fixed frets might seem to constrain the instrument to discrete pitches, skilled tanburists achieve subtle pitch inflections through finger pressure variations, pulling the string sideways to raise pitch slightly, or releasing pressure to lower it. These techniques produce the gentle pitch bends (*ta'rif*) and ornamental slides (*surish*) that characterize expressive performance in *Shashmaqom*. Singers hear these inflections and reproduce them in their own vocal lines, using the tanbur as a reference for the appropriate degree and timing of microtonal deviation from the fretted pitches.

#### Specific Tanbur Techniques and Their Vocal Analogues

The repertoire of tanbur performance techniques includes several figurations that find direct expression in vocal ornamentation. The first of these is the already-mentioned tebranish, the vibrato-like oscillation produced by left-hand finger movement on a fretted note. In tanbur performance, tebranish varies in speed and width according to musical context, with wider, slower oscillations used for emphasis and narrower, faster oscillations used for sustained notes. Vocal tebranish matches these parameters precisely, and singers learn the appropriate contexts for each variety through imitation of tanburists.

A second important technique is the *surish*, or sliding ornament, in which the left-hand finger slides from one fret to another without releasing pressure on the string. This produces a continuous pitch glide that connects two discrete pitches, filling in the intervening microtonal space. In tanbur performance, *surish* may cover intervals as small as a quarter-tone or as large as a fourth. Vocal *surish* reproduces this glide, and the tanbur provides an acoustic model for the speed, continuity, and endpoint accuracy of the slide. Singers who have internalized the sound of tanbur *surish* produce more accurate and stylistically appropriate vocal slides than those who learn solely from other singers.

A third technique is the *khayrit*, a rapid alternation between two adjacent pitches, typically a tone or semitone apart. On the tanbur, *khayrit* is produced by alternating between two left-hand fingers while the right hand continues a steady plectrum stroke. The effect is a fluttering, ornamental figure that occupies a defined duration within the rhythmic cycle. Vocal *khayrit* requires rapid alternation between two pitches, and the tanbur model provides the tempo and clarity of alternation that distinguishes stylistically correct from incorrect execution.

Perhaps the most complex tanbur technique with vocal implications is the practice of playing melodic variations (tavsif) that elaborate the basic maqom melody. In ensemble performance, the tanburist may play increasingly elaborate versions of a melody while the singer performs a simpler version, or the two may alternate in presenting variations of increasing complexity. This practice trains singers in the art of melodic variation by providing them with a continuous stream of possibilities to hear and potentially adopt. The tanbur thus serves not only as a model for correct execution of given material but as a generator of new material that expands the singer's vocabulary of melodic and ornamental possibilities.

#### The Tanbur in Ustoz-Shogird Vocal Pedagogy

The traditional ustoz-shogird system of musical transmission relies heavily on the tanbur as a teaching instrument. The typical lesson proceeds through a sequence of activities in which the tanbur plays a central role. The ustoz begins by playing a section of a maqom movement on the tanbur, often singing along with the instrument or alternating between playing and singing. The shogird listens and watches, attending both to the sound and to the ustoz's left-hand finger positions on the tanbur neck. The ustoz then repeats the passage while the shogird attempts to sing along, using the tanbur sound as a pitch and phrasing reference. Finally, the shogird sings the passage without the tanbur, with the ustoz providing corrections.

This sequence reveals the tanbur functioning simultaneously as model, reference, and corrective tool. As a model, the tanbur demonstrates the ideal melodic shape, ornamentation, and rhythmic articulation. As a reference, it provides continuous pitch information against which the shogird can compare their own vocal production. As a corrective tool, it allows the ustoz to demonstrate specifically where the shogird's singing deviates from the model, playing the problematic passage on the tanbur while the shogird listens and then attempts again.

The physical layout of the tanbur also supports pedagogical activities that would be difficult or impossible with voice alone. The ustoz can point to specific frets on the tanbur neck while discussing pitch relationships, creating a tangible reference for abstract modal concepts. The ustoz can also place the shogird's finger on the tanbur string at the correct fret position, allowing the apprentice to feel the correct spatial location for a pitch before attempting to sing it. This haptic dimension of learning, the combination of touch with hearing and sight, appears to enhance retention and accuracy in ways that purely aural pedagogy cannot achieve.

Ethnographic accounts of traditional tanbur-vocal pedagogy emphasize the importance of the instrument's sympathetic resonance as a teaching tool. When a singer produces a pitch accurately, the corresponding open string of the tanbur may vibrate sympathetically even if not played. The ustoz watches for this sympathetic vibration as an indicator of the shogird's pitch accuracy. Conversely, the absence of sympathetic vibration indicates intonation problems requiring correction. This immediate, non-verbal feedback loop, mediated by the instrument's acoustic properties, provides a form of assessment that is both objective and musically relevant.

#### Discussion

##### Comparison with Other Instrumental-Vocal Relationships

The relationship between tanbur and voice in Uzbek classical music differs significantly from comparable relationships in other musical traditions. In Persian classical music, for example, the setar (a smaller, four-stringed relative of the tanbur) accompanies voice but typically subordinates itself to vocal phrasing rather than modeling it. The Persian vocal style, with its

more extensive use of ornamentation and freer rhythm, does not align as closely with setar technique as Uzbek vocal style aligns with tanbur technique. This difference likely reflects the greater rhythmic and metric organization of Shashmaqom compared to the more through-composed Persian radif.

In North Indian classical music, the relationship between sarod or sitar and voice shares some features with the Uzbek case, particularly the use of instrumental techniques to model vocal ornaments. However, the Indian tradition places greater emphasis on the distinction between instrumental and vocal idioms, with instruments like the sarod developing techniques (such as sustained glissandi) that have no direct vocal analogue. The Uzbek tanbur, by contrast, maintains closer correspondence between instrumental and vocal technique, perhaps reflecting the relatively recent historical emergence of a distinct instrumental idiom separate from vocal performance.

The Western classical tradition offers a contrast of a different kind. The piano, as the primary accompanying instrument for art song, provides harmonic and rhythmic support but does not model vocal phrasing in the same direct manner as the tanbur. Western vocal pedagogy relies primarily on the teacher's voice as a model, with the piano serving as a pitch reference but not as a source of phrasing or ornamentation models. The Uzbek integration of instrumental and vocal pedagogy thus represents a distinctive approach that may offer lessons for voice teaching in other traditions.

#### Contemporary Transformations and Challenges

The institutionalization of Uzbek music education has transformed but not eliminated the tanbur's role in shaping vocal phrasing. Conservatory voice students typically receive instruction in maqom theory, ear training, and repertoire, but they also continue to study tanbur at a basic level. This requirement, unique among world conservatory systems, ensures that singers develop direct tactile familiarity with the instrument that models their vocal production. The singer who can play tanbur, even at a modest level, possesses an internalized reference for pitch relationships, ornamentation, and phrasing that the non-playing singer lacks.

However, the conservatory setting also introduces changes to the traditional tanbur-vocal relationship. Class size, limited lesson time, and the emphasis on written notation and theoretical understanding reduce the intensive aural and haptic learning that characterized the ustoz-shogird system. Some contemporary pedagogues express concern that the current institutional approach produces singers who know about tanbur technique without having internalized it in the embodied manner of traditionally trained musicians. Efforts to address this concern include the revival of intensive apprenticeship programs alongside formal conservatory study.

The preservation of traditional tanbur-vocal pedagogy faces additional challenges from changing performance contexts. The traditional setting for Shashmaqom performance, the majlis (gathering) of connoisseurs in intimate spaces, allowed subtle instrumental-vocal interactions that are difficult to replicate on large concert stages or in recording studios. The visual aspect of tanbur pedagogy, the singer watching the tanburist's fingers, becomes impossible when the tanburist is placed in an orchestra pit or when the singer faces an audience rather than the accompanying musicians. Adapting traditional pedagogy to contemporary performance contexts while preserving its essential features remains an ongoing challenge.

#### Conclusion

The tanbur plays a multifaceted and essential role in shaping vocal phrasing in Uzbek classical music. Through its fret system, the instrument provides a spatial map of maqom modal structures that singers internalize as a guide to pitch production and melodic contour. Through its timbral characteristics and performance techniques, the tanbur models the vocal sound and ornamentation styles that define the Uzbek classical aesthetic. And through its central position in traditional ustoz-shogird pedagogy, the tanbur serves as the primary tool for transmitting vocal repertoire and technique from master to apprentice.

The relationship between tanbur and voice is not one of simple accompaniment but of deep structural integration. The instrument does not merely support the voice or fill in harmonic texture but actively shapes the way singers conceive and execute melody. This integration reflects a fundamental feature of Uzbek classical music, the unity of instrumental and vocal practice within a shared modal and rhythmic framework. Understanding this integration is essential for anyone seeking to perform, teach, or preserve this rich musical tradition.

For contemporary practice, the tanbur's role in vocal pedagogy suggests that effective training of Shashmaqom singers requires continued emphasis on instrumental study. Singers who develop basic tanbur skills internalize pitch relationships, ornamentation patterns, and phrasing models more thoroughly than those who learn from notation or recordings alone. Institutions dedicated to preserving Uzbek classical music should therefore maintain and strengthen the requirement for singers to study tanbur alongside voice.

Future research should investigate the neurological and physiological mechanisms through which tanbur playing influences vocal production. Neuroimaging studies of singers trained with tanbur accompaniment compared to those trained without could illuminate the cognitive integration of visual, tactile, and auditory information in pitch production and ornamentation. Additionally, comparative studies of tanbur-vocal pedagogy across different regions of Uzbekistan and across different historical periods would enrich our understanding of this distinctive and effective approach to musical transmission.

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