REPERTOIRE SELECTION AND VOCAL TECHNIQUE ADAPTING FERGHANA FOLK CLASSICAL SINGING FOR STRUCTURED UNIVERSITY SYLLABI

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Abstract: The integration of Ferghana folk classical singing into the structured university syllabi of Uzbekistan presents a unique pedagogical challenge. Unlike the codified Shashmaqom tradition, which benefitted from Soviet era institutionalization, Ferghana vocal music including Tanovar, Katta ashula, and lyrical Ferghana songs has historically relied on oral master apprentice transmission (ustoz shogird). This study examines how repertoire selection and vocal technique instruction can be systematically adapted for conservatory and university settings without losing the genre's essential aesthetic features. Through a mixed methods approach combining syllabus analysis from four Uzbek higher music institutions, interviews with twenty three vocal pedagogy faculty, and comparative observation of master classes and university lessons, I identify three principal areas of tension: the standardization of ornamentation, the pacing of repertoire difficulty, and the notation versus aural learning debate. Results indicate that successful adaptation requires a tiered repertoire model progressing from short Ferghana folk lyrics to extended Tanovar forms, alongside a vocal technique framework centered on four Ferghana specific competencies: controlled laryngeal flexibility for ishkala ornaments, breath management for melismatic phrasing, microtonal pitch stability, and text driven emotional modulation. The discussion proposes a semester by semester syllabus template that preserves oral transmission through required listening and imitation hours while using notation only as a memory aid. The study concludes that Ferghana folk classical singing can be effectively taught in university settings when repertoire selection respects regional stylistic boundaries and vocal technique is reframed not as Western bel canto but as an embodied Ferghana aesthetic.

Keywords: Ferghana vocal music, Tanovar, university music pedagogy, oral transmission, Uzbek folk classical singing, ornamentation technique

Introduction

The Ferghana Valley has long been recognized as a crucible of Uzbek vocal artistry. From the meditative Tanovar to the epic Katta ashula (great song) and the intimately lyrical Ferghana songs of love and separation, this region produced many of the twentieth century's most revered singers including Hoji Abdulaziz Abdurasulov, Orifkhon Khatamov, Mamurjon Uzokov, and Soyiba Qosimova. Their legacy survives through recordings, oral transmission, and the work of dedicated teachers. However, the institutionalization of Ferghana vocal music within university programs of Uzbekistan faces a fundamental contradiction. The living oral tradition demands flexibility, individualized ornamentation, and prolonged mimetic apprenticeship, while the university syllabus requires standardized curricula, measurable learning outcomes, and fixed timeframes. This contradiction has led to what several Uzbek ethnomusicologists call the conservatory problem: students emerge with theoretical knowledge of Ferghana styles but without the embodied vocal flexibility that distinguished the great masters.

The problem is compounded by historical factors. During the Soviet period, the Tashkent Conservatory prioritized Shashmaqom as the official classical canon, creating notation based courses, textbooks, and exam structures for Shashmaqom that were later partially adapted for Ferghana repertoire. Yet Ferghana vocal music operates differently. Its ornamentation is more extemporaneous. Its phrasing follows poetic meter rather than fixed instrumental cycles. Its emotional affect depends on subtle microtonal inflections that resist equal temperament notation. Consequently, many university trained singers perform Ferghana repertoire with what older practitioners criticize as "flat" or "mechanical" delivery, technically correct but aesthetically hollow.

This study addresses the following research questions. First, what are the specific points of tension between Ferghana vocal pedagogy and university syllabus structures as experienced by teachers and students? Second, how can repertoire be sequenced to build competence while maintaining stylistic authenticity? Third, what vocal technique framework accommodates the physiological demands of Ferghana singing within a progressive semester based model? The significance extends beyond Uzbekistan. As higher education institutions worldwide seek to incorporate oral tradition musics into formal curricula, the Ferghana case offers lessons in balancing preservation with adaptation, standardization with flexibility, and notation with aurality.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative case study design conducted between September 2025 and April 2026. One Uzbek higher music institutions participated: Kokand State University. This site was selected to represent both the central Tashkent perspective and Ferghana Valley native institutions where regional stylistic knowledge remains strongest.

Data collection involved three components. First, I analyzed current syllabi for all undergraduate vocal performance courses that included Ferghana repertoire, totaling sixteen syllabi from the four institutions. Analysis focused on repertoire lists, semester sequencing, technical exercises, assessment criteria, and the ratio of notation based to aural based instruction. Second, I conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty three vocal pedagogy faculty members. The participant group included twelve men and eleven women, with teaching experience ranging from six to thirty eight years. Seven faculty members were native to the Ferghana Valley with direct apprenticeship training under twentieth century masters. Sixteen held conservatory degrees but had later studied informally with Ferghana practitioners. Interview questions addressed perceived difficulties in teaching Ferghana repertoire, strategies for ornament instruction, attitudes toward notation, and suggestions for syllabus improvement. Interviews were conducted in Uzbek, recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for analysis. Third, I observed twelve lessons and four public master classes, comparing teaching methods between Ferghana born ustoz teachers and conservatory trained professors. Observations focused on how ornamentation was demonstrated, how rhythm and microtonation were communicated, and how students received corrective feedback.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis procedures. Interview transcripts and observation notes were coded inductively using NVivo software, generating initial codes that were grouped into broader themes through iterative discussion between the author and two research assistants familiar with Ferghana music. Syllabus content was tabulated and compared for common patterns

and outliers. Member checking was conducted with five faculty participants who reviewed preliminary findings.

Results

The analysis yielded three major results concerning tensions in current practice, effective repertoire sequencing strategies, and vocal technique frameworks.

Regarding tensions in current practice, three areas of persistent difficulty emerged from faculty interviews and syllabus review. The first tension involved ornament standardization. Whereas oral tradition allows each performance to vary ornament placement and density, university assessments often demand consistent reproduction of a single notated version. Seventy eight percent of faculty reported that this pressure leads students to memorize ornaments rigidly, losing natural phrasing. One Ferghana native teacher stated "My student plays the notation perfectly but his ishkala sounds like a machine. The note is correct but the soul is missing." The second tension involved pacing of difficulty. Traditional apprenticeship exposes students to complete Tanovar performances from the first year through listening and imitation without formal sequencing. University syllabi, however, typically begin with short folk songs and introduce Tanovar only in the third or fourth year. Sixty five percent of faculty felt this delays development of sustained breath control and melismatic fluency that Tanovar requires. The third tension involved notation versus aural learning. Syllabi from Tashkent institutions averaged forty percent of instructional time dedicated to score reading and notated exercises, while Ferghana branch institutions allocated only fifteen percent. Students trained primarily with notation showed faster initial accuracy but slower development of microtonal flexibility and ornament variation. Students trained aurally showed the reverse pattern.

Regarding effective repertoire sequencing strategies, faculty who reported highest student success used a tiered model that did not strictly separate folk from classical repertoire but organized by technical demands. Three tiers emerged from interviews. The first tier consisted of short Ferghana lyrical songs of two to three minutes duration with syllabic text setting, narrow pitch range of one octave, minimal ornamentation limited to occasional nola, and repeated phrase structures. Examples included "Ferghanacha" and "Adashganman". This tier occupied the first two semesters. The second tier introduced longer Ferghana folk classical pieces of four to five minutes with more melismatic writing, expanded pitch range of a twelfth, introduction of ishkala and oshirma ornaments, and aba or abab form. Examples included "Guluz" and "Yor yor". This tier occupied semesters three and four. The third tier included full Tanovar performances of six to eight minutes with extended melismatic passages, full vocal range, all ornament types including sequential ornament combinations, and through composed structures based on ghazal poetry. Examples included Hoji Abdulaziz's "Ey sabo" and Mamurjon Uzokov's "Guluz" arrangements. Notably, successful teachers did not progress linearly through all students at identical pace. Instead, they used mastery based progression where students advanced tiers only after demonstrating three competencies: accurate pitch memory of two complete recordings, ability to execute ishkala and nola at variable speeds, and listener judged emotional appropriateness.

Regarding vocal technique frameworks, faculty interviews revealed that Ferghana singing demands four physiological competencies rarely emphasized in conventional conservatory vocal technique courses. The first competency, controlled laryngeal flexibility for ishkala ornaments, requires the ability to slowly bend pitch a quarter tone to a semitone below the target pitch and

glide upward without glottal tension. This counters Western classical training that prioritizes stable pitch on sustained notes. The second competency, breath management for melismatic phrasing, requires sustained subglottic pressure across ten to fifteen seconds of textless vocalise on a single vowel, as occurs in Tanovar introductions. The third competency, microtonal pitch stability, requires singing intervals of three quarter tones (neutral seconds) and distinguishing them from adjacent semitones, a skill absent from equal temperament ear training. The fourth competency, text driven emotional modulation, requires shifting vocal timbre and ornament intensity in direct response to poetic meaning, sometimes within a single word. Faculty who successfully taught these competencies used a combination of vocalises derived from Ferghana repertoire rather than abstract exercises. For example, an ishkala vocalise consisted of a single pitch sustained while bending down and up repeatedly, starting at slow tempo and accelerating. For microtonal stability, teachers used call and response patterns of three quarter tone intervals sung on nonsense syllables.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that adapting Ferghana folk classical singing for university syllabi is neither impossible nor requires diluting the tradition. However, it does require deliberate structural changes to current pedagogical practices. The three tensions identified, ornament standardization, pacing, and notation use, are not inherent to the music but result from applying Shashmaqom derived syllabi models to Ferghana repertoire. The successful tiered repertoire model revealed by Ferghana native faculty offers a template that respects both institutional constraints and musical authenticity.

Several theoretical implications emerge. First, the distinction between "folk" and "classical" in Uzbek music pedagogy is less useful than a continuum of technical demands. Short Ferghana lyrical songs share melodic materials with Tanovar but require fewer ornaments and shorter breath phrases. By reframing progression as technical complexity rather than genre hierarchy, teachers can introduce authentic Ferghana style from the first semester without overwhelming beginners. Second, the vocal technique framework for Ferghana singing should be taught as a distinct physiological system rather than as an application of Western bel canto or Shashmaqom technique. The laryngeal flexibility required for ishkala directly opposes the stable larynx advocated in many conservatory methods. Students who first learn Western style vocal production often struggle to unlearn stable pitch habits when encountering Ferghana repertoire. Third, aural learning and notation can coexist if notation is repositioned as a memory aid and analytical tool rather than a performance prescription. The most successful approach observed in Ferghana branch institutions involved students first memorizing a recording completely by ear, then using notation to analyze phrase structure and ornament placement, then returning to aural models for expressive details. This cycle of aural notation aural preserved oral tradition integrity while using notation's analytical benefits.

Practical implications for syllabus design follow. A semester by semester template for a four year undergraduate program would include the following. First year, semesters one and two, focuses exclusively on tier one Ferghana lyrical songs with aural only instruction, breath management exercises, and introduction to nola ornament. Second year, semesters three and four, introduces tier two repertoire with notation as post memorization analysis, adds ishkala and oshirma through vocalises, and requires weekly listening journals of twentieth century master

recordings. Third year, semesters five and six, introduces tier three Tanovar repertoire with students choosing between multiple recorded versions to develop interpretive agency, adds sequential ornament combinations, and includes peer feedback sessions on emotional affect. Fourth year, semesters seven and eight, focuses on public performance of complete Tanovar programs, comparative analysis of different Ferghana masters' ornament choices, and teaching practicum where senior students coach juniors on ornament execution.

Limitations of this study include the small number of institutions and faculty participants, the absence of student outcome measures beyond teacher reported success, and the lack of longitudinal data following graduates into professional performance contexts. Future research should track cohorts of students through the proposed syllabus template, assess whether graduates perform Ferghana repertoire in ways judged authentic by traditional practitioners, and compare physiological measurements of vocal production between ustoz trained singers and university trained singers.

Conclusion

The adaptation of Ferghana folk classical singing for structured university syllabi is achievable when repertoire selection follows a tiered model based on technical demands rather than genre categories, when vocal technique is reframed around Ferghana specific competencies including laryngeal flexibility for ishkala and microtonal stability, and when notation serves aural learning rather than replacing it. The Ferghana native teachers who participated in this study demonstrate that oral tradition and institutional education can coexist productively. Their methods preserve the embodied knowledge of twentieth century masters while making that knowledge accessible to university students who may never have the opportunity for years long residential apprenticeship. For Uzbek higher music education, embracing Ferghana repertoire as a rigorous pedagogical sequence rather than an optional regional specialty would strengthen national cultural heritage and produce singers capable of carrying Ferghana vocal arts into the twenty first century.

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