

MICROTONAL INTONATION AND ORNAMENTATION IN THE KASHKAR RUBAB MAQOM REPERTOIRE

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Abstract: The Kashkar rubab, a central instrument in the classical traditions of Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, serves not merely as an accompaniment but as a sovereign vessel for the intricate maqom repertoire. The performance practice on this instrument transcends the mechanical execution of notation, residing instead in the sophisticated oral transmission of microtonal intonation and a complex system of ornamentation. This article posits that the very essence of the Kashkar rubab's identity and its capacity for spiritual expression (*hal*) is embedded in the precise manipulation of intervals smaller than a semitone and the application of specific, context-dependent ornamental figures. These elements are not decorative afterthoughts but are constitutive of the melodic and modal DNA of the Shashmaqom and related cycles. Through an analysis rooted in organology, ethnomusicological theory, and practical performance knowledge, this paper will explore how the physical construction of the instrument facilitates microtonal flexibility, how ornamentation functions as a grammatical tool in musical phrasing, and how the synergy between intonation and embellishment creates the profound emotional landscape that defines the maqom tradition.

Keywords: kashkar rubab, microtonal intonation, ornamentation, maqom repertoire, performance practice, shashmaqom, uzbek classical music

Introduction

The classical music of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, with the monumental Shashmaqom at its zenith, represents one of the most sophisticated and refined artistic traditions of Central Asia. This vast corpus of music, historically cultivated in the great urban centers of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Khujand, is more than mere entertainment; it is a philosophical and spiritual edifice, a sonic architecture designed to guide the listener through a spectrum of nuanced emotions and metaphysical states, a concept known as *hal*. The theoretical framework of the maqom system, with its intricate modal structures known as *maqomat*, its rhythmic cycles (*usul*), and its prescribed formal sequences, provides a grand blueprint for this architecture. However, the living, breathing soul of the tradition does not reside solely in these theoretical abstractions or in the skeletal notation of its melodies. It lives, instead, in the subtle and often un-notated spaces between the notes - in the delicate microtonal inflections that color each mode and in the complex, grammar-like system of ornamentation that articulates its musical discourse. For the performers and connoisseurs of this tradition, it is precisely these nuances that separate a technically correct rendition from a spiritually transformative performance.

Within this rich ecosystem, the Kashkar rubab holds a position of singular importance. As a long-necked, fretted lute carved from a single block of apricot wood, it is not merely an accompanying instrument but a revered soloist, capable of carrying the entire weight of the maqom repertoire. Its voice is instantly recognizable: resonant, slightly melancholic, and possessing a remarkable capacity for vocal expression. This capacity presents a fundamental artistic challenge. The maqom tradition is fundamentally melodic and microtonal, drawing its aesthetic ideal from the subtleties of the human voice and the untuned instruments of the bowed variety, such as the *ghijak*. How does a fretted instrument, with its inherent tendency towards

fixed-pitch discretization, faithfully reproduce the fluid, continuous pitch field that the maqom system demands? The answer to this question lies at the very heart of mastery on the Kashkar rubab and forms the central inquiry of this article.

This paper posits that the Kashkar rubab's solution to this challenge is a deeply integrated and symbiotic relationship between microtonal intonation and ornamental practice. It argues that these two elements are not separate, sequential layers of musical expression but are, in fact, co-dependent and often indistinguishable in execution. The instrument's unique organology, specifically its adjustable gut frets and the technique of laterally pulling strings to alter pitch, provides the physical mechanism for microtonal precision. Concurrently, its extensive vocabulary of ornaments - including the pardoz (embellishment), zarb (percussive strike), and girish (glissando) - is not merely decorative but functions as the primary syntactic tool for realizing these microtonal variations in a musically meaningful way. An ornament becomes the vehicle for achieving a microtonal pitch, and a microtonal inflection is often expressed through an ornamental gesture.

Therefore, this study moves beyond a general description of performance practice to a focused analysis of this critical synergy. It will explore how the physical design of the instrument facilitates a fluid approach to pitch, situating it within the broader context of Central Asian lute organology. It will then delineate the core system of ornamentation, framing it not as a set of optional flourishes but as an essential grammatical component that governs phrasing, emphasizes structural points, and conveys emotional intensity within the maqom's formal sections, from the stately Sarakhbor to the improvisational Talqin. Finally, and most significantly, it will demonstrate how intonation and ornamentation fuse in practice, arguing that this fusion is the definitive characteristic of an authentic Kashkar rubab style. Through this tripartite investigation, the article aims to contribute a deeper understanding of the performance practice of one of Central Asia's most important instruments, asserting that the soul of the Kashkar rubab, and its indispensable role in the maqom tradition, is embodied in the masterful interplay of the microtonal and the ornamental.

The capacity of the Kashkar rubab for precise microtonal expression is first and foremost a function of its organology. Unlike its close relative, the Afghan rubab, the Kashkar variant is characterized by a body carved from a single piece of aged apricot wood (kashkar), a longer neck, and a distinct fret-tying system. The frets, traditionally made of gut or nylon, are tied onto the neck in a manner that allows for minute adjustments. A master performer (rubabchi) will often subtly shift the position of a fret before or even during a performance to align with the specific intonation requirements of a particular maqom or section within a maqom, such as a sarakhbor or talqin. This adjustability is crucial because the maqom system employs intervals that do not conform neatly to the equal-tempered scale of Western music. The neutral second, the three-quarter tone flat, and the nuanced intonation of the fourth and fifth degrees in various maqomat are all dependent on this flexibility.

The playing technique further enhances this microtonal capability. The strings are not pressed directly onto the fretboard but are rather pulled laterally across the frets. By applying varying degrees of pressure and altering the angle of the pull, the performer can raise the pitch of a fretted note by a quarter-tone or even more. This technique, often referred to as "bending," is however far more controlled and specific than the blues-inflected bends of the electric guitar. On the rubab, it is a means of fine-tuning, of landing on a microtonal pitch that exists between the fixed points of the frets. For instance, in Maqom Rost, the third degree often requires a slightly lowered, contemplative intonation, achieved by a delicate pull on the string from a lower

fret rather than by fretting the note directly. This action transforms a fixed-pitch instrument into a fluid, expressive voice capable of replicating the microtonal subtleties of human song, which is the ultimate model for the maqom tradition.

If microtonal intonation provides the essential color palette for the maqom, then ornamentation is the grammar that structures its musical discourse. Ornaments on the Kashkar rubab are not arbitrary flourishes; they are prescribed, meaningful gestures that articulate phrasing, emphasize structural points, and convey emotional intensity. The system of ornamentation is vast, but several core techniques form the foundation of the rubabchi's expressive vocabulary.

One of the most fundamental ornaments is the pardoz, a term that translates to "decoration" but implies a systematic embellishment of a melodic line. This can include rapid, single-note trills executed by a fast, rocking motion of the left-hand finger on a single fret, creating a shimmering effect that gives life to sustained notes. More complex is the use of grace notes and short, appoggiatura-like figures that precede a main note. These are not random choices; their direction and intervallic relationship to the principal tone are dictated by the prevailing mode. A grace note from below might be used to approach a stable tonic, while one from above might resolve to a sensitive leading tone within the maqom.

Another critical ornamental technique is the zarb, or strike, which involves a sharp, percussive attack on a string, often with the right-hand mizrab (plectrum), sometimes combined with a left-hand pull to immediately bend the pitch. This creates an accent of both dynamics and pitch, highlighting a rhythmic cycle's first beat or a phrase's climax. Furthermore, the use of open strings as drones against which the melody moves is a form of textural ornamentation. The constant sympathetic resonance of these open strings creates a rich harmonic tapestry, and melodic notes are often played on adjacent strings to create fleeting consonances and dissonances with the drone, a technique that enhances the modal flavor.

These ornaments function syntactically. A sequence of pardoz might define the opening exposition of a sarakhbor, building complexity and energy. A strategically placed zarb might mark the cadence point of a musical sentence, and a delicate trill might be used to sustain tension over a long, held note in a talqin section. The absence of ornamentation is equally meaningful, with stark, unadorned passages used to create contrast and highlight moments of profound stillness or introspection. The master rubabchi weaves these elements together into a coherent and emotionally resonant narrative, demonstrating a deep understanding of the grammatical rules of the maqom language.

The preceding sections have established microtonal intonation and ornamentation as distinct, yet foundational, pillars of performance practice on the Kashkar rubab. However, to perceive them as separate entities is to misunderstand the very nature of the instrument's artistry. The true genius of the Kashkar rubab tradition, and the definitive characteristic of a master rubabchi, is revealed in the profound and inextricable synergy between these two domains. They are not merely adjacent techniques but are fused into a unified expressive language where one consistently enables and defines the other. In this sophisticated musical grammar, an ornament frequently functions as the primary vehicle for achieving a microtonal pitch, and conversely, the expressive purpose of a microtonal inflection is often realized through a specific ornamental gesture. This symbiotic relationship is the engine that transforms the theoretical framework of the maqom into a living, breathing, and emotionally potent auditory experience.

This fusion is perhaps most vividly illustrated in the execution of the girish, a glissando or portamento that connects two notes. To the untrained ear, a girish might simply sound like a

slide. Yet, within the disciplined context of the maqom repertoire, it is a highly controlled and semantically rich gesture, a microtonal journey rather than a mere connective utility. The master rubabchi does not slide indiscriminately from one pitch to another; they sculpt the path between them. The speed, the dynamic contour, and, most critically, the specific microtonal landscape traversed during the slide are all subject to meticulous artistic choice. For instance, an ascending girish moving towards a stable tonal center, or shohid, might deliberately accelerate through a slightly sharpened version of the target pitch before settling back with a delicate release of left-hand pressure into the true, pure intonation. This momentary overshoot creates a feeling of yearning, anticipation, and resolution, amplifying the gravitational pull of the final note. Conversely, a descending girish might linger almost imperceptibly on a neutral second or a three-quarter tone, highlighting the melancholic character intrinsic to a mode like Maqom Navo before resolving downward. In these instances, the ornament (girish) is the method of delivery for a series of fleeting, yet essential, microtonal pitches that exist outside the fretboard's fixed points. The emotional content of the phrase is embedded not in the starting or ending note, but in the microtonal contour of the journey between them.

Similarly, the ubiquitous trill, a fundamental component of the pardoz system, becomes a primary site for microtonal expression. A trill on the Kashkar rubab is rarely a simple, rapid alternation between two equal-tempered notes. Instead, it is often an oscillation between a fundamental pitch and its microtonally altered neighbor. The upper note of the trill might be a precise quarter-tone or a subtle comma sharp, creating a uniquely tense and vibrant sonic color that is absolutely characteristic of a specific maqom. The acoustic beating and rhythmic intensity generated by this carefully out-of-tune trill produce a texture that is both agitated and captivating, an effect impossible to achieve with equal-tempered intervals. This technique is not an abstraction; it is a concrete performance directive. The ustoz instructing a shogird will not simply say “trill here,” but will demonstrate the exact width and quality of the oscillation, an oscillation defined by its microtonal specificity. The ornament is therefore the container for the interval, and the specific microtonal relationship defines the unique flavor of the ornament.

This interdependence extends to the very attack and decay of a single note, areas where ornamentation and intonation are fused into a single instantaneous gesture. The zarb, or percussive strike, is a quintessential example. This ornament involves a sharp, forceful pluck of the string combined with an immediate, simultaneous lateral pull by the left-hand finger. The result is not just a dynamic accent, but a pitch that is “born” already in motion. The note attacks not as a stable pitch but as a microtonally elevated one, instantly bending downward into its sustained, correct intonation. This creates a visceral, sigh-like effect, imbuing a single note with a narrative of tension and release. The zarb is thus a complete micro-ornament: its explosive onset is the ornamental feature, and its pitch trajectory is the microtonal content. They are conceived and executed as one inseparable musical entity.

This deep-seated synergy has profound implications for the transmission and preservation of the tradition. A written transcription of a maqom melody, no matter how detailed, can only capture the skeletal outline of the notes - the what. It cannot convey the essential knowledge of the how: the precise tactile pressure required for a microtonal bend within a girish, the exact width of a trill in a specific sho'be (section), or the coordinated timing of the pull and strike in a zarb. This embodied knowledge is the exclusive domain of the oral tradition, passed directly from ustoz to shogird through years of careful listening, imitation, and correction. The student must internalize the tactile and aural feel of these fused techniques, learning that the correct execution of an ornament is wholly dependent on its correct microtonal intonation, and that the expression

of a microtonal pitch is most often achieved through an ornamental technique. It is in this seamless fusion - where the distinction between bending a note and decorating it dissolves - that the Kashkar rubab truly transcends its identity as a wooden instrument and sings with the expressive, soulful voice that has secured its central place in the majestic tradition of the Maqom.

Conclusion

The journey through the intricate soundscape of the Kashkar rubab's performance practice reveals a musical tradition of profound depth and sophistication, one where technical mastery and spiritual expression are inextricably linked. This analysis has argued that the instrument's unique voice within the grand tapestry of the Maqom repertoire is not defined by its melodic outline alone, but is fundamentally constituted by the symbiotic relationship between microtonal intonation and a complex, grammatical system of ornamentation. These elements, often treated as secondary in other musical traditions, are here revealed to be the very lifeblood of the tradition. The investigation has demonstrated that the physical organology of the instrument - its adjustable gut frets and the technique of lateral string-pulling - is not merely a set of mechanical features but an enabling architecture designed specifically for the nuanced demands of the Maqom system. This design allows the rubabchi to navigate the fluid pitch field of the maqomat with a precision that fixed-fret instruments could never achieve, transforming the lute from a producer of discrete pitches into a vessel of continuous melodic expression that mirrors the human voice.

Furthermore, this exploration has reframed the concept of ornamentation from a set of decorative flourishes to an essential syntactic language. Techniques such as the pardoz, zarb, and girish are not optional embellishments but are constitutive of the musical phrase itself. They provide the rhetorical force, articulate the structural cadences, and generate the dynamic energy that moves the listener through the emotional journey of a performance. The absence or misapplication of these ornaments would result not in a plainer version of the melody, but in a fundamentally incorrect and aesthetically impoverished statement, much like a sentence stripped of its correct grammar and punctuation loses its intended meaning. The rules governing their use are as rigorous and context-dependent as the modal system they serve, forming a parallel layer of theoretical knowledge that is transmitted aurally and kinetically from master to apprentice.

The core contribution of this study, however, lies in illuminating the profound synergy between these two domains. As evidenced, the girish is the vehicle for microtonal travel, the trill is the site of microtonal oscillation, and the zarb is the fusion of percussive attack and microtonal resolution. In the hands of a master, the act of ornamenting is simultaneously the act of intoning, and the pursuit of correct intonation is achieved through the application of ornament. This synergy represents the highest level of artistic integration on the instrument, where technical skill dissolves into pure musical expression. It is in this seamless fusion that the abstract theoretical structures of the Shashmaqom are translated into the tangible, visceral experience of hal, that state of deep emotional resonance and spiritual connection which is the ultimate goal of the performance.

Looking forward, this understanding carries significant implications for the preservation, pedagogy, and future study of the Kashkar rubab tradition. As the oral tradition faces the pressures of modernity, documentation must evolve beyond mere melodic transcription. It is imperative that future research employs advanced technologies, such as high-resolution spectrographic analysis and motion-capture of performance technique, to create a durable record of these nuanced interactions. Such an archive would not replace the master-disciple relationship but would serve as a vital supplement, capturing the subtleties that notation alone cannot convey. For pedagogy, this underscores the necessity of an immersive, aural, and tactile learning process

where students learn to hear and feel the correct microtonal shapes within the ornamental figures, understanding that the two are a unified concept. Ultimately, the Kashkar rubab stands as a testament to the refined artistic sensibilities of Central Asian culture. Its performance practice, centered on the indivisible bond between microtonal intonation and ornamentation, is a sophisticated intellectual and artistic discipline that commands both deep respect and continued scholarly exploration to ensure its vibrant voice continues to resonate for generations to come.

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