

THE DUTAR'S VOICE AS MELODY AND METAPHOR IN UZBEK MUSICAL THOUGHT

Robiyaxon Obidova
Muxtasarxon Ismoilova
Kokand State University

Abstract: This article explores the profound symbiosis between the sonic character of the Uzbek dutar and the conceptual frameworks that define Uzbek musical and poetic aesthetics. It posits that the dutar is not merely an instrument for producing melody but is itself a central metaphor - a sounding object of thought - within Uzbek cultural philosophy. The analysis moves beyond organological description to investigate how the instrument's physical and acoustic properties - its fretless neck, its pair of melody strings, its chorus of sympathetic strings, and its warm, vocal timbre - directly shape and express core concepts in maqom theory, poetry, and spiritual practice. The argument is structured in three interrelated domains. First, it examines how the dutar's fretlessness facilitates the realization of maqom as a fluid, affective landscape of pitch, making the instrument a primary tool for conceptualizing modal nuance. Second, it analyzes the instrument as a metaphorical "voice," arguing that its technique and repertoire are designed to emulate and converse with the human voice, thus blurring the line between instrumental and vocal expression in the performance of classical poetry. Finally, the article considers the dutar's dual-stringed nature and resonant body as metaphors for dialogue, companionship, and cosmic harmony, reflecting deeper cultural values of balance and interconnectedness. This study concludes that in Uzbek musical thought, the dutar is both a tool for making music and a material articulation of the very principles that make that music meaningful, serving as an essential key to understanding the interrelation of sound, sentiment, and cosmology in Central Asian culture.

Keywords: dutar organology, maqom intonation, instrumental voice, musical metaphor, uzbek musical aesthetics, cultural symbolism

Introduction

In the pantheon of Central Asian musical instruments, the Uzbek dutar occupies a unique position. It is, on one level, a folk instrument of seemingly simple construction: a long-necked lute with two silk or nylon melody strings and a variable array of sympathetic strings. Yet, its cultural weight is immense. It is the indispensable accompanist to epic tales and lyrical poetry, the primary instrumental vehicle for the classical Shashmaqom, and a cherished soloist in its own right. To approach the dutar solely through the lens of its repertoire or playing technique, however, is to miss its deeper significance. This article proposes that the dutar is fundamentally a conceptual instrument - a vessel of metaphor and a physical embodiment of Uzbek musical thought. Its voice is not just the melody it produces but the totality of meanings that its sound and form evoke within the cultural imagination.

The central thesis is that the dutar's specific materiality and acoustics have actively shaped the development and conceptualization of key aesthetic principles in Uzbek music. Its design is not accidental but evolutionary, refined to answer the demands of a particular sonic and philosophical ideal. To understand the dutar is to understand how Uzbeks think about sound,

emotion, and structure. This inquiry sits at the intersection of organology, ethnomusicology, and cultural philosophy. It asks: How does the fretless neck inform the concept of modal flexibility and emotional nuance? In what ways is the instrument's voice construed as an interlocutor with, or extension of, the human voice? And what cultural values are encoded in its dualistic stringing and resonant architecture?

This study employs a hermeneutic approach, interpreting the instrument as a cultural text. It draws upon analysis of performance practice, the textual metaphors found in classical Persian and Chagatai poetry sung to dutar accompaniment, the oral teachings of master players, and the author's own immersive engagement with the tradition. The discussion is structured to first unravel the philosophical implications of the fretless fingerboard in relation to the maqom system. It then explores the dutar's mimetic relationship with the human voice, analyzing the techniques and aesthetic goals that foster this dialogue. Finally, it contemplates the instrument's physical form as a metaphor for social and cosmic order. By tracing these connections, this article aims to demonstrate that the dutar is far more than a musical tool; it is an active participant in the generation of cultural meaning, a voice that speaks both in melody and in metaphor.

The Fretless Neck and the Philosophy of Maqom Fluidity

The most sonically and philosophically definitive feature of the dutar is its unfretted neck. This is not a lack but a plenitude - an open field of pitch possibility. In Western tempered music, the fret or key imposes a grid of fixed, equidistant intervals. The dutar's smooth neck rejects this grid, offering instead a continuous, glissando-friendly plane. This physical characteristic is directly responsible for enabling and conceptually reinforcing the essence of the maqom system. A maqom is not a rigid scale but a flexible set of tonal relationships, characteristic phrases, and, most importantly, specific intonations for each degree that convey its unique emotional color. The dutar's neck is the perfect medium for this philosophy.

On a dutar, a pitch is not a fixed point but a neighborhood. The third degree of Segoh, for instance, is performed not at a mathematically precise frequency but within a subtle range slightly lower than an equal-tempered minor third, its exact pitch bent by the pressure of the finger and the expressive intent of the moment. This microtonal flexibility, called *parda* (literally, "veil" or "curtain"), is where emotion resides. The performer does not "hit" a note; they "find" it, guided by ear, tradition, and the desired affective state. The instrument thus teaches the player and listener that musical meaning lies in the journey between tones, in the slight weep of a slide, or the uncertain quest of a portamento resolving to a stable pitch. This makes the dutar an instrument of profound nuance, where a single melodic figure can sound joyous or lamenting based on minute adjustments of intonation achievable only on a fretless fingerboard.

Consequently, the dutar becomes the primary instrumental teacher of maqom theory. Learning a mode on the dutar is a tactile and aural education in relativity. The student's finger learns the "feel" of Chorgoh versus Navo in their hand's musculature, as the spacing and stretching between notes shift. The instrument physically demonstrates that modes are not abstract collections of pitches but embodied landscapes with their own topography. The sympathetic strings, tuned to the scale of the active maqom, resonate in approval when the player's intonation is true, creating a halo of resonance that validates the modal center. This feedback loop between finger, ear, and resonating body makes the dutar a responsive partner in discovery. In this way, the instrument itself articulates a core tenet of Uzbek musical thought:

that true musicality is not adherence to an absolute pitch standard but the sensitive navigation of a fluid, affective pitch space. The fretless neck is the material condition for this philosophy, making the maqom not just a system to be played, but a world to be inhabited.

Mimetic Voice The Dutar as Singer and Interlocutor

A ubiquitous compliment for a skilled dutarist is that their instrument “speaks” or “sings”. This is not mere poetic fancy but a central aesthetic objective. The ideal dutar tone strives to emulate the qualities of the trained human voice, particularly that of a maqom singer. This mimetic relationship is cultivated through specific techniques and governs the interpretation of repertoire, effectively making the dutar a surrogate vocalist and a responsive partner in poetic discourse.

The technical pursuit of a vocal quality is evident in the core articulations of dutar playing. The tremolo, produced by rapid alternation of the index finger, is not just a sustain mechanism; it mimics the vibrato and emotional pulsation of a singer holding a long, plaintive note. The slides and bends directly mirror the melismatic glides and microtonal inflections of vocal taqrir. Legato phrasing is paramount, with notes connected as smoothly as breath connects syllables in sung poetry. The attack is often softened; the pick strikes the string in a way that minimizes percussive noise and maximizes the fundamental tone, aiming for a rounded, warm, and “breathy” timbre akin to the vocal chest register. When a dutar plays the instrumental version of a vocal shu’be from the Shashmaqom, it is not simply playing the melody; it is performing a wordless song, carrying all the phrasing, dynamics, and emotional nuance a singer would impart to the accompanying ghazal.

This vocal mimesis elevates the dutar to the status of an interlocutor. In the classical sohbat, the instrument does not merely accompany the singer but engages in a dialogue. The singer presents a line of poetry; the dutar responds with an instrumental verse, commenting on, elaborating, or emotionally deepening the sentiment just expressed. This call-and-response, known as javob, relies on the dutar’s capacity to be “eloquent.” Its phrases must be shaped with rhetorical clarity, with beginnings, developments, and cadences that feel like uttered sentences. Furthermore, in the vast corpus of Uzbek folk music, the dutar is the voice for narratives when the human voice is absent. It tells epic stories in the termalar, its melodies rising and falling with the action, its rhythms galloping with horses or slowing with lament. In this role, the dutar transcends mimesis to become a full-fledged narrative voice, its two strings capable of conjuring characters, landscapes, and epic events. Thus, the metaphor of the dutar’s voice is functionally literalized in performance; it speaks, sings, replies, and narrates, fulfilling a role that places it at the heart of human emotional and communicative expression.

The Instrument as Metaphor Dualism, Resonance, and Cosmic Harmony

The physical form of the dutar itself serves as a rich source of metaphor, reinforcing cultural values that extend beyond music into social and cosmological realms. Its most obvious feature - the pair of melody strings - presents a fundamental duality. Traditionally referred to as the “male” and “female” strings, this pairing is the foundation of all harmony produced on the instrument. They are tuned in unison or at intervals like fourths or fifths, creating a constant, interactive partnership. One string may carry the melody while the other provides a drone or harmonic shadow; they may engage in parallel motion or take turns in the foreground. This duality reflects a core cultural principle of complementary pairs - a concept found in cosmology, philosophy,

and social organization, symbolizing the productive union of opposites that generates balance and completeness.

This metaphor of harmonious partnership is amplified by the instrument's resonant body. The dutar's soundboard acts as a responsive chamber, giving voice to the vibrations of the strings. In mystical thought, particularly within Sufi traditions that deeply influence Central Asian arts, the human heart is often described as a resonating chamber that vibrates in response to divine truth or spiritual poetry. The dutar, when played with feeling, becomes an external analogue to this internal state. Its resonance is a physical manifestation of responsiveness and capacity to be "moved." The sympathetic strings, which vibrate without being plucked, further this metaphor. They represent the wider community, the unseen listeners, or the spiritual realm that is stirred into motion by the actions of the primary actor. They create a shimmering, ethereal halo of sound around every note, a sonic representation of influence, connection, and the way an individual's action or expression can set off a chain of resonance in the world around them.

Finally, the very act of playing the dutar embodies a metaphor for ideal social and spiritual conduct. The player must balance assertiveness and sensitivity. The left hand must press firmly enough to stop the string cleanly, but with such control as to bend it with expressive grace. The right hand must strike with authority but also with caressing subtlety. This physical negotiation mirrors the social ideal of *odob* - the cultivated ability to act with strength tempered by refinement, to express oneself with passion guided by wisdom. The instrument, in its demand for this balanced touch, becomes a teacher of character. Thus, from its dual strings to its resonant body and the discipline required to play it, the dutar stands as a tangible metaphor for a universe conceived in terms of complementary pairs, sympathetic resonance, and harmonious action. It is not just an instrument for music; it is a material poem about connection, its very form and function illustrating the interconnectedness of all things - a fundamental pillar of Uzbek musical and philosophical thought.

Conclusion

The voice of the Uzbek dutar is a polyphonic one, speaking simultaneously in melody and metaphor. This article has demonstrated that the instrument is an active agent in the formulation and perpetuation of key concepts within Uzbek musical thought. Its fretless neck is the physical enabler and philosophical symbol of the fluid, affective pitch world of the *maqom* system, teaching that true musicality resides in nuanced navigation rather than fixed points. Its cultivated timbre and phrasing establish it as a mimetic voice, capable of singing wordless poetry, engaging in dialogue with singers, and narrating epic tales, thereby blurring the ontological line between human and instrumental expression.

Ultimately, the dutar transcends its functional role to become a dense repository of cultural metaphor. Its paired strings embody the principle of complementary duality, its resonant body and sympathetic strings illustrate concepts of spiritual and social resonance, and the disciplined touch required to play it mirrors ideals of balanced character and etiquette. In Uzbek cultural consciousness, the dutar is therefore much more than a medium for entertainment. It is a conceptual tool, a sounding philosophy. Its melodies are not merely sequences of notes but manifestations of a deeper understanding of relationship, emotion, and cosmic order. To listen to the dutar with this understanding is to hear not just an instrument being played, but a world

of thought being sounded - a voice that articulates, in its uniquely warm and nuanced timbre, the very heart of Uzbek aesthetic and spiritual sensibility.

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