

Sonic Practices and Concepts in Tajik Popular Music

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If there is one question that the study of Tajik popular music has repeatedly raised to my attention, it is about the relevance of classical distinctions of musical genres to the complex soundscape I have become acquainted with in Tajikistan since I began field research in 2002. The widespread intersection of traditional music and its role in shaping perceived cultural belonging on the one hand, and a popular music involving new technologies, transformed compositional practices and global or transnational flows on the other, speaks to the need of finding flexible ways to talk about these ostensibly distinct domains. One important aspect is stylistic intermingling, which I shall address in this paper by looking specifically at how electrified Tajik popular music incorporates features rooted in traditional idioms, and represents, in many respects, a creative continuation of traditional sensibilities. I will focus on lyrics and aspects of musical vocabulary, and address some of the concepts and values assigned to them.

As a preamble, I wish to mention a few aspects that, for reasons of time, I will not develop below, and that are nonetheless significant to an understanding of the relationship between traditional and popular musics in Tajikistan. First, not only Tajik electrified popular music is by and large – though not always – receptive to traditional idioms, but at times the reverse is also true: the performance of popular songs on traditional instruments or their incorporation as part of performance contexts that are typical of traditional music, such as indoor gatherings, are aspects that I have observed both in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, and in the rural areas of Kulob and Badakhshan.

Second, both traditional and popular musics are ingrained in the fabric of grassroots social occasions, especially wedding parties and other communal celebrations. Such grassroots contexts are the primary venues where the interlacing of popular and traditional idioms is forged. Although certain community rituals or phases thereof may predominantly feature either one or the other, most often there seem to be no rigid boundaries separating the two, both in practice and in the perceptions of participants. Popular and traditional musics are frequently contiguous, even interchangeable, and their relationship appears to be permeable and characterized by stylistic and contextual fluidity. This is facilitated, in my view, by the fact that they often serve the social rituals of the same communities and, generally, do not belong to distinct social spheres or classes. As a reflection of this, while a number of artists cultivate repertoires almost exclusively modeled on pop idioms and tend to be particularly fashionable among younger urban audiences, a significant portion of popular musicians have double expertise in traditional and popular musics, are active in the wedding circuits of both urban and peripheral or rural locales, and are predictably more prone to combine traditional and non-traditional resources in their music.

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In contrast to this grassroots flexibility, there are performance and social contexts where the distinction between popular and traditional musics is more clearly marked. The same musicians that engage in hybridization may cultivate purely traditional repertoires, for example, in music institutions such as state ensembles or on occasion of concerts or other cultural initiatives that are meant to promote or showcase local traditions and are sustained by discourses of musical authenticity. Also, traditional music is often perceived by musicians as enhancing their opportunities to publish or tour on the international market especially in Europe and North America. Thus, musicians play out their creativity and expertise, as well as make strategic choices, negotiating their position among diverse musical streams and juggling the demands and pressures of different contexts and powers.

As a first example of the creative amalgamation of multiple musical resources at play in Tajik popular music, I wish to discuss a piece drawn from the repertoire of Gulchehra Sodiqova. Gulchehra, born in 1942, has long been a major exponent of the traditional music of the rural region of Kulob in southern Tajikistan. Over the last ten years she has developed a synthesized, electrified popular music repertoire in collaboration with her sons, with whom she makes studio recordings and performs in the wedding circuits of Dushanbe and the provincial area of Kulob. The piece I wish to discuss here, titled *Zi durī*, was recorded across 2003 and 2004, and published in Tajikistan in 2005. It features a 5-time-unit rhythm that is common in the traditional music of Kulob, and combines an instrumental and vocal melodic framework closely adhering to traditional models with an arrangement for ensemble including traditional lutes and percussions (*dumbra*, *rubob* of Kashgar, *tablak*, *doyra*), *ney*, violin, drum machine and synthesizer, and aspects of harmonization obtained by the insertion of a bass line and chords.

Ghazal by Badruddin Hilolī (1470-1527)	Rhyme	Melody
<i>Zi durī to ba kay moro chunin mahjur medorī</i>	X	A
<i>Agar nazdi tu meoyam tu khudro dur medorī.</i>	X	A
<i>Tabibi man tuī ammo maro bemor mekhohī</i>	---	B
<i>Davoi man tuī ammo maro ranjur medorī.</i>	X	A
<i>Ba nuri khud shabe ravshan nakardī majlisi moro</i>	---	C
<i>Charoghi oshnoīro charo be nur medorī.</i>	X	A
<i>Magar kayfiyati ranji khumor ey jon namedonī</i>	---	B
<i>Ki moro be sharobi lahmi khud makhmur medorī</i>	X	A
<i>Ba bazmi vasl hozir mekunī arbobi khashmatro</i>	---	C
<i>Hamin miskin Hiloliro zi khud mahjur medorī</i>	X	D
For how long will you keep me far away from you? If I come close to you, you keep yourself away from me. You are my healer, but you want me to be ill You are my remedy, but you make me suffer. You have not turned the night into daylight for us to meet Why do you keep our friendship in the dark? Could it be that you do not know the pain of longing, my love? Since you inebriate me without the sweet wine of your presence. You exclude me from the banquet of reunion And keep this poor Hiloli far away from you.		

Table 1. *Zi durī*: text and translation

by repetition of the same melody type (melody A), characterized by a descending movement to the tonal centre of the piece, whereas melodies displaying changes of register and contrasting melodic material (melodies B and C) occur in connection with non-rhymed half-lines. Another aspect that recaptures Kulobi traditional practice lies in that instrumental melodic statements are often followed by a cadence characterized by chromatic motion around the tonal centre and/or dominant degree of the melody.

The following audio example from *Zi dur* includes the first six half-lines of the poem. Table 2 (page 3) shows the text, melody type/rhyme pattern, and pitch set corresponding to each half-line.



Excerpt 1 from *Zi Durī* by Gulchehra Sodiqova

Zi durī exemplifies the use of learned poetry in a popular music context. Poems are drawn predominantly from the corpus of classical Persian poetry, as well as from contemporary Tajik poets for whom the classical tradition serves as a model of excellence in form, expressive style and content. Not only the use of learned poetry links popular music with traditional practices, affecting formal fabric as in *Zi durī*, but it also perpetuates the outstanding role of poetry as a vehicle of social, religious and ethical values in Tajik expressive culture. Poetry distills the most meaningful experiences of life. As is the case of *Zi durī*, a major theme is that of love, which may interchangeably be interpreted as mundane or as devotional and mystical, particularly in relation to the theme of longing for reunion with the divine. Also significant are edifying, philosophical and sapiential themes that sustain and elaborate the ideals of *ma'rifat* (erudition joined with wisdom and spiritual purity) and *adab* (intellectual refinement joined with virtuous behaviour).

The choice of lyrics affects to a significant degree the status and the evaluation of both musical pieces and musicians in the popular music domain. Songs set to newly-composed lyrics, that are often quite removed from the stylistic and expressive models of learned poetry, certainly feature in the repertoire of several Tajik popular music artists. Such songs may achieve great popularity – especially among younger audiences – both in the cassette market and the media, and at communal social occasions such as weddings, where they are widely considered to be particularly suitable for parts of the celebration devoted to dancing. However, interviews with a cross section of musicians and members of the audience suggest that learned poetry continues to be perceived as a marker of artistic excellence in the evaluation of popular music songs, thus protracting the traditional eminent position of poetry in Tajik musical aesthetics. Accordingly, singers in popular music who cultivate a repertoire of learned poetry are most likely to enhance their recognition and stature on the levels of both artistic eminence and perceived moral standing and integrity. One of the reasons for Gulchehra Sodiqova's success in the contemporary Tajik popular music scene is certainly related to her drawing on a time-honored poetic pedigree in her transition from a strictly traditional repertoire to an electrified popular music one. As a result, besides the aesthetic, spiritual and ethical values of which learned poetry is traditionally a carrier, Gulchehra's art continues to bear on important aspects of identity by linking itself with the venerable literary tradition of a wider Persian-speaking world.

At the same time, Gulchehra's music activates levels of identity affiliation specifically connected with the regional sphere of Kulob, reflecting the social and cultural relevance of regional belonging in contemporary Tajikistan and affecting the makeup of Gulchehra's typical audience. In this respect, significant is her use of a musical vocabulary strongly receptive to Kulobi traditional idioms, particularly in relation to her electrified renditions of the genre *falak*, a genre featuring folk quatrains on the theme of separation. As an example, I shall again refer to the piece *Zi durī*. The last half-line of Hilolī's *ghazal*, although rhymed, is set to a melody that departs from the melody types outlined before (Melody D, see Table 3), and is used to bridge the *ghazal* and a *falak* performance that follows. This melody leads to a shift of tonal centre and modal entity that is customary in Kulobi traditional practice on occasion of similar transitions from introductory *ghazal* to *falak*. Other typical elements of traditional *falak* are retained in Gulchehra's electrified rendition, including the use of folk quatrains, a musical mode characterized by chromatic intervals and stepwise melodic movement, and the addition of the syllables “e”, “jon” or “joni” at the beginning and end of verses. At the same time, her *falak* mingles with a popular music sonic texture and arrangement, and also includes instrumental interludes featuring a quotation of the symphonic *falak* by Abdulfattoh Odinaev, which was first performed in 1973 and has continued to enjoy popularity up until the present.

The next audio excerpt features in sequence: the last half-line of the *ghazal*, the transition to *falak* and one *falak* quatrain. Table 3 shows the text and the pitch-sets of melody D and *falak*.



Excerpt 2 from *Zi Durī* by Gulchehra Sodiqova

Hamin miskin Hiloliro zi khud mahjur medorī. Melody type D

Falak quatrain:

[e] *Shinam shinam [e] az tu shirin yod oyad*

I sit for hours, the sweet memory of you comes to me

[e] *Ohe mekasham az falak dod oyad [jon]*

I sigh and a cry comes from the sky

[e] *Rozi dilma [e] agar ba sangho guyam [joni]*

If I reveal the secrets of my heart to the rocks

[e] *Sang az tagi daryo ba faryod oyad [e]*

From the riverbed the rocks shall cry.

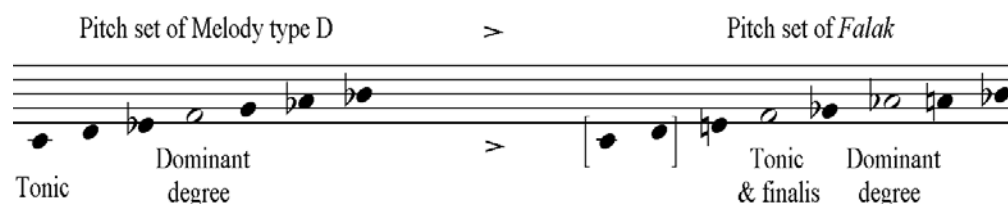


Table 3. *Zi durī*: *ghazal* (last half-line) and *falak*

In the popular music of Gulchehra Sodiqova, materials rooted in traditional practice intersect with a compositional process involving new technologies and diverse sources of inspiration. This intersection is at once geared towards a sonic imagery of contemporaneity that responds to the demands of the Tajik wedding market and cassette industry, and able to evoke a sense of belonging primarily articulated on a regional level.

Another artist from Kulob who enjoys celebrity in the popular music scene is Manizha Davlatova, a singer in her mid twenties who is now based in Dushanbe and who is very active in the cassette market and wedding circuits of both Dushanbe and rural locales. Compared with Gulchehra Sodiqova, her repertoire exemplifies a different treatment of traditional materials. These are certainly employed here but less emphasized, and are combined with a wider range of musical influences that allow for a plurality of readings of cultural affiliation and identity.

I shall illustrate this through a piece by Manizha Davlatova titled *To hastam*. Two features of this song constitute noticeable aspects of continuity with traditional practice. The first element is the use of the seven-time-unit rhythm known as *zarb*, which is particularly common in the traditions of southern Tajikistan and has been widely adopted in Tajik popular music. A second element is the use of learned poetry and, specifically, of a selection from a *ghazal* by the renowned contemporary Tajik poet, Loiḳ Sheralī (d. 2000). As already observed with Gulchehra's *Zi durī*, also here the distribution of melody types mirrors the formal regularity and the rhyme structure of the poem (Table 4). In the first section of the song, with the exception of the first half-line, rhymed half-lines are set to melody type B. The song continues with a section characterized by a shift to a higher register. In much the same way as with the first section, the recurrence of the rhyme is marked by melodic repetition: rhymed half-lines are set to melody type E, which – it may be noticed – is a transposition by a 5th of melody type B, whereas contrasting melodic material is set to non-rhymed half-lines.

Ghazal by Loiḳ Sheralī	Rhyme	M. T.
<i>To hastam bud to hastī hamrozi tu khoham bud</i>	X	A
<i>To sozi dame doram damsozi tu khoham bud.</i>	X	B
<i>Andar dili purshūram to nash'ai darde hast</i>	---	C
<i>Maftuni tabu sūzi ovozi tu khoham bud.</i>	X	A
<i>Chun jona baroi tan shoistai jonon ast</i>	---	D
<i>To jonu jahon doram jonbozi tu khoham bud.</i>	X	E
<i>Bar qasdi hama qahru shūru shari taqdiram</i>	---	F
<i>Qurboni yaki moyu yak nozi tu khoham bud.</i>	X	E
As long as you and I live, I will be your intimate friend		
As long as I breathe, I will accompany you.		
As long as joy and pain dwell in my restless heart		
I will be enchanted by your voice, and burn with passion.		
As the body elects the soul as its beloved d		
As long as my soul is in this world, I will be your devotee.		
Against all the fury, the troubles and the bitterness of my destiny		
I will surrender myself to our union, and to a single whim for yours.		

Table 4. *To hastam*: text and translation



Excerpt from *To Hastam* by Manizha Davlatova

Besides elements rooted in local traditions, *To Hastam* is receptive to the aesthetics of Indian film music, particularly in relation to aspects of instrumentation and to string and choral arrangements. Appreciable is also the influence of Iranian pop on Manizha's vocal style, especially that of the Iranian female singer Leilâ Forouhar, one of Manizha's major sources of inspiration.

By reflecting the appeal that Indian film music, Iranian pop and, also, Afghan pop have to Tajik audiences, the music of Manizha Davlatova sustains both discourses of cultural affinity between Tajikistan and the Indian subcontinent, and discourses involving a wider Persian-speaking world. In this respect, particularly significant is the popularity she enjoys among Persian-speaking audiences in Afghanistan, where her concerts in Mazâr-e Sharif and Kabul in 2006 were highly acclaimed, as well as her collaboration with Leilâ Forouhar, with whom she has recently appeared on stage in Dushanbe. While this testifies to the ability of Manizha to enunciate a wide net of cultural associations on a transnational level thanks to the musical and literary resources she employs, it is worth observing that, within Tajikistan, her music seems to be located at the intersection of contrasting readings, such that, on the one hand, Manizha's multifarious popular music is in many respects conducive to a trans-regional idiom that caters for a composite urban audience with diverse regional backgrounds, thus moving past regional boundaries that are both culturally and politically very significant in Tajikistan; on the other hand, it also lends itself to being perceived according to regional parameters, and especially made their own by Kulobi audiences who readily identify familiar regional musical signs in her music and who continue to form the majority of her patrons in the wedding circuit.

Gulchehra and Manizha are among the considerable number of musicians whose popular music is proving to be highly influential not only in urban locales, but also in peripheral and rural ones. While my examples here refer in particular to the Kulob region, a similar situation applies, for instance, to popular music artists who are active in the highland villages and provincial towns of Badakhshan. Popular music is common currency everywhere. Not only it has been spread from the city to the countryside, especially through wedding performances, but it has affected the style and compositional practice of many grassroots rural performers. Urban and rural, popular and traditional musics are receptive to as well as influential on one another and, in Tajikistan, their relationship is predicated on creative cross-fertilization.



Gulchehra Sodiqova & sons.



Manizha Davlatova.

Credits:

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