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Mugham: The Soul of Azerbaijani Music



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An introduction to the UNESCO-recognised tradition that feels both ancient and immediate

The first time you hear mugham, you will probably wait for something that never arrives. No chorus. No steady beat you can tap. A singer holds one syllable of an old poem for eight seconds, bends it, climbs a step, and holds it again, while a plucked lute answers underneath. Twenty minutes later the piece ends somewhere near where it started, and you are not sure what happened, only that something did.

That confusion is not a failure of the listener. Mugham is built on a different set of expectations from almost anything on a

Western playlist, and once you know what it is doing, the whole thing opens up.

Mugham: The Soul of Azerbaijani Music



A frame, not a score

Mugham is a modal system. It shares a family with the Iraqi maqam, the Persian radif, Turkish makam and the Uyghur muqam, all of them descendants of the same medieval theory of scales and their effects on the human mind.

A mode here is not just a set of notes. It is a scale plus a starting tone, a set of characteristic phrases, and an agreed route through the material. A full performance, a dastgah, moves through a sequence of sections, each one settling on a higher tone than the last, with the tension rising as the singer climbs. Between the improvised sections come tesnif, composed songs in fixed metre, and reng, instrumental dance pieces that let everyone breathe. At the end, the singer comes down and lands on the tonic. That descent is the point of the whole architecture, and hearing it done well is closer to relief than to applause.

None of it is written down in full. Notation captures the skeleton and loses the thing that matters — the microtonal shading, the ornament, the timing of a pause. So mugham passes from master to student by ear and by imitation, one apprenticeship at a time, which is exactly why UNESCO took an interest.

Seven modes, seven states of mind

Uzeyir Hajibeyli, the composer who did more than anyone to put this tradition on paper, listed seven principal modes in his study of Azerbaijani folk music and attached an emotional character to each. Rast carries courage and fortitude. Shur is the cheerful, lyrical one, and along with Segah — the mode of love — accounts for the majority of Azerbaijani songs and dance tunes. Chahargah is agitation and passion. Shushtar goes to sorrow, Bayati-Shiraz to melancholy, and Humayun, the least commonly used, to grief of a deeper kind.



Treat that list as working practice rather than superstition. A musician choosing Humayun for a funeral gathering and Rast for a wedding is doing what a film composer does when he reaches for a minor key, except that the vocabulary is far older and far more specific.

Three musicians, one poem

The classic ensemble is small: a khanende, the singer, holding a frame drum called the gaval, flanked by a tar and a kamancha. The tar is a long-necked lute with a body shaped like a figure eight and a skin soundboard; the kamancha is a spike fiddle played upright on the knee. Both instruments have their own UNESCO listings, which tells you how seriously the craft of building them is taken.

The words come from classical poetry, most often the ghazals of Fuzuli and Nasimi. The singer chooses the couplets, and the choice is part of the performance — a good khanende reads the room and picks lines that fit the evening. This is a form where the text is ancient, the frame is fixed, and everything in between is decided in the moment.

Shusha, and a boy in the chorus

Karabakh produced the singers. Shusha in particular was known as a natural conservatory — a mountain town that turned out khanendes the way other places turn out miners.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Abdurrahim bey Hagverdiyev staged a scene called *Majnun at Leyli's Grave* in Shusha. Majnun was sung by Jabbar Garyagdioglu, already famous. In the boys' chorus behind him stood a thirteen-year-old named Uzeyir Hajibeyli.

He never really got over it. At twenty-two he wrote *Leyli and Majnun*, using Fuzuli's sixteenth-century poem and leaving most of the verse untouched. Where an Italian opera would have put arias and recitative, he wrote mugham — actual improvised sections, sung by trained khanendes, inside a European four-act structure. It premiered at the Taghiyev Theatre in Baku on 25 January 1908 and is generally counted as the first opera of the Muslim East. The State Opera and Ballet Theatre has opened its season with it for decades.



The hybrid kept going. In 1948 Fikret Amirov wrote *Shur* and *Kurd Ovshari* for full orchestra and created symphonic mugham. In the 1960s and 70s Vagif Mustafazadeh ran the same experiment with a jazz trio, and the results still sound startlingly natural, because a mugham singer and a jazz soloist are doing structurally similar work — improvising inside a mode, in front of people, without a net.

Recognition, and a building

A short passage of mugham played on the balaban, a soft-toned double-reed wind instrument, is on the Voyager Golden Record, currently somewhere past the edge of the solar system.

Closer to home, UNESCO proclaimed Azerbaijani mugham a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003 and inscribed it on the Representative List in 2008. That December the International Mugham Center opened on the Baku waterfront — roughly 7,500 square metres, a 350-seat hall, a recording studio, rehearsal rooms and busts of the old masters in the foyer. The first World of Mugham festival followed in March 2009 and the festival has run every two years since.

Institutions can preserve a corpus. They cannot manufacture a singer. That job fell to performers like Alim Qasimov, who took mugham to concert halls that had never heard of it, and who has spent years working with his daughter Fargana Qasimova — including with Yo-



Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble and in Mark Morris's staging of *Layla and Majnun*, which put Hajibeyli's opera back in front of Western audiences a century after Baku.

How to listen

Give it one uninterrupted sitting, ideally with headphones and no second screen.

Stop waiting for a chorus. Instead, track the pitch: notice that each section of the piece is centred slightly higher than the last, and that the singer is working towards something. When the voice finally drops back to where it began, you will feel the resolution physically, even without knowing the mode by name or a word of the poem.

Listen for the gaval, too. The singer plays it himself and it does almost nothing for long stretches, then marks a phrase with a single stroke. That restraint is the whole aesthetic in miniature.

Mugham is old, and it is still being made. It is also one of the few classical traditions where the audience is expected to react out loud — a murmur, a word of approval when a phrase lands. Nobody sits in silence. That, more than any inscription on a list, is what keeps it alive.