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UZBEK OPERA CONDUCTING: THE ROLE OF M. ASHRAFI, T. SODIQOV, AND B. INOYATOV IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL MUSICAL THEATER

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Abstract

Purpose: This article explores the professional activities of opera conductors in Uzbekistan. The discussion focuses on the creative and interpretative contributions of conductors such as M. Ashrafiy, T. Sodiqov, and B. Inoyatov.

Methods: Their artistic practices and related challenges were examined through historical sources and scholarly articles, followed by a comparative analysis.

Results: The study reveals the interpretative approaches, creative contributions, and collaborative methods with performers employed by Uzbek opera conductors.

Originality/Value: The research classifies the activities of Uzbek opera conductors into two distinct categories, providing a new perspective on their role in national musical culture.

Keywords: *opera, conductor, composer, interpretation, performance, style, principles*

Introduction

The activities of opera conductors in Uzbekistan can be studied in two categories:

1. Composer-conductors.
2. Stage-conductors.

In fact, the work of conductors belonging to both categories pursues the same ultimate goal – the realization of the composer’s idea. However, representatives of the first category perform their tasks both as authors and as stage conductors. This process is more complex, and their working methods and principles differ significantly from those of conductors belonging to the second category. Therefore, in the following sections, we will examine the creative output of selected

conductors in order to analyze the distinctive features of each group.

It is well known that numerous sources have highlighted the creative portrait of conductor and composer Muxtor Ashrafiy. Various scientific-practical conferences (Ashrafi M., 1975; Ashrafi F., Solomonova T. Temina E. Mukhtar Ashrafi. 2004, – P. 25–72; Muxtor Ashrafiyva. 2015. – P. 38–42; Muxtor Ashrafiy. 2012) have been dedicated to studying and analyzing his artistic legacy, and several collections have been published on this topic. However, in the literature examined, greater attention is usually paid to his work as a composer, pedagogue, and public figure, while his

conducting activity has not been explored in sufficient detail. When focusing specifically on Muxtor Ashrafiy's qualities as an opera conductor, one can observe that his manual technique and conducting style possessed a unique character. He had fully mastered what conductors commonly refer to as manual technique, with expressive and graceful hand movements that made observing him at the podium a special aesthetic experience. Above all, under his direction, the orchestra, chorus, and soloists produced a unified and precise sound, ensuring the integrity of the entire performance (Slonim, A., 2015, p. 60–61). Since the beginning of his career at the Uzbek Musical Theater (in 1937, as artistic director and chief conductor), Muxtor Ashrafiy conducted musical dramas and his own original works, playing a crucial role in the professional development of this field. It was precisely in his example that the art of Uzbek opera conducting was established. Considering his pioneering contribution to the emergence of national opera, his efforts to provide professional conducting for such works, to strengthen the role of the symphony orchestra in the theater, and to create fully developed opera scores, he should rightly be called the founder-conductor (K. A.).

Another important aspect of his career is his work as a stage conductor for numerous theatrical productions. Possessing a profound understanding of opera dramaturgy, he demonstrated exceptional mastery in expressing stage images through conducting gestures. His aim was always to study in detail every subtle aspect of performance together with singers and orchestra through extensive rehearsals. Muxtor Ashrafiy never imposed short preparation periods on singers nor rushed the rehearsal process to keep up with the production schedule. For him, the decisive factor was the quality and reliability of the work performed – an approach that ultimately revealed the individuality of each performer (Slonim, A., 2015, p. 61).

At this point, it should be noted that Ashrafiy also collaborated with playwright K. Yashin and directors M. Mukhammedov and Z. Kabulov in stage productions such as "Kimga" (1932) and "Ichkarida" (1933). As Ya. Pekker emphasized, what distinguished "Ichkarida" from other works of this genre

was, first and foremost, the use of Uzbek folk instrumental orchestra in unison with the singers, while simultaneously introducing the transition toward a symphonic orchestra. Although the earlier principles of musical characterization of the protagonists, based on folklore themes, were still preserved, "Ichkarida" nevertheless occupied a special place as an original creative achievement (Pekker, Ya., 1957, p. 138–139).

Muxtor Ashrafiy was not only a composer and creator of works, but also a passionate promoter of musical art and an active conductor who widely performed the works of his colleagues, Russian composers, and the masterpieces of world classical music (Pravda Vostoka. 1982). One of the most notable experiences was the staging of *Carmen*, a cornerstone of Western European classical opera, on the stage of the Uzbek Musical Theater. At the same time, the production team referred to a little-known version of the opera discovered in 1930 by the French musicologist Marc Delmas. This version was performed for the first time in Uzbekistan on the theater stage. "The opera *Carmen* became one of the most significant works in Ashrafiy's conducting career. The lesser-known version of this great world opera score opened wide creative and performative prospects for the conductor. Reviews of the premiere testify to the new, remarkable success of the Uzbek conductor" (Ashrafi, F., Solomonova, T., & Tyomina, E., 2004, p. 72). In his article, V. Muzalevsky shared his impressions of the premiere and commented on M. Ashrafiy's conducting of *Carmen*: "Muxtor Ashrafiy was able to deeply absorb the stylistic features characteristic of the opera genre. The strength of the musical performance in *Carmen* was manifested above all in the well-coordinated ensembles, in the flexible and unified sound of the theater chorus, and in the effective rendition of the overture and entr'actes (despite the orchestra not being complete). Ashrafiy succeeded in finding a vivid, though not yet fully stabilized, tempo for the performance, and in the process, he himself reached the highest peak of his conducting mastery" (Muzalevskaya, V., 1944).

While working on Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*, M. Ashrafiy staged the opera in the Uzbek language under his artistic and musi-

cal direction. Later, he continued his career at the Russian Opera and Ballet Theater named after Sverdlov, where he conducted a number of productions, including Prince Igor, Pagliacci, Aida, and The Queen of Spades. According to the theater's description: "Conductor Ashrafiy's first experience with masterpieces of Russian classical opera demonstrated, in his person, the growth of a conductor of wide artistic scope within the theater" (Ashrafi Museum M. (n.d.). Inventory No. 1661).

Another founding figure of Uzbek opera conducting, Tolibjon Sodiqov, also contributed to the development of a distinctive national operatic style through his activity as a composer-conductor in the theater. His original work *Layli va Majnun*, a musical drama staged at the Uzbek Musical Theater in 1933 (directed by M. Mukhammedov), was conducted by the composer himself. T. Sodiqov set himself the goal of writing a musical drama based on the play by the playwright Khurshid (Shamsiddin Sharafiddinov). Going beyond the reworking of traditional maqom and folk melodies, the composer also created original music. Examples include Navfal's letter scene, Layli's final aria before death, the funeral march, and the choral finale. In the first and third tableaux of the work, two-voice choral parts appear for the first time. As musicologist A. Korsakova notes: "The successful experiment of transitioning from unison choral singing to polyphony was carried out by T. Sodiqov as early as 1933" (Korsakova, A., 1961, p. 90).

One of the earliest productions in T. Sodiqov's conducting career was the musical drama *Gulsara* (edited by R. Glière), staged in 1936 under the direction of M. Mukhammedov. Sodiqov distinguished himself from other conductors by his profound knowledge of Uzbek music and his ability to interpret national melodies authentically within the symphonic orchestra. As contemporaries recalled: "Realizing the great responsibility placed on a musical theater conductor, T. Sodiqov worked thoroughly on every production. He was known as a very sensitive and refined conductor. When he took the podium, he was completely transformed, immersing himself in the music and mastering the art of conveying the essence of the work to the audience through sound" (Azimov, K., 2001, p. 160).

This version of "*Layli va Majnun*" was prepared in collaboration with composer R. Glière, and the premiere was conducted by the author himself, T. Sodiqov. According to one reviewer: "Although he (T. Sodiqov) co-created the score with R. Glière, he was not able to fully convey all of its charm. Composer Sodiqov's talent was considerably higher than that of conductor Sodiqov. He was a fine musician and could analyze the score deeply, but his conducting technique was rather modest, which affected his work with the orchestra" (Feliksov, N., 1940). In response to this opinion, A. Korsakova expressed her own view: "If a talented composer did not, in fact, possess 'beautiful' conducting gestures, this did not prevent him from directing an orchestra with sensitivity and precision, nor from achieving an accurate interpretation of the work being performed – especially of his own opera" (Korsakova, A., 1961, p. 208).

Through his conducting career, T. Sodiqov convincingly demonstrated the artistic features and potential of the musical drama and opera genres. Clear examples of this include his opera *Layli va Majnun* (co-authored with R. Glière) and the musical drama *Davron ota* (1941, co-authored with A. Kozlovsky).

Since the establishment of the Uzbek Musical Theater, a number of other conductors belonging to the second category have also played an important role. Among them are B. Inoyatov, N. Goldman, V. Karpov, and F. Shamsutdinov.

From 1942, Bahrom Inoyatov began his career as a conductor at the Opera and Ballet Theater, making his debut with O. Chishko's opera *Mahmud Torobiy* (1944, directed by S. Mukhamedov and R. Bobozhonov). At the theater, he worked alongside prominent and experienced conductors such as M. Ashrafi, T. Sodiqov, and N. Goldman, contributing to the staging of various productions. "The symphonic orchestra bears the main responsibility for the artistic weight of each production. The development of the orchestral score and its significant role in musical dramaturgy depend on the conductor's level, talent, taste, and ability. Possessing a deep inner sense of music, Bahrom Inoyatov expressed the meaning of each work through his subtle and refined gestures, achieving harmony between the stage action and the perform-

ers: soloists, chorus, and orchestra in opera, and dancers and orchestra in ballet” (Azimov, K., 2001, 102). Throughout his career, he conducted Uzbek operas such as A. Kozlovsky’s “Ulug’bek”; M. Ashrafi and S. Vasilenko’s “Bo’ron” (The Storm); T. Sodiqov and R. Glière’s “Layli va Majnun” and “Gulsara”. Among the world opera repertoire, he conducted G. Bizet’s “Carmen” and “Les pêcheurs de perles” (The Pearl Fishers), U. Hajibekov’s “Koroghlu”, A. Spendiariov’s “Almast”, G. Verdi’s “Rigoletto”, and many others.

It should be noted that in the activities of Uzbek opera conductors, a number of productions translated into Uzbek also played an important role. Among these were “Yer Targyn” by Ye. Brusilovsky and “Nargiz” by M. Magomayev, which were staged for the first time in the Uzbek language. “These works helped actors, directors, and conductors in preparing and working on stage productions, the most complex form of musical-theatrical art, allowing them to test themselves and ultimately assisting in the staging of the first national opera” (Korsakova, A., 1961, p. 318). The premieres of these translated works were conducted by M. Ashrafi and B. Inoyatov. In addition to these, the Azerbaijani composer U. Hajibekov’s opera “Koroghlu” (produced in 1950, directed by S. Mukhamedov) should also be mentioned. Through his conducting mastery, B. Inoyatov was able to convey to the audience all the richness and elements of Hajibekov’s music. Alongside his conducting career, he also engaged in translating opera librettos into Uzbek. Examples include U. Ha-

jibekov’s “Koroghlu” (in collaboration with Kh. Ghulom) and G. Bizet’s “Les pêcheurs de perles” (The Pearl Fishers, in collaboration with M. Tursunov). Furthermore, his work as a conductor-translator extended to several productions such as A. Spendiariov’s “Almast” and S. Ryauzov’s “Medegmasha” (At the Foot of the Sayan Mountains). Musicologist A. Korsakova specifically comments on Inoyatov’s conducting of “Medegmasha”: “Unlike the production of “Almast”, here the theater strove to achieve success. Conductor Bahrom Inoyatov distinguished himself by skillfully communicating all the orchestral colors through refined gestures. His confident leadership contributed to the successful coordination of vocal ensembles in the opera” (Korsakova, A., 1961, p. 326).

In the course of studying the activities and analyzing the creative work of Uzbek opera conductors, it can be concluded that stage conductors play a crucial role in the promotion of national operas. The experience and observations of each conductor whose work has been examined reflect the specific features and laws of national stage art. However, the lack of sufficient video recordings (especially of staged national operas) hinders the theoretical study of this field. For this reason, the issues of staging national operas and the collaboration between conductors and directors remain pressing problems to this day. From this perspective, the creative path of Uzbek opera conductors has been analyzed. This, in turn, is one of the essential factors for the future development of the conducting school.

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