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EVOLUTION OF STRING INSTRUMENTS: CONSTRUCTIVE AND TECHNICAL SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE KASHGAR, AFGHAN, AND INDIAN RUBABS

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of plucked string instruments by comparing the structural and technical similarities of the Kashgar, Afghan, and Indian rubabs. The study explores the historical development of the rubab family within the musical cultures of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia, emphasizing the role of cultural exchange along the Great Silk Road in shaping their construction and performance traditions. Particular attention is paid to the organological characteristics of these instruments, including resonator design, string configuration, resonance strings, fret systems, sound production methods, and acoustic properties. The research demonstrates that although these instruments share a common historical origin, they have evolved independently under the influence of regional musical traditions and aesthetic principles.

Keywords: *kashgar rubab, Afghan rubab, Indian rubab, string instruments, organology, musical heritage, Great Silk Road, performance traditions, acoustic characteristics, UNESCO*

Plucked string instruments have occupied a prominent place in the musical cultures of Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia for centuries. Among them, instruments belonging to the rubab family are distinguished by their ancient history, organological diversity, and extensive performance capabilities. The rubab serves not only as an important musical instrument but also as a unique cultural artifact reflecting the historical development of cultural exchange, aesthetic values, and musical thought among different peoples.

The development of the rubab is closely associated with the cultural exchanges that took place along the Great Silk Road. Economic and cultural interactions among Eastern Turkestan, Transoxiana, Khorasan, Afghanistan, and Northern India enabled the instrument to acquire new structural and acoustic characteristics under the influence of various local traditions. Consequently, several related yet independently developed instruments emerged, including the Kashgar rubab, Afghan rubab, Indian rubab, Pamir rubab, and the Uyghur rawap.

The rubab is one of the oldest plucked string instruments of the Eastern world, with its earliest descriptions appearing in Arabic and Persian musical treatises dating from the ninth and tenth centuries CE. The term rubab derives from the Arabic word *rubāb*, which was initially used as a generic designation for string instruments. Over time, the term became established as the name of a family of instruments possessing specific structural and acoustic characteristics.

The Uzbek scholar Abdurauf Fitrat provides valuable information concerning the construction of the rubab: “The body of this instrument consists of four principal parts: the resonating bowl, the upper body, the neck, and the head. The bowl, upper body, and neck are carved from a single piece of mulberry wood. The head is made separately and then attached to the neck. The resonating bowl and the upper body resemble two hollow vessels connected by a 2.5-centimeter bridge, while both the bowl and the connecting section are covered with deer or goat skin” (Fitrat, A., 1993, p. 29).

In his *Kitāb al-Mūsīqā al-Kabīr* (The Great Book of Music), Abu Nasr al-Farabi provides general information on the construction and performance capabilities of string instruments belonging to the rubab family. Although the instrument he describes is not identical to the modern Kashgar or Afghan rubab, his observations constitute an important theoretical source for understanding the historical evolution of plucked string instruments.

In the thirteenth century, Safi al-Din al-Urmawi, in his treatises *Kitāb al-Adwār* and *Sharafiyya*, presented valuable information concerning the pitch system, string arrangement, and the role of the rubab in maqom performance. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Abd al-Qadir Maraghi identified the rubab as one of the principal instruments employed in court music and compared its performance capabilities with those of other string instruments, thereby providing important evidence for the instrument’s historical significance and artistic development (Rajabov, I. Maqoms. –2006, p. 78). By the seventeenth century, Darvish Ali Changi, in his treatise *Risolayi Musiqiy* (Treatise on Music), identified the rubab as

one of the most widespread musical instruments in Central Asia. During this period, regional variants of the instrument began to emerge, laying the foundation for the subsequent development of the Kashgar, Pamir, and Bukhara performance schools.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, intensified cultural exchanges among Eastern Turkestan, Afghanistan, and India along the Great Silk Road contributed to the further evolution of regional forms of the rubab. The Kashgar rubab developed a distinctive long-necked, fretted construction, whereas the Afghan rubab became characterized by its system of sympathetic strings. The Indian rubab, influenced by the court music of the Mughal Empire, evolved into an instrument distinguished by its fretless neck and highly sophisticated performance techniques.

The scientific classification of string instruments constitutes one of the principal fields of organology. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the German scholars Erich Moritz von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs developed the Hornbostel–Sachs classification system, which remains the most widely accepted scientific classification of musical instruments worldwide. According to this system, the rubab family belongs to the category of composite chordophones (lutes).

Throughout their historical development, however, each regional variant of the rubab acquired distinctive structural characteristics under the influence of local musical traditions, performance requirements, and craftsmanship.

The Kashgar rubab is regarded as one of the most technically versatile instruments among Uzbekistan’s traditional musical instruments. Its origins are associated with the ancient craftsmanship traditions of Eastern Turkestan, while its subsequent development was significantly influenced by the performance schools of the Fergana Valley, Tashkent, and Samarkand. The instrument derives its name from the ancient city of Kashgar. It took its modern form in Eastern Turkestan during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries before spreading to the Fergana Valley, Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara.

Structurally, the Kashgar rubab features a long neck, a spoon-shaped resonator, a mem-

brane soundboard, 19–24 frets, and typically five principal strings together with sympathetic strings, the exact number of which varies according to the instrument's type.

The resonator of the Kashgar rubab is traditionally carved from mulberry wood, while its upper surface is generally covered with goat or fish skin. This membrane produces the instrument's characteristic bright, resonant, and penetrating tone.

One of the principal advantages of the Kashgar rubab is its metal fret system. The frets provide accurate temperament, stable intonation, and the possibility of performing complex modulations. These characteristics clearly distinguish the Kashgar rubab from both the Afghan and Indian rubabs.

The Afghan rubab is regarded as the most renowned member of the rubab family. It is widely distributed in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, and in Afghanistan it is officially recognized as the national musical instrument.

Structurally, the Afghan rubab is characterized by a short neck, a deep wooden resonator, a goat-skin soundboard, three to four principal strings, two to three drone strings, and eleven to fifteen or more sympathetic strings.

Its body is large, rounded, and deeply carved from a single block of hardwood, typically mulberry or walnut. Organologically, the Afghan rubab is considered one of the most sophisticated representatives of the rubab family owing to its complex string arrangement and rich acoustic characteristics.

The Indian rubab is found primarily in the Kashmir region of northern India. It is distinguished by its relatively small size, soft timbre, and its use in both religious and folk

music traditions. Its body is generally smaller and thinner than that of the Afghan rubab. The front of the resonator is commonly covered with goat or cow skin, similar to the sarod, while the back is made of wood. The neck is longer and covered with a smooth metal fingerboard. Although it is fretless, this construction facilitates continuous finger gliding and expressive pitch transitions.

1. The Indian rubab entered northern India, particularly Kashmir and Punjab, and was subsequently adapted for court music during the Mughal period. Many scholars consider it to be the historical predecessor of the sarod (National Encyclopedia of Uzbekistan (O'zME), 2006–2008, p. 511).

Its playing technique resembles that of the sarod, with the plectrum moving primarily from the lower to the upper direction. However, because of the greater number of strings, the performer must possess exceptional finger agility and technical precision. Although the Indian rubab and the sarod belong to the same instrumental family, they differ significantly in construction, playing technique, and acoustic characteristics.

The Indian rubab developed under the influence of the court music tradition of northern India. Many organologists regard it as the direct historical ancestor of the modern sarod.

The rubab family represents a system of plucked string instruments that has evolved over many centuries throughout Central, South, and Western Asia. Although all members of this family share a common historical origin, each has acquired distinctive structural, acoustic, and performance characteristics under the influence of regional musical aesthetics and local performance traditions.

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