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THE RUBAB IN EASTERN MUSICAL PERFORMANCE AND ITS VARIOUS FORMS AND TYPES

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Abstract

This article explores the rubab, an ancient Persian string instrument, widely spread in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and India. Based on historical sources from the 7th century, the rubab is considered the traditional instrument of Khorasan and holds a central place in Afghan classical and folk music. Various types of rubab (Afghan, Uzbek, Kashgar, Pamir, Tajik) are examined in terms of their construction, performance techniques, and regional differences in timbre. The study highlights the role of rubab in folk celebrations, professional ensembles, and its revival in modern performance practice, particularly in Uzbekistan. The conclusion emphasizes rubab as both a musical instrument and a cultural symbol of Eastern peoples.

Keywords: *Rubab, Kashgar rubab, Tajik rubab, Afghan rubab, Eastern music, folk instruments, performance practice*

Rubab – an ancient Persian musical instrument, widely spread in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and India. Since the 7th century, the name “rubab” has been mentioned in ancient Persian sources. It is considered the traditional instrument of Khorasan and today serves as a central instrument in Afghan folk and classical music. In the 1960s, the tendency to create purely Persian ensembles brought the rubab back onto the stage of Persian classical music.

References to the rubab are also found in the works of Nizami, Nasimi, Fuzuli, S. A. Shirvani, and many other classical authors. The great scholar and music theorist of the 10th century, Al-Farabi, described the

rubab as an ancient Eastern musical instrument. Among the peoples of Central Asia, the instrument became known as the “Kashgar rubab” and the “Tajik rubab.” In the 12th century, the rubab entered Europe under the name *rebec*. In Turkey, a three-stringed version of the rubab exists.

The rubab is used both as a melodic and accompanying instrument in folk music, festive ceremonies, and professional ensembles. Its main structure consists of a boat-shaped body and a long neck, although the size, materials, and number of strings vary. In each region, the rubab’s sound acquires a unique timbre, shaped by the materials, construction, and performance techniques employed.

Regional types of rubab:

1. Afghan rubab – characterized by a large, deep body, side indentations, and a short neck.
2. Uzbek rubab – has a body made of wood (circular or oval in shape), with a leather soundboard, a long neck, and 4–6 strings. The sound is produced using a special plectrum.
3. Kashgar rubab – a small plucked string instrument, widely popular among the Uyghurs and other Central Asian peoples. It has a small, rounded body, a long neck with tied frets, and a peg-box bent backwards, distinguished by two “horn-like” projections at the base of the neck. It is usually played with a rigid plectrum (often made of horn), both in solo performance and for accompanying songs.
 1. The body is small and rounded, usually carved from a single piece of mulberry wood.
 2. The neck is long and sturdy, with tied frets (typically 18–25), made of gut or other materials.
 3. Pamir rubab – made of apricot wood, with its body covered by a thin layer of goatskin.
 4. Tajik rubab – closely related to the Afghan rubab, with a pot-shaped body made of strong wood and leather. Compared to the Kashgar rubab, the Tajik rubab has a more refined shape and produces a louder sound, due to the use of more durable materials.

It is employed both in solo performance and in ensembles, and is considered one of the main instruments of Tajik folk music.

The Kashgar rubab is a plucked string instrument widely known among the Uyghurs and other peoples of Central Asia. It is distinguished by its small, round body, long neck, and tied frets. The instrument is typically played with a plectrum made of hard horn or bone. It is used both for performing solo melodies and for accompanying songs.

1. The body is small and round, usually carved in one piece from mulberry wood.
2. The neck is long and durable, with tied frets (generally 18 to 25) made of gut or other materials.

The instrument is equipped with two pairs of melodic strings and one resonant (auxiliary) string, traditionally made of silk or gut.

Performance technique and application:

1. The instrument is held horizontally and played with a plectrum made of hard horn.
2. The rubab is used for performing solo melodies as well as for accompanying songs.
3. Its performance style is dynamic and expressive, often employing tremolo and complex rhythmic patterns.

The Kashgar Rubab is considered the principal Uyghur musical instrument. It is widespread among the peoples of Central Asia and is also found in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

String system and range of the Kashgar Rubab

The instrument is equipped with three strings (the 1st and 3rd are paired, while the 2nd is single):

1. The 1st and 2nd strings are melodic, made of silk.
2. The 3rd string is a resonant one, made of brass.

The melodic strings are tuned at a perfect fourth interval, while the resonant string is tuned a perfect fifth below the 2nd string (or an octave below the 1st string).

The range of the Kashgar Rubab extends from “A” of the small octave to “A” of the third octave.

Among its five strings, four are made of metal alloys, while one is crafted from gut or silk.

The tuning process follows the intervals of fourths and fifths:

1. The 1st string is tuned to “A”, The 2nd string to “D” or “E”, The 3rd string to “A” or “B”.

The most widespread types of the rubab have a length of 800–1000 mm, and their sound is primarily produced with the help of a plectrum. At the beginning of the 20th century, “Uzbek music, while preserving its unique national traditions, was also enriched with elements of European musical culture. This process, which was marked by immense complexity and challenges” (Tashpulatov, M. F. 2024) continued into the mid-20th

century, when the rubab evolved into a modernized form. In particular, within the Uzbek folk instruments orchestra, the rubab was reconstructed in three distinct types: *prima*, *alto*, and *tenor*.

The general structure of the instrument is as follows:

1. A polished wooden body (circular or oval in shape), covered with leather on the top,
2. Equipped with 4–6 main strings and several resonating strings,
3. An average length of 80–100 cm,
4. Played using a plectrum (mediator).

The rubab can be used both for solo performances and for accompanying songs. “Its sound varies depending on the region, as dif-

ferences in materials, construction, and performance techniques give each type of rubab a distinct timbre” (Odilov, A., 1995). The Kashgar rubab continues to serve as a leading instrument in Uzbek folk ensembles today. Its range extends from *A* of the small octave to *A* of the third octave.

The rubab is not only a musical instrument but also a spiritual symbol that embodies the cultural heritage of peoples. Although the rubabs of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kashgar share common roots, they differ in their construction, performance techniques, and timbre. This diversity reflects the variety and richness of the musical culture of Eastern peoples.

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