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THE RHYTHMIC FOUNDATIONS OF USUL IN CENTRAL ASIAN MUSICAL TRADITION

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of usul, a fundamental rhythmic pattern in Central Asian traditional music, and its significance in both musical and poetic contexts. Drawing from various scholarly works, the study highlights how different historical figures, such as Ibn Sina and Al-Farabi, approached usul and contributed to its theoretical development. The article delves into the intricate structure of usul, its relationship with meter, and its manifestation in both explicit forms (through percussion) and implicit forms (within melodic compositions). Additionally, the research examines how the smallest rhythmic components (naqra and nagma) play a crucial role in forming complex rhythmic systems. By comparing usul with poetic meters and exploring its historical evolution, the article underscores the cultural and musical importance of rhythm in Central Asian traditions. The findings show that, while usul has been defined in various ways across time, its core function as a rhythmic foundation has remained constant, influencing musical practices in the region for centuries.

Keywords: *Usul, rhythm, maqom, Central Asian music, Ibn Sina, Al-Farabi*

Introduction

The science of usul (rhythmic patterns), which is part of the field of rhythm, has been studied in the works of numerous scholars from past generations. Through examining various sources, it was discovered that each researcher referred to the term “usul” differently. For instance, Ibn Sina in his treatise called it (usul) “bahr” (original rhythmic form), al-Urmavi termed it “main types of tuzuk”, Marogi referred to it as “doira”, Kavkabi used “doira methods”, D. Changi called it “bahri usul” (a method consisting of turok and their groups), while in Central Asian ma-

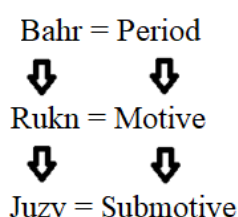
qom practice it is simply called “usul” (Nazarov A., 1995. 57–58).

“Usul” is derived from the Arabic language and reflects meanings such as origin, foundation, and principle. It is a rhythmic-metrical formula that is maintained throughout an entire work. Usul can be expressed in two ways: explicit and implicit. In the explicit form, it is performed on a specific percussion instrument, while in the implicit form, it reveals its unique aspects within the melody. Usul is considered one of the main elements of music in oral tradition and forms the foundation of its multifaceted rhythmic structure.

In particular, various rhythmic layers are formed based on it (Tahalov S. M., 1987. 74–75).

Results of research

Usul, like other entities, has its smallest component. This component is called “naqra”. According to musicologists, a sound heard for a specific duration is called “nagma”. Since “nagma” is a continuous sound, it naturally has a starting point. This point is denoted by the term “naqra”. “Naqra”, translated from Arabic, means “stress”, and in music, it serves as a means of defining the starting point. Usul determines the duration of these naqras and the intervals between them, establishing how they connect. This concept is close to the definition of meter. Additionally, sources indicate that rhythm patterns are formed by combining the letters “T” and “N”. It is known that aruz (prosody) contains long and short syllables, and similarly, in usul, rhythmic patterns consist of long and short durations. For example, “Tan” is a long syllable, in “Tanan”, “Ta” is short and “nan” is long, in “Tanna”, “Tan” is long and “na” is short, and in “Tananan”, “Ta” and “na” are short while “nan” is long (Rajabov I., 2006. 117). In the science of aruz, these syllables are called “juzv”, their combinations form rukns (feet), and from rukns, bahrs (meters) are formed. This concept can be defined as follows in music theory:



According to K. Sachs, the Greek word “rhythmos” originates from the root “rheo, rhein”, meaning “river, water flow”. In Arabic, “bahr” (“sea, river, lake”) is considered the original form of musical-poetic meters (“usul” is derived from this basis). Scholars

speculate that Khalil ibn Ahmad may have been the first to use “bahr” as an alternative term for “usul” in music (or poetry) (Nazarov A., 1995. 37).

In past treatises, rhythm was one of the complex issues, and the great thinker Ibn Sina paid attention to its lexical and musical (rhythmic) characteristics. Lexical rhythm refers to the rhythm belonging to the art of words (poetry). Specifically, this thinker stated: most movements that are rhythmically balanced are not balanced in terms of words (verbal language) – due to the disruption of movement. And the majority of verbally balanced (movements) cannot be rhythmically balanced – due to the abundance of pauses. Each of them “is balanced according to its own nature.” From this, we can say that the organizing beats (i.e., rhythmic pattern) of the cycle (usul) do not always correspond with the verbal (oral) expression. Each has its own internal laws. In their treatises, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina argued that musical rhythm has its own unique aspects and that it develops independently of poetic systems. Ibn Sina expressed the opinion: “Things are beautiful with rhythm and word, and everything beautiful in words is also beautiful in rhythm. But the reverse is not true”. To clarify this idea, “naqr” is musical rhythm, and “lafz” is verbal language (meter in writing). That is, what is beautiful in both of these will certainly be beautiful rhythmically. However, what is beautiful in musical rhythm cannot always be reflected in writing (poetry). Also, forms of variation (change) are divided into verbal or rhythmic principles. Both are expressed in melodies in an inseparable connection. However, their difference lies in their structural components. It is stated that verbal rhythm is organized with letters, while melodic (musical) rhythm is organized with beats. As can be seen, their foundations are different. To present this issue more clearly, Ibn Sina gives a simple example and explains it (Nazarov A., 1995. 101–105). In modern writing, it is as follows:

1. Letter expression: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
tan tan ta - nan
2. Naqra expression: 1 2 3 4
♪ ♪ ♫ ♪

As can be seen, the sum of the literal expression is seven, while the rhythmic one is four.

Both al-Farabi and Ibn Sina divide the types of rhythm into two groups: “muvassal” and “mufassal”. Ibn Sina wrote in his treatise: “Perhaps the rhythm is in two parts: one is called muvasal, and its beats occur in equal units (azminas), which people call hazaj. The second is called mufassal, and its beats are separated from several subsequent beats for a certain period of time. This separating time is called fasila”. Specifically, the mufassal group is formed based on muvasal rhythms. In general, a complex form of rhythm develops from its simple type. Similarly, complex meters (4/4, 6/8, etc.) are derived from simple meter types (2/4, 3/4, etc.). Undoubtedly, Ibn Sina continued and further developed the ideas of al-Farabi’s rhythm theory in his treatise. However, it should be noted that even though they divide the forms of rhythm into the same two groups, there are some differences in their internal characteristics. However, it should be noted that even if they divide the forms of rhythm into two groups, they have some differences in their internal characteristics.

According to the treatises of several scholars, the rhythmic movement of a person’s smooth breathing and heartbeat formed the basis for 12 types of musical rhythm. In particular, this served as the foundation for the concept of “zarb-i-qadim” (basic rhythm). This rhythmic formula is mentioned several times in the works of medieval scholars; this method calculates time with equal durations. Specifically, our musicologists call this manifestation of rhythm “metric” because it is based on strict periodicity (Solomonova T. E., 1978. 30–31). This uniform time measure is conventionally represented by the syllables “tan-tan”. These two “tan-tan” together reflect “zarb-i-qadim”. The number of rhythm types varies, with some scholars stating that there are 6 types in Arabic and 15 in Persian music. Additionally, according to Khoji Abdulqodir, there are 17 variations of musical rhythm, while other scholars increase the number of rhythms to 24. In gen-

eral, this rhythmic formula became the basis for the subsequent complexity and diversity of methods.

As mentioned in sources, the rhythmic aspect of Uzbek music relies on two main concepts: zarb (beat) and usul (method) (Tahalov S. M., 1987. 74–75). Zarb is the initial rhythmic unit from which the sequence and relationship of durations and accents are formed. Usul is what creates the criteria for these relationships and norms for calculation. Although Uzbek traditional music is notated based on the tact system, as observed in musical scores, its internal division is represented by the rhythmic period of the usul. Specifically, usuls define certain limits in the application of different durations and accents.

In O. Bochkareva’s article “On the Rhythm of Uzbek Folk Instrumental Music”, we will focus on the definition of meter, as this idea directly expresses the usul. Specifically, the author states: “Meter is a means of dividing time into equal durations. Also, one of its most important features is the presence of an accented side, which is usually defined as strong beats. In Uzbek music, metric accentuation appears as simple periodic and complex periodic. The first of these includes 2/4, 3/4, 6/4, and similar meters. The latter is usually called “usuli lang” (limping rhythm) by Uzbek performers. That is, two different meter types (5/4+7/4) combine to form a single complex repeating periodicity” (Bochkareva O., 1972. 277, 279, 280). In particular, it would not be an exaggeration to say that this description is close to the definition given to usul. It can be assumed that the author referred to usul as a complex repetitive periodicity.

Conclusion

In general, as evident from the ideas presented above, the method has existed since ancient times and has had its own distinctive definitions in certain periods. Specifically, it can be said that the explanations regarding the method provided in various sources are closely related and do not possess significant differences from one another.

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