



SAZ

INDISPENSABLE INSTRUMENT OF AZERBAIJANI ASHUGS

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THE SAZ IS ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR STRINGED-PLECTRUM MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF THE AZERBAIJANI PEOPLE. THE SAZ IS PLAYED PRIMARILY BY ASHUGS, WHO CONTINUE THE TRADITIONS OF THEIR PREDECESSORS – OZANS WHO SANG TO THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF THE GOPUZ.

The art of ashugs combines ashug songs (whose number exceeds 100) performed exclusively on the saz, and songs written in a special poetic form (goshma, gozallama, mukhammas, divan, tajnis, etc.) by ashugs themselves. An important place in an ashug's repertoire belongs to dastans (heroic-ethical tales), ustadnamehs (sermon

songs) and lyrical and heroic songs. Dayishmas – contests involving two, three or four ashugs, who offer each other riddles in their poems – are also held.

The saz is used for the solo performance of ashug melodies and as part of ashug ensembles. Often, instrumental versions of tunes are performed by venerable musicians

who convey the beauty of the ashug melody most clearly and subtly.

It should be emphasized that along with mugham, the ashug art is a rich and diverse branch of Azerbaijani folk music based on ancient traditions and has long existed in various regions of Azerbaijan. It is no coincidence that **it has been included on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.**

The saz, its origin and development, structural features and learning are a favorite subject of research by musicologists and folklorists concerned with the relationship of poetry and ashug music [1-10]. This instrument is considered a symbol of the Turkic world, expressing the spirit of its peoples. Listening to the saz, one cannot but admire its unusually sweet and sonorous sound.

Due to the wide spread of ashug art among many Turkic and other peoples, the saz is one of the few instruments known under one name in the vast territory covering the Caucasus, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Turkey and the Balkans. In Turkey, this instrument is also called a "baglama".

In the Middle Ages, the word "saz" was used in most cases to refer to musical instruments in general. This meaning is still used in Turkey. Over time, this word came to mean an instrument played by ashugs. Another meaning of the word "saz" is serviceable or in good condition, and thus, with regard to the instrument, it can be interpreted as "tuned", "efficient".

The mention of the musical instrument, the saz, is common in the medieval classical poetry of Azerbaijan. Various works mention the sound, structure and types of the saz. For example, Khagani speaks of a one-stringed saz, and

Nizami – about one of its types – the jur-saz. Ismail Khatai sings about the saz in one of his poems:

Today I didn't take my saz, I won't touch my voice again. There are four important things for all of us: Science, the word, singing and the saz.

Ashugs unanimously testify that the saz was initially small. It was supplied with three strings made of horse tail hair or silk thread. The emergence of new forms of ashug poetry and the influence of mughams required improvements in the technical and artistic possibilities of the saz. This led to an increase in the size of the body, the length of the neck, the number of strings and frets. The expansion of the sound row of the saz ensured the performance of all known ashug melodies and accordingly, the further spread of the instrument.

Modern sazes vary in size, number of strings and frets. Large instruments (up to 1,000-1,100 mm) are called *tavar* or *boyuk saz*, middle-sized ones (800-900 mm) - *orta saz*, and small ones (540-700 mm) - *jura* (small) or *goltug* (axillary) saz. The number of strings in the *tavar* is 8-11, middle-sized saz - 8-9 and *jura* - 4-5.

Big sazes are used by ashugs and small ones in orchestras and ensembles, as well as when ashugs teach their students. Previously, there existed larger sazes - *bash tavar* or *ana saz* - up to 1,500 mm in length and with 12 strings. Currently, ashugs use the term *ana saz* to refer to 9- or 11-stringed instruments.

Orchestras and ensembles of Azerbaijani folk instruments also include the so-called orchestra saz (*orkestr sazi*) with a length of 800 mm, with 5-6 strings and 17 frets.

The wooden parts of the saz include the deep body (*chanag,*



*Ashug Pari,
Maral Rahmanzade, 1974*

chomcha, gobul, govda), the long neck (*gol, bilak*), the butt (*kup, becha, bogaz*), the sounding board (*sina, dash, gapag*), the head (*kalla*) with pins (*ashikh, gulag, burgu*) and the stand (*kharak*). The body is made mostly of the mulberry tree cut in the fall and aged 2-3 months, has a length of 450-500 mm, a width of 300-450 mm and a depth of 200-300 mm. In some sazes, the lower contour of the body is convex (*garpizi* – watermelon-shaped), while in others it is a little flat (*yemishi* – melon-shaped). At present, the so-called *Tovuz saz* (named for its place of manufacture) is quite common. By the shape of its body, it occupies an intermediate position between the abovementioned types. Previously, hollowed as a tree stump from the outer and inner sides, it was shaped as the body of the saz (the saz of

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Azerbaijani tales, Zumrud Mammadova, 2006

the famous ashug Alasgar). Later, to improve the sound and ease the process of manufacture, the body began to be made from wooden staves (*dilim, bugum, gabir ga, yarpag*) with a length of 420-450 mm. The number of staves varies from 5 to 11, mostly - 9.

The 650-700-mm-long neck is usually made of the walnut tree. To ensure that the instrument sounds well, the neck is sometimes made hollow. Such sazes are called *khatabandi* or *khakaband*. The stamp of the neck is removed, the neck is made hollow, a few small pellets are thrown in (*girma*), and then,

the stamp is put back in its place. On the 120-mm-long head, which serves as a direct extension of the neck, holes are drilled for pins, depending on the number of strings. The 90-120-mm-long butt is made of mulberry, apricot or walnut trees. The body and the neck are attached to it.

The 3-4-mm-thick sounding board is made from mulberry or oak and is flattened. To ensure that the middle part of the sounding board does not sink, it is burnt in the fire. To improve and strengthen the sound of the saz, 5-6 small cavity openings (*saslik*) are made under

the strings on the sounding board. The pins are made of walnut, apricot, pear or beech trees and placed on the openings at the head of the saz at the top and sides of the neck. At a distance of four fingers (approximately 70-80 mm) from the lower end of the sounding board, there is the lower stand made of apricot or pear trees, and on the neck closer to the pins – there is a low upper stand made of bull or buffalo horns.

At the rear of the body, there is a small bar (*ayag, darag*) made of bone, metal or wood to tighten the lower ends of the string. The frets (*parda*) made from a sheep's small intestine (*kirish*) are attached to the neck. Currently, vein frets have been replaced by nylon threads.

Most ashug sazes previously had only eight frets. Eleven frets were enough to play all the ashug tunes. Now their number is usually 14-15. Each of the frets, in turn, has a name passed down from generation to generation and characterizing their position on the neck, the sound row of the saz, the pitch of the sound and oral ashug songs (*bash parda, orta parda, shah parda, divani parda, bayati parda, becha parda*, etc.). And every ashug environment has its own entrenched names.

Ashugs pull 9-8 or 11 strings (tel) on the saz, but in most cases nine-stringed sazes are used. The strings have small equal thickness and are made of an alloy of steel and silver. In the nine-stringed saz, the upper ends of the three lower strings and one upper string are twisted around the upper pins and the three middle and the upper two strings around the side pins.

The saz is played with a plectrum (*tazana*) made from the bark of a black cherry or sour cherry tree. To ensure that the hand holding the



Saz, inlaid with pearls
B. Balabayov. 1999

plectrum can move freely and the performer does not get tired, the saz is held at the chest with a belt (*gayish*, *gaytan*, *ashirma*) slung over the shoulder and attached to the hooks on the butt in the rear of the body.

Typically, the body, neck, butt, and the edge of the sounding board and the heads of the pins are decorated with mother-of-pearl ornaments (*shirga-sadaf*) and bone (*shirmayi*), which have a specific geometric shape known as "*chilik*"; "*aypara*"; "*darag*"; "*dirnag*"; "*pitik*"; "*pakhlava*"; "*zanjirvari*"; "*buta*"; "*dama*" and "*jidaburnu*". The saz is typically kept in a dark fabric cover (*koynak*) sealed with a thin rope in the head part.

While playing, the saz is held horizontally, the body is pressed against the upper chest and held with the left hand and a strap slung over the shoulder. The plectrum, placed between the tips of the right-hand thumb and the index finger over the

body, strikes the strings while left-hand fingers (index, middle and ring fingers) move along the neck and press the strings against the frets. The ashug sings and accompanies himself on the saz in a standing position.

The strings are combined into three groups: a) 3+2+3; b) 3+3+3 and c) 4+4+3, configured in unison. According to the register, the 3-4 lower (*ayag*, *barmag*, *alalti*, *danis-han*) strings are called *zillar* (high), the 2-3 middle strings - *bamlar* (low) and the 3-4 upper strings are called *damlar* (bourdon). Forming an organ point, the bourdon strings are tuned in unison and have slightly lower pitch than the high strings. The always open middle tuning strings have the lowest pitch. Together with the bourdon strings, they are accompanying strings and are tuned in unison with the octave or the fourth-fifth. In contrast to the

upper strings, the height of their sound is changing. As can be seen, regardless of the number of strings on the saz, there are three tones (sounds). Therefore, the instrument is normally called *uch telli saz* (three-stringed saz).

Regarding the pitch of the low strings, there are seven types of saz settings (*ana kok*, *dilgami*, *ur fani*, *ayag divani* and so on). The row of high and bourdon strings in all types of settings is permanent - respectively, they are tuned for C in the first octave and B flat in the low octave. The row of low strings varies depending on the modal-harmonic features of the work performed. Regarding the high and bourdon strings, they are usually tuned in the fifths-fourth interval, i.e. comply with F in the first octave. This is the main setting (*ana kok*) of the saz.

The ashug, using changing low strings, achieves a wide variety of

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chords with the unchanging bourdon strings. In addition, ashugs make masterful use of the strings of the melodic group; they press only one, two or three strings against the fret with their fingers, and thus, produce a melodic line with tremolo and strikes of the plectrum against the bottom or, conversely, from the bottom up against a group of strings, or by dynamics. Thus, sometimes **ashugs get four-part sounds, reaching a wide range of dynamic shades**. They often use strokes obtained by alternating through clanking – moving the plectrum on all the strings from the top down and bottom up. Often, plectrum strikes against all the strings down alternate with strikes against a specific group of strings.

While performing, ashugs often use left-hand fingers in order to get nuances and certain sound timbres (*basma, surutma, vurma*, etc.). While playing, they also use vibration (*titratma*), obtained by pressing the melodic strings against the fret with their fingers (index, middle and ring fingers) and rapidly moving their finger up and down, clicking (*jirtig*) on the sounding board, as well as with soft strikes of the fingers against the strings – near the neck and the stand, and over the middle of the sounding board – and shaking the instrument up and down over the chest several times. The upper and lower plectrum strikes against the strings and their rotation are the main particularity of playing the saz.

While performing ashug melodies accompanied by the saz, the inner world, feelings and emotional state of the performer and **his ability to convey diverse sounds and rhythms are important. They should always be integrated.** Only in this case, does the ashug's solo

performance on the saz reach true artistry.

Close familiarity with ashug art gave a great impetus to Uzeyir Hajibayov in creating "Ashugsayagi" for the violin, cello and piano; Aghshin Alizadeh – in creating a play of the same name for the chamber orchestra and the Fifth Symphony; Jahangir Jahangirov – the Ashug Ali cantata; Rashid Afandiyev – a series of plays on the theme of ashug tunes and the saz, piano and percussion instruments; Rashid Shafag – the scenic song "Ashug Ali Baba" for the saz, a soloist and a children's choir; Aydin



Azimov – the vocal cycles "Voice of Ozans" for vocals, the saz, tar and ud; Sevda Ibrahimova – the "Martyrs" cantata; Elnara Dadashova – the anthem "Glory to Your Courage" for the saz and the choir, in which the saz is used as a leading instrument.

The artistic and technical capabilities of the saz are well disclosed in Suleyman Alasgarov's suite "Ashugvari", written for the saz, a singer and an orchestra of folk instruments. Javanshir Guliyev wrote a sonata for the saz and viola, a sonatina for the saz and a quartet of

wind instruments and the "Caravan" trio (flute, cello and saz).

In Said Rustamov's suite "Azerbaijan" (Part 1), Jahangir Jahangirov's "Egyptian Paintings" (Part 3) and Haji Khanmammadov's "Festive Suite" (Part 1), the saz is the main melodic line and, combined with wind instruments – the flute and the balaban, it gives listeners a true pleasure.

The sounds of the saz raise the fighting spirit, decorate wedding feasts, spiritually enrich people and help them to learn about the world, allowing them once again to feel the incomparable beauty of Azerbaijani folk music. ♦

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