

# AZERBAIJANI KANUN

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THE AZERBAIJANI MUSICAL INSTRUMENT KANUN IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN HARP, UNLIKE WHICH ITS MANY STRINGS WERE PLACED ON A WOODEN BODY IN A HORIZONTAL POSITION.

**T**he kanun is an instrument akin to the lyre, dulcimer, and zither common in European countries. Because of the similar name, it is assumed that the kanun was formed from the ancient kanon, i.e., the monochord the only string of which was supplemented with additional strings already in antiquity [5]. It is no accident that the Tajik musicologist, singer and chang performer, Dervish Ali (second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> - first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century) **considered it the legacy of the Hellenic world.** [6] **As evidenced**

**by written records, before the Christian era, it was common in Ancient Egypt, Anatolia and Mesopotamia.** Then the kanun migrated to Iran, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Pakistan, India and China [4, 7].

The kanun was one of the most common instruments in medieval Azerbaijan [1, 3] and was praised by many classics of Azerbaijani literature, who also list a number of specific properties of this instrument. For example, Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209), putting it above other stringed instruments, notes the sub-

tle harmony of thickened and thin strings and their influence on human consciousness. In the allegorical poem «Seven Cups», Muhammad Fizuli (1498-1552) compares the kanun with a «*chest of secrets*» that produces a «*plaintive, tender song*» and advises us not to tell him anything because he has «a hundred tongues», referring to the existence of multiple strings.

**In the Middle Ages, three types of the kanun, differing in size, were the most common: Turkish (small), Baghdad (medium) and**



**Egyptian (large).** The Azerbaijani kanun was different from the Turkish and Arabic one for its scale, including with an octave of 17 steps [2].

The appearance of the kanun, which was widespread in the Middle Ages, can definitely be judged by the miniatures in the manuscripts of prominent poets' works. Usually, they reflect entertainment scenes in rulers' palaces. Among the performers who play stringed and wind instruments, accompanied by a percussion instrument, such miniatures also depict a musician (mostly woman) who, with her legs crossed, is holding the kanun on her knees, and its body is very different from the modern version. When viewed from above, the body has a shape reminiscent of a grand piano. We can therefore conclude that **the construction of the kanun has undergone significant change since the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, by its appearance, that kanun is similar to the modern one painted by the famous Russian painter and graphic artist Prince Grigoriy Gagarin (1810-1893), author of the**

well-known watercolor «Shamakhi Bayaderes», who visited Azerbaijan in the period 1840-1850.

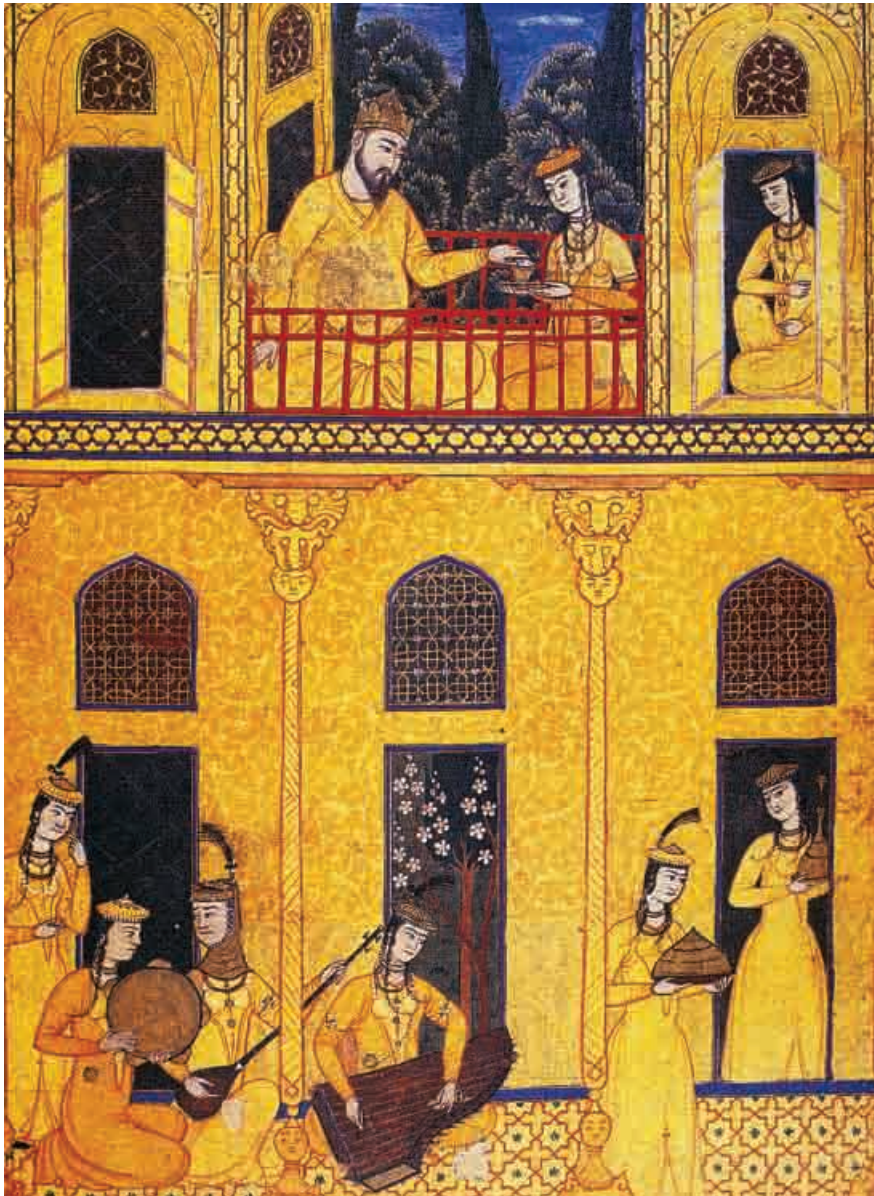
Currently, **the kanun is a popular instrument for playing traditional Arab music. At the same time, this instrument is common in Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, as well as Greece** under the name of kanonaki. By the area where it is common, the kanun surpasses another popular stringed instrument of the Arab world – the ud. Kanuns used in various countries today are similar by their external form [4, 7], differing only by the number of strings.

The **body** of the kanun is shaped like a right-angled trapezoid, whose acute angle is 30°. It is glued together from wooden staves that are made mostly of plane trees. The length of the instrument is 890-900 mm, width - 380-390 mm and height - 60 mm.

Most of the **sounding board** of the kanun is wooden. For the best sound, resonator holes with carved rosettes are opened in it. Sturgeon,

goat or sheep skin is pulled on its lower part divided into 3-4 equal sections.

Above the leather membrane, there is a small holder (*kichik kharak*) resting upon it with three or four legs, and on the oblique side – there is a large holder (*boyuk kharak*). **24-25 triple vein (they have now been replaced with a nylon thread) strings (*sim*)** are pulled over the holders and the sounding board. Previously, thin strings, the total number of which varies from 72 to 75, were made from silk and thick ones - from goat, lamb, veal intestines. In the lower part of the body, there are seven thick (with a diameter of 0.9 - 1.0 mm), and in the higher part – the 7 most thin (0.6 mm) strings. In the middle, there are 0.7-0.8 mm thick strings. One end of the string passes through holes drilled in the side of the body, forming a right angle, and is fixed with knots. The knots, in turn, are closed with a removable ruler (*khatkesh*) placed on the side. The other end of the string is wound on the pegs (*paya*) located on the oblique side,



first passing through the hole made in it. The pegs are turned with a special key (*achar*) of bronze, copper or brass. Toward the pegs, under each of the triple strings, there are two bronze hinged levers (*ling*), by which, raising or lowering the strings, they change the height of the sounds extracted from the strings by a semitone.

The strings are engaged by plectrums made from horn or metal plates that are placed under the thimble (*uskuk*) worn on both index

fingers. While playing, the kanun is placed on the knees with the long side facing the performer.

**Notes for the kanun** are written in the treble and bass clef, and they sound a tone higher than written. The range of the kanun is from G in the great octave to C in the first octave. The timbre of the kanun is unusually gentle and soft.

The **diatonic scale** of the instrument with a volume of 3.5 octaves is divided into low (*bem*), medium and high (*zil*) registers. In arpeggios,

chords, and weak sounding, all fingers are involved. Due to the possibility of using the levers to change the pitch, all flat and sharp scales are used in the kanun.

The performing technique allows the use of arpeggios, glissandos, passages and other techniques. You can take intervals: second, third, fourth and fifth. Double notes, sixth, seventh, and octave intervals are obtained through tremolo. Intervals greater than an octave and three and four-sound chords are possible. The technical capabilities of the instrument allow you to play complex compositions.

After nearly the 50-year "silence" of the kanun caused by the dismissive attitude to the instrument (and perhaps only to it) in the 1930s, **thanks to composers Suleyman Alasgarov and Said Rustamov, it was played again before the audience attending the opening of the decade of Azerbaijani literature and culture in Moscow in 1959.** Asya Tagiyeva played solo on the kanun.

After this, the interest in the kanun grew considerably. The kanun was included in all the ensembles of folk musical instruments, as well as various folk, chamber and pop ensembles. Attention was paid to teaching the younger generation of musicians to play the kanun. In the Palace of Pioneers and Schoolchildren (now the Tofiq Ismayilov Palace of Children's and Youth Creativity), Gulara Tagiyeva created an amateur girl's ensemble of kanunists. Then the talented kanunist Tarana Aliyeva organized the ensemble Inji from graduates of the Azerbaijan State Conservatory. The ensemble includes seven members who performed not only mugams "Bayati Shiraz", "Mahur Hindi" and works of



Azerbaijani composers at a high level, but also works by foreign composers - Kanye West "O Sole Mio" (Oh My Sun), Consuelo Velasquez "Besame Mucho" (Kiss Me Much), Zequinha de Abreu "Tico-Tico" and others [2]. The ensemble continues to perform successfully in our days.

**The kanun is first and foremost an instrument of professionals. It is included in orchestras and ensembles of folk musical instruments.** In orchestras, kanuns are used as a separate group (at least 4 instruments) as a solo and accompanying instrument. It makes an especially strong impression when coupled with stringed instruments - saz, ud and tar. At the same time, it seems to the audience that two people are talking about something. Given the nature of the sound, the kanun is often given the role of the lead instrument.

Thanks to its sonorous, bright and soft sound, the kanun is often used for the solo performance of mugams (mostly Bayati-Shiraz and Chahargah) and folk songs. From pieces of professional music, Zakir Bagirov's "Rhapsody" was first performed to the accompaniment of two harps and the kanun.

Suleyman Alasgarov wrote a poem for the kanun and the orchestra of folk musical instruments and the dance tune "Shalakh"; Dadash Dadashov – a play for the kanun and piano, "Poem", "The Joy of Chinara" in the genre of scherzo, and a concert for the kanun and orchestra; Ogtay Zulfugarov - "Ballad", "Poem" and concert pieces; Ilham Abdullayev - two plays for the kanun and piano.

The unique sound of the kanun is particularly noticeable while performing the concert for the piano and symphony orchestra written by Fikrat Amirov and Elmira Nasirova.



The lyrical and gentle sound of the kanun is conveyed very well in Haji Khanmammadov's works "Dream Dance" and "Spring Suite", and Suleyman Alasgarov's concert for the orchestra of folk instruments, "Poem", "Spring melodies", "Song Without Words" and the rhapsody "Karabakh tunes".



The septet for the cello, violin, folk instruments on Nasimi's poem "Dervish" and Firangiz Alizadeh's "Umprompto-Crossings", performed at international music festivals, scored great success. Using the kanun in these works, the composer sought to give them an "oriental wind". It is pleasing that the kanun was included by the composer in the score of the opera "Anguish".

Currently, kanun classes are avail-

able at the Baku Music Academy and the Music College. So the future of the kanun is in safe hands. 🌸

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