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# RHYTHMS OF THE NAGARA, GAVAL AND GOSHA NAGARA

*Doubled nagara with a metal contour*

ACCORDING TO WRITTEN SOURCES, WEBBED PERCUSSION MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS, WHICH HAVE LONG BEEN POPULAR IN AZERBAIJAN (IN SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE - MEMBRANOPHONES), DIFFERED IN DESIGN, SHAPE, SIZE, MATERIAL AND SOUND. THEY WERE ONE- AND TWO-SIDED, I.E. THE SOUNDING MEMBRANE STRETCHED OVER ONE OR BOTH OF THE OPEN SIDES OF THE BODY, AS WELL AS BINARY - CONSISTING OF TWO BODIES. THEY PRODUCED DRY, LOW, HIGH, DEAF OR CRACKLING SOUNDS WITH THE HELP OF STICKS, MALLETS, HANDS OR FINGERS.





*Gaval lined with mother-of-pearl*



**M**embranophones were widespread in Azerbaijan in ancient and medieval times. **The number of one-sided percussion instruments reached 11 (gaval, gosha-nagara, dair, daf, tabil, dumbak, tabil bas, kus, jift-kos, mazhar and nagarazan) and two-sided - 5 (nagara, davul, duhul, dumbul and tabira).** They were used as signaling instruments in battles to raise the morale of soldiers, during folk performances and festivals, Meykhana performances (folk music - a kind of recitative improvisation), religious rituals, funeral processions, parades, weddings, dances and sports games. They were played solo and in ensembles with other instruments. This tradition continues today.

Among webbed instruments, the **nagara** - a kind of drum - is the most common among Azerbaijanis (from the Arabic word "naqr" - "tapping"). The body (saganag, gobul) of the nagara has a cylindrical shape and is made of apricot, walnut, mulberry and lime trees. To this end, they hollow out a piece of wood to a thick-



*Girl playing the gaval, Abu Gasim Tabrizi, 1816*

ness of 5-6 mm or take a board with a thickness of 4-5 mm, soak and then bend it. Across the body, 1-3 sound holes (*oyug*) with a diameter of 10 mm are drilled in the middle - otherwise the body, unable to bear the load, may crack. Sometimes, a vertical bar is fixed inside the body to provide rigidity for the rib.

Goat skin is mainly used for the membrane (*uz*) of the instrument. Gazelle or deer skins were used previously. The skin is slightly damped, and pulling pile over its top (in this case, the instrument sounds better),

they sew it with a double stitch seam on a steel rim (*chenbere*), which has 6-12 copper tension loops (*garmag, uzuk, khalga*) placed at an equal distance from each other. Rims with the membrane are fixed on the open sides of the body with the help of plaited ropes (*kandir, jiya*) passing through the loops and twisted with wooden pegs - "thumbscrews" and are tightly pulled on the body of the instrument. The loop of one rim should be on the axis of symmetry between the loops of the opposite rim. This way of fastening

Laguutu



the membrane makes it possible to adjust the tension of the membrane, and therefore, its relative height. To facilitate the movements of the performer, the instrument is equipped with a tether strap. Sometimes a bell (*zingirov*) is hung from the body.

The body of the nagara has a **different diameter. Depending on this, the instrument is called differently:** large ones - *kos* (*koos, kus*), *dumbul* (in Shabran and Guba districts), middle-sized ones – *orta, goltug* (axillary), *al* (manual) nagara or simply nagara, *toy* (in the Nakhchivan AR), and smaller ones – *jura, kichik* or *bala* nagara. Structurally, all varieties of the nagara are identical.

The diameter and height of the rib of the **big nagara – the kos** - is 400-450 and 500-550 mm respectively. A sound hole is cut out in the shape of a square, or small circles are drilled on the body. The instrument is provided with a strap for carrying and with two mallets (*chilik, chiling*) bent in the form of a hook with spherical ends and belt loops with a length of 395-405 and 280-285 mm respectively and with a diameter of 13-15 and 9-10 mm. The kos is always “accompanied” by its small variety, whose body has a height of 340-360 mm and a diameter of 300-320 mm. Accordingly, this binary instrument is called *kos-nagara*. A large nagara is called *ana kos* and small one – *bala kos*.

**Medium-sized nagaras** have a diameter of 330-360 and a height of 260-310 mm. Depending on their size, they are called: *kichik* (small,

330x260 mm), *orta* (medium-sized, 340x290 mm) and *iri* (large, 350-360x310-300 mm) nagara. These types of the nagara are usually played with both hands or with two sticks (large and small) with straight or hooked ends. In the latter case, the



Def lined with bones

instrument is called the *chilik* (*chiling, chubuk*) nagara. The thick stick has a length of 350-360 mm and a thin one - 230-235 mm. In the upper part of the sticks, a hole is made

through which a narrow belt made of cowhides is inserted and the ends are sewn. While playing, the belt loop of the sticks is worn on the index fingers of both hands, while the sticks themselves rest on the thumbs, and the remaining fingers freely lie on the sticks. The big nagara is made individually.

The **small nagara** (*jura, kichik, bala*) with a body diameter of 240-300 mm and a height of 235-295 mm is made by the same master as the big nagara. It is played with two mallets with a length of 270 and 295 mm and a diameter of 11-13 mm, and always with the big nagara. Generally, because of its strong sound, it is played outdoors in a standing or sitting position. In the former position, the instrument is held under the arm and its body is clasped with the shoulder and held up with the left forearm. Given this position of the instrument, it is usually called the *goltug nagara*. In the latter position, the nagara is usually put on the left knee, while the left hand holds the tether strap whose belt is attached to the waist of the performer.

The nagara is played with hands and sticks. In the former case, they beat it with the phalanges of the



Gosha (doubled) nagara made of clay. 18th century



*Wooden dumbak*



index, middle, ring and little fingers focusing on their ends, and with the palms of both hands or by clicking and sliding the fingers across one membrane, as well as with various combinations of fingers. Thus, we get a variety of rhythmic patterns of various timbre shades and dynamics. The instrument produces a clean, clear, strong and sharp sound.

In Nakhchivan, while performing the Yalli dance, the nagarist (toychu), who participates in the ensemble of zurnachis, slings the instrument over the neck and hits the top and bottom of the membrane with sticks (the thick one is called "shalban").

When the chilik nagara is played, it is hung from the belt slung over the shoulder, or is under the arm of the performer who clasps the body with his left hand. The sticks hit one and sometimes two membranes. While the chilik nagara is played, the rhythmic foundation of the accompaniment is produced with a thick stick held in the lower position with the right wrist bent, thus emphasizing the strong shares of time. At the same time, the thin stick, held in the upper position with the axial rotation of the left hand, produces a smaller

and masterfully varied rhythm.

The choice of the method of playing the nagara – with hands or sticks - depends on the number of performers in ensembles and the place of performance - indoors or out on the square. Ensembles of ashugs, balabanists, folk instruments and orchestras play with hands, and ensembles of damburists, zurnachis and tulumists – with sticks.

**The binary instrument kos-nagara** is held in the front and is hung over the shoulder on a belt. The instrument is played with one (on the ana kos) or two mallets (on the bala kos) put on the hands with the help of loops and is hit against one or both (at least on the bala kos) membranes of the instrument. Strong parts of the tact are produced on the ana kos, while the bala kos emphasizes the rhythmic basis of tunes.

The big nagara – the kos - is used only in an ensemble of zurnachis. It also involves a bala kos performer. Rhythms of the kos nagara accompany the beginning of a wedding, ceremonies to welcome the groom and see the bride off, various dances, sporting events and games.

**The medium-sized nagara – the goltug nagara** - is used in orchestras and ensembles of folk instruments, as well as during solo performances on stage. It is part of small ensembles of sazandas, balabanists and zurnachis.

**Small varieties of the nagara – the jura or the bala nagara** - are mostly used in ensembles of balabanists and accordion players, as well as while accompanying a clarinetist.

There are ensembles of nagarists, which include up to 30-40 performers. Tuning the nagara to different tones in advance, they simultaneously beat out rhythms in separate groups according to a pre-planned metro-rhythmic scheme. Nagaras are

*Dancer.*

*Mirza Gadim Erivani. 19th century*



often played by groups of dancers.

The distribution area of another popular instrument – the **gaval**, which is similar to the tambourine, in eastern countries is wider than that of the nagara. There are several versions about the meaning of the word "gaval", but the most plausible of them is from the famous decorator and great connoisseur of oriental music Latif Karimov (1906-1991). According to his conclusion, **a "gaval" or "gavval" is a singer performing a "goul" - rhythmic music based on Arabic texts - to the accompaniment of the percussive instrument daf, which was widespread in the East in the Middle Ages.**

The gaval, also known in many parts of Azerbaijan as the daf (in Guba - daft, in Gazakh - damdira), is a bent narrow rib (saganag) with a diameter of 310-320 mm, on one side of which fish (sturgeon and beluga)

# IRS Following tradition

skin is pulled. There are gavals with a membrane made of goat skin. Typically, the rib is made of thin plywood with a length of 1,400 mm from mulberry or walnut. They spread joining cement on it and turn it three times in the form of a cylinder. The surface of the rib is smooth on the outside, but a little convex on the inside. Along the perimeter of the rib, from its inner side, rattle rings (over 60) of copper or brass are hung with the help of rods at a distance of 18-20 mm. The outside of the rib is often decorated with mother of pearl. Gavals have different sizes - with a diameter of 340-450 mm and a width of 40-60 mm.

Before playing, the membrane of the gaval is heated in the sun, over a fire or with an electric lamp. Well-stretched and heated leather produces a clean, clear and powerful sound. You hold the gaval with both hands, turning its internal side towards yourself. At this time, the edge of the rib rests on the thumbs. Sounds are produced as both hands and fingers (index, middle, ring and little finger) softly strike the edge or the center of the membrane, as well as by shaking the instrument. The gaval is normally played indoors. In this case, a variety of ways are used: hitting the edge and the middle of the membrane with an open palm and fingers of one or both hands; hitting the edge of the membrane by sliding the little finger on the ring finger; shaking the instrument with both hands; turning the instrument after single beats. In addition, as an orchestra of folk instruments plays various works, the performer hits the center of the membrane, pressing the rim of the gaval to his knees and chest.

The gaval is an instrument that is commonly used **when showing**

**scenes connected with the life-style, customs and traditions of the Azerbaijani people. It sounds in different musical genres and during popular games** (like the "jut gaval") and performances. It is used in solo performances for rhythmic accompaniment to dances, singing, and for accompanying string and wind instruments. In an ensemble of sazandas, the gaval sounds in the hands of a khananda (singer), who accompanies the rhythmic episodes of mugam dastgahs and zarbi (percussive) mugams by playing it. In this case, the gaval plays an independent role. And while singing, depending on the melodic line of mugam, the singer keeps



*Goltug (axillary) nagara*

the instrument in different positions trying to change the direction and tone of the sound. At the culmination of the mugam, the singer keeps the gaval at the mouth level closer to the ear on the left side. At this moment, the instrument serves as a kind of resonator. While performing tasnifs and folk songs, the performer accompanies only the introductory part and interludes with the gaval.

Playing the gaval is improvisational in nature. The gaval is also used in orchestras of folk instruments and as an attribute by dancers.

**The gosha-nagara** (i.e. double nagara), also known as the *dumbul*

and *dumbalak*, consists of two bodies (*goz*) of the same height, but different sizes - one is smaller than the other one almost by half. In appearance, they resemble a bowl or a cup. The instrument is made individually. The height of the instrument is 300 mm and the maximum diameter of the large body is 200-280 mm and the small body - 110-180 mm. From the sides and at the top and bottom, the bodies are fastened together with straps or fixed with a metal tube on a common wooden base. In old times, a bell was fixed between them on a special leg or a metal plate was hung.

Both bodies are made of walnut, mulberry trees, metal, and in the past - of fired clay. To ensure that the instrument does not sound hollow, small holes are made in the bottom of the bodies. Goat, bull, camel or horse (from the thin thorax) skin is pulled over the open side of the body with interlocking narrow straps (*kosha*) or a special screw mechanism (like in *timpani*).

Two wooden (cornel), thin, round sectional rods (*chubug, agach*) with a length of 280-335 mm, the diameter of which is 12 mm in the head and 7 mm in the lower part, are used for playing. Recently, an instrument consisting of three bodies - large, medium-sized and small one - has been used under the name of "*uch nagara*" (three nagaras).

Typically, the *gosha-nagara* is not a solo instrument. To extract pure and ringing sounds, the membrane of the instrument is gently heated over a fire before playing. The *gosha-nagara* is put on a special wooden stand (the big body is usually on the right of the performer), slightly tilting toward the performer, or is held under the arm while escorting a bride or during sporting events (*zorkhana*, tightrope walkers, etc.). Previously, it



was placed on the ground or hung from the neck of the performer.

Due to differences in the diameters of the circles of the upper body parts of the gosha-nagara, one of the bodies sounds around a fourth higher in relation to the other. The sound of the instrument is a bit dry, ringing and has a unique color.

When it is played, different sounds are obtained by hitting sticks separately against the two membranes, one membrane (in the center or edges), against each other or on the rib (saganag), and by hitting the membrane with the hand. Often, strikes are produced with the thickened ends of the sticks or both hands on the membrane, and they play by sliding sticks on the membrane, pressing one of the sticks against the membrane of the big body or a combination of these techniques. As you can see, different strikes are used, and based on this, complex rhythmic sounds are produced. Usually, strong parts of the rhythm are produced by hitting the membrane and rhythmic

figurations – with sticks.

**The gosha nagara is part of orchestras and ensembles of folk instruments, and ashug ensembles** (in the Shirvan area). It is widely used during folk games and performances (*“zorkhana”*, *“mil”*, *“sino”*). It is also used by a women’s instrumental ensemble consisting of the accordion, gaval and gosha nagara. A trio of two balabanists and one gosha nagarachi is very popular.

Above we described the three most popular webbed musical instruments. In Azerbaijan, a dumbak with a goblet-shaped body (usually wood) with a length of 350-400 mm and a diameter of 250-260 mm, on which goat skin is stretched, is also widely used. It is played with fingers and the palms of both hands in the center or edge of the membrane. ❖

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