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The Energy of “Female” Music: Gender Statistics and Cultural Prerequisites for Gender Equality Among Kazakh Composers

ABSTRACT

Since ancient times, musical and poetic creativity in Turko-Mongolian nomadic cultures – including that of the Kazakhs – has functioned as a relatively gender-inclusive sphere. Kazakh women, alongside men, historically participated in the musical culture as bearers of sacred (*baksy*), vocal (*akyn*), epic (*zhyrau*), and instrumental (*kuishi*) traditions. This legacy continues to shape contemporary musical culture in Kazakhstan. However, ongoing gender disparities in other areas of socio-political life may still limit the time and opportunities available to women for creative self-realisation. This article examines how the ambivalence between cultural equality and structural inequality has influenced the careers and artistic identities of contemporary Kazakh women composers. Drawing on interviews and case studies, the research explores the extent to which gender influences their compositional style and professional trajectories. Statistical analysis reveals that since the early 20th century, women have accounted for 21.9% of Kazakh composers, a figure significantly higher than the global average. Furthermore, this proportion has grown steadily in recent decades. Importantly, the gender dimension of composition in Kazakhstan has not previously been compared to other cultural contexts. This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach rooted in the humanities, and integrating methods from music history, cultural studies, sociology and gender theory. It also incorporates musical-sociological tools such as statistical, sampling, and graphic analysis. Despite challenges in obtaining comprehensive data, the analysis of sources – including *Grove Music Online*, *The Living Composers Project*, Wikipedia, and composer unions in Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, and Turkic-speaking Central Asian countries – reveals Kazakhstan’s distinctive profile in terms of gender representation in composition.

KEYWORDS

Women composers

Music of
Kazakhstan

Gender and music

Female creativity

Gender statistics in
music

Introduction

Kazakh musical culture is notable for the longstanding participation of women, both within the oral ethnic tradition and in the context of Westernised music. The professional tradition of Western composition in Kazakhstan is approximately 100 years old. During this relatively short period, 66 women have emerged as composers, representing a significant proportion –21.9% – compared to global averages.

Studying gender in Kazakh music through sociological and historical lenses helps deepen our understanding of cultural dynamics in Kazakhstan, where women have traditionally occupied a dual position: subordinate in domestic life, yet granted relative equality in the arts. Within the professional community, it is widely believed that the role of women in Kazakh artistic culture has been more autonomous than in many other societies, shaped by the ethnic worldview and the cultural specificity of Kazakh traditions.

This observation prompts several questions. Is the relatively high proportion of women composers in Kazakhstan unique or part of a broader trend? Does this phenomenon stem from Kazakh cultural and ethnic foundations, or was it shaped primarily by Soviet-era policy? How did the perception and status of women in Kazakh composition evolve over time, and how does it align with global gender patterns in music?

Although gender studies have gained prominence in Western humanities since the second half of the 20th century, in Kazakhstan this topic remains insufficiently explored. Nevertheless, in recent decades, scholars in Kazakhstani arts and humanities have begun to close this gap by developing interdisciplinary and gender-aware methodologies. The current study seeks to contribute to that effort.

The nomadic communities of Eurasia, including the Kazakh people, present a unique gender paradox. Traditional societies are often viewed as limiting women's rights and public roles, an assumption reinforced by historical and religious norms. Gulzhauhar Chumbalova (1992: 11), referencing Sergei Rybakov's 1901 recording *Sokyr Kyzdyn Ani* (Song of a Blind Girl), describes the prevailing ideology of female subordination in pre-revolutionary Kazakh life:

The ideology of the subordination of the Kazakh woman, as well as the women of other eastern peoples, to destiny sent to them. And in this respect, it is an important document

characterising the oppressed position of a Kazakh woman in pre-revolutionary life.

As practice shows, women were subjected to stricter moral control than men, with actions permissible for men often considered unacceptable for women. In many traditional Muslim societies, gender stereotypes shaped by religious beliefs still influence public life today. Historically, these social norms restricted women's access to artistic professions. However, in contrast to neighboring sedentary cultures, Kazakh women were comparatively more visible in public creativity and artistic expression. They had near-equal access to education and were able to participate in public events.

Historical and ethnographic sources offer ample evidence of women's artistic involvement, particularly in poetic and musical competitions. For example, women-*akyns* (poet-singers) actively participated in musical and poetry competition *aitys*, and women-*kuishi* (instrumentalists) competed in instrumental competitions *tartys*. As Yedige Tursunov writes:

There are both men and women among akyns. Even if we list only aityses fixed in books, among their participants, we meet women-akyns – Togzhan, Aksulu, Sara, Ryszhan, Aikumis, Tabiya, etc. Women were opponents of men-akyns in 20 of the 37 aitys-contests, which texts were included in only the first volume of the academic publication of *aitys*. One of these women-akyn was so skilful in a poetic dispute that she competed simultaneously with eight men-akyns (Tursunov 1999: 111–112).

These examples are supported by the recognition of prominent women from Kazakh ethnic traditions such as the singers Sarah Tastanbekova (1853–1907), Mayra Shamsutdinova (1890–1927), and the *kuishi* Dina Nurpeisova (1861–1955). Their presence illustrates that women's artistic agency was not an exception but a culturally rooted phenomenon.

This value system, shaped by a traditional worldview and nomadic heritage, is echoed in the creative careers of modern women composers, including Gaziza Zhubanova (1927–1993), Aida Isakova (1940–2012), Aktoty Raimkulova (b. 1964), Gulzhan Uzenbayeva (b. 1964), Jamilya Jazyzbekova (b. 1971), Kadisha Onalbayeva (b. 1972), Angelina Ershova (b. 1977), Nargiz Khinkov-Aitbayeva (b. 1984), Shirin Bazarkulova (b. 1989), and Togzhan Karatai (b. 1994), among others. Appealing to the work of women composers,

comparative analysis in this creative field of different national cultures will reveal the specifics of female musical creativity in Kazakh society and trace the changes that have taken place over the past hundred years.

Through analysis of their work and comparison with global trends, this article explores the specific features of women's musical creativity in Kazakh society and traces its evolution over the past century. The discussion focuses on gender representation in traditional Kazakh society, the impact of cultural mentality on creative practice, and the interplay between global and national gender discourses in contemporary Kazakh musical culture.

Methodology

Given that this study addresses the roles of men and women in various spheres of society – social, political, economic, and cultural – an interdisciplinary approach grounded in the humanities was essential. The research integrates methods from sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, art history, linguistics, economics, anthropology and history. Each of these fields offers distinct perspectives on gender, while their integration allows for a more comprehensive analytical framework.

The study primarily employs a musicological-historical approach, which enables an evaluation of the significance of women's creative contributions within both contemporary and historical Kazakh culture. Since the study focuses on the producers of the 'cultural text', a comparative historical perspective is also applied. This allows the gender dimension to be situated in relation to broader global and regional trends, as well as to local musical practices.

In recent decades, scholarly attention to gender in the arts has grown significantly, particularly in Western academic circles. This development is closely linked to feminist movements advocating equal rights and representation. Key contributions have come, *inter alia*, from Susan McClary (1991), Marcia J. Citron (1993), James Briscoe (1997), Pirkko Moisala (1999), Aisling Kenny (2009), Ellen Koskoff (2014), Desmond C. Sergeant and Evangelos Himonides (2016). These scholars have shaped the fields of feminist musicology and gender-based music historiography.

However, much of the research in feminist musicology remains qualitative. Only a limited number of studies incorporate quantitative or statistical data. Notable exceptions include research based on data from institutions such as the British Music Information Center and the American Composers Alliance. According to Jennifer Fowler's 2006 survey, women made up approximately 17–20% of contemporary composers in the United Kingdom. In the American Composers Alliance database, the proportion of women is even lower – just 12% (62 out of 515 composers). Data from the Canadian Music Centre indicates that 149 of 695 registered composers (17.6%) are women.

Ethnographic literature also provides valuable insights into the creative roles of women in traditional musical cultures. Studies by Alexander Zatayevich (1925), Akhmet Zhubanov (1962), and Boris Yerkovich (1979) offer early documentation of women's participation in Kazakh musical life. More recent works by Saida Yelemanova (2000) and Saule Utegaliyeva (2013) directly address gender-related questions. For comparative purposes, this study also draws on analyses of gender roles in other Turkic-speaking cultures, using data from research by Zoya Kyrgys (2002), Yekaterina Karelina (2009), Yelena Vasilchenko (2014), Raziya Sultanova (2014) and Tanya Merchant (2015). These works explore female musical genres, performance practices, and cultural taboos across Central Asia.

Despite these contributions, research explicitly focused on gender in Kazakh music remains sparse. Scattered observations can be found in studies on broader topics related to women in traditional culture, such as works by Zira Naurzabayeva (2010), Inga Stasevich (2011), Zhanerke Shaigozova and Madina Sultanova (2014), Gulfairuz Zhapekova (2014), Zhainagul Kadyrkulova (2017), and Zhanat Kundakbayeva (2017). Biographical and analytical studies of individual female composers also exist, authored by Sarah Kuzembay (1982), Umitzhan Jumakova (1982), Svetlana Shubina (2003), Nurgiyana Ketegenova (2009), Tamara Jumaliyeva (2013), Valeria Nedlina (2013) and Moldir Kisamedenova (2015), among others. However, these works focus more on individual achievements than on systemic gender analysis.

Thus, this study addresses an underexplored topic in Kazakhstani musicology by combining statistical, ethnographic, and comparative approaches to assess the scope and specifics of female participation in composition.

Procedures

Based on the methodological framework outlined above, the research was carried out in three interrelated stages, each employing distinct approaches to address the multifaceted nature of gender representation in music.

- 1) First stage – the collection and comparative analysis of statistical data on the number and proportion of women composers in Kazakhstan and globally over the past century, based on multiple open sources to minimize bias.
- 2) Second stage – the study of ethnographic and cultural-historical materials to classify gender roles in traditional musical genres and practices across Turkic-speaking societies, identifying their influence on women’s creative participation.
- 3) Third stage – case studies of contemporary Kazakh women composers based on interviews, focusing on career development, personal attitudes toward gender, and the differences between Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. Data collection was carried out by interviewing living female composers from different generations.

The First Stage of Research: Statistical Analysis

The primary objective of the first research stage was to compare the gender dynamics in Kazakh composition with global trends during the period of the development of Western-style composition in Kazakhstan, beginning in the early 20th century. Given the sociological scope of the inquiry, appropriate quantitative methods were applied, including statistical analysis, data sampling, and graphical representation.

To achieve this, data on male and female composers over the past century were collected from a range of open sources and archival materials, including:

- 1) *Grove Music Online* – an authoritative music encyclopedia, published by Oxford University Press, with over 51,000 articles;
- 2) *The Living Composers Project* (founded by Daniel Albertson) – a database covering living composers from 99 countries;
- 3) *Wikipedia* – specifically the categories “List of 20th Century Classical Composers” and “Women Composers”;

- 4) *National Composers' Unions* – publicly available lists from Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan;
- 5) *Historical sources* – including the essay *Composition Department of the Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory (1944–1994)* by N. Akzhigitova and B. Bayakhunov (2012);
- 6) *Archival data* – lists of graduates from the composition department at the Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory;
- 7) *Foundational texts* – including *Essays on the History of Kazakh Soviet Music* (1962) and *Kazakh Composers* (2013).

Due to the differing methodologies used in the compilation of these databases, absolute numbers across sources are not directly comparable (see Figure 1). This visualization demonstrates that methodological approaches to data selection in encyclopedic and specialized databases often result in a distorted representation of gender proportions in the culture, failing to reflect the objective reality.

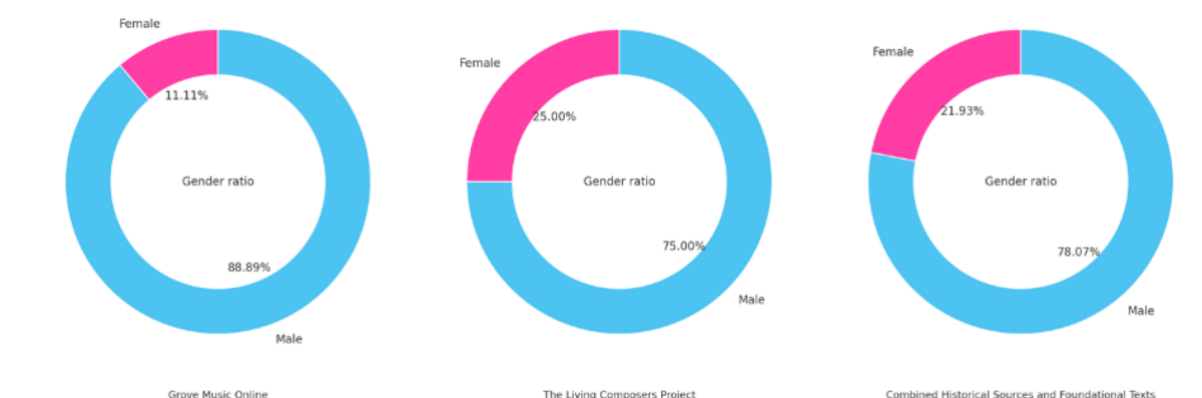


Figure 1. Methodological Bias in Gender Representation: Kazakhstani Composers Across Data Sources

Consequently, this study focuses on gender ratios rather than total composer counts, which vary significantly by country and source. This relative measure provides a more meaningful cross-national comparison.

To ensure consistency and transparency in data processing, the following principles were adopted:

- 1) *Temporal Scope*: the dataset included composers born between 1900 and the present, aligning with the emergence of Western-style composition in Kazakhstan.
- 2) *Generational Analysis*: composers were grouped into generational cohorts based on the model by Neil Howe and William Strauss, which has been locally adapted by Umitzhan Jumakova (2003) in the periodisation of Kazakh composition history.
- 3) *Gender Categorisation*: composers were classified as male or female based on names and pronouns used in reference sources. Non-binary gender identities were not accounted for due to a lack of representation and explicit labeling in the consulted databases (except for limited self-identification on *Wikipedia*).
- 4) *Country Selection Criteria*: countries were selected to provide contrast between regions with long-established compositional traditions and those whose composition schools emerged during the 20th century, particularly in relation to varying levels of gender equality.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this type of data. The total number of composers is difficult to estimate comprehensively. Ideally, accurate statistics would require complete records from all composition departments globally – data which are not currently available. Many of the sources, especially encyclopedic references, reflect the editorial judgment of experts, often privileging composers of recognized prominence. As a result, emerging or less publicly visible composers, especially women, may be underrepresented.

Despite these limitations, triangulating multiple sources yielded a relatively consistent picture. Even the most optimistic assessments – such as Wikipedia’s estimate of 15.8% female composers – underscore that composition remains a predominantly male profession worldwide. However, a longitudinal analysis reveals a gradual increase in the proportion of female composers across generations.

Comparative Analysis of Gender Representation in Composer Databases

The statistical data collected from *Grove Music Online*, *The Living Composers Project*, *Wikipedia*, and regional sources provide a multi-perspective view of gender distribution in the field of composition over the past century. While the absolute figures differ

depending on the source and its methodology, several consistent patterns can be identified.

For example, the *Grove Music Online* data were sorted by birth cohort (pre-1930, 1931–1950, 1951–1970, 1971–present), gender, and country. This data was then compiled into tables to enable comparison of generational shifts in gender representation.

Table 1. The Gender Split According to *Grove Music Online*

Period	Men	Women	Total	Share of women
1900-1930	1431	88	1519	5.7%
1931-1950	861	72	933	7.7%
1951-1970	433	60	493	12.1%
1971-1990	23	2	25	8%
Total	2748	222	2970	7.4%

The *Grove Music Online* dataset reveals a persistent gender imbalance, with women making up only 7.4% of composers overall. There is a modest upward trend in representation across generations, peaking at 12.1% for those born between 1951 and 1970. However, the drop in the 1971–1990 cohort (to 8%) is most likely due to the underrepresentation of more recent composers in the database, rather than an actual decline in participation.

Table 2. The Gender Split According to *The Living Composers Project*

Men	Women	Total	Share of women
4012	642	4654	13.7%

Unlike *Grove*, *The Living Composers Project* does not sort composers by birth year or generation. Nonetheless, it shows a higher overall proportion of female composers – 13.7% – suggesting that women are more visible among currently active professionals. The broader scope and real-time updates of this platform likely contribute to the increased representation.

Table 3. The Gender Split According to *Wikipedia*

Period	Men	Women	Total	Share of women
1900-1930	968	140	1108	12.6%
1931-1950	559	113	672	16.8%
1951-1970	325	89	414	21.4%
1971-1990	82	22	104	21.1%
1991-2005	11	2	13	15.3%
Total	1945	366	2311	15.8%

Wikipedia, as an open-source platform, reflects more inclusive and up-to-date data, with women representing 15.8% of composers. The generational trend is clearly upward, particularly between 1931 and 1990, where women's share exceeds 20%. This growth suggests a broader cultural shift toward gender inclusivity, although *Wikipedia's* variable standards of reliability and its crowd-sourced nature introduce certain inconsistencies.

Table 4. The Gender Split in Kazakhstan

Period	Men	Women	Total	Share of women
1900-1930	43	1	44	2.3%
1931-1950	57	6	63	9.5%
1951-1970	60	18	78	23%
1971-1991	31	19	50	38%
1991-present	44	22	66	33.3%
Total	235	66	301	21.9%

Kazakhstan demonstrates a distinctly positive trend in female representation. From just 2.3% in the early 20th century, the proportion of women composers rose steadily, reaching 38% in the late Soviet period. The current figure of 33.3% (1991–present) remains significantly above the international average. This is likely the result of both traditional Kazakh cultural practices and Soviet-era policies promoting gender equality in education and professions.

Table 5. The Gender Split in Russia, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan

Country	Men	Women	Total	Share of women
Russia	296	113	409	(27.6%)
Belarus	68	33	101	(32.6%)
Uzbekistan	109	13	122	(10.6%)
Kyrgyzstan	58	5	63	(7.9%)
Azerbaijan	83	11	94	(11.7%)
Kazakhstan	235	66	301	(21.9%)

Regional comparisons provide further context. Kazakhstan’s proportion of women composers (21.9%) exceeds that of other Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan (10.6%), Kyrgyzstan (7.9%), and Azerbaijan (11.7%). However, it is still below the levels seen in Eastern Slavic countries like Belarus (32.6%) and Russia (27.6%). These differences highlight both shared Soviet legacies and unique national factors – such as cultural traditions, institutional support, and societal attitudes – that shape women’s participation in the arts.

Analysis

None of the encyclopedic sources used in this study can be considered entirely objective or comprehensive. Several factors contribute to this limitation. First, such reference works tend to prioritize the most prominent and historically recognized figures, which means that many lesser-known or emerging composers – particularly women – may be omitted. Selection criteria often favor visibility, accolades, or institutional affiliations, inadvertently reproducing existing gender biases.

Secondly, encyclopedic and biographical dictionaries are subject to historical lag. The representation of younger generations is significantly lower, not necessarily due to a lack of creative activity, but because inclusion in such sources often requires a retrospective assessment of achievement. As a result, recent composers – especially those still developing their careers – are often absent from established academic publications.

Conversely, entries from earlier periods tend to appear more frequently, especially when

they have already been canonized through scholarly consensus. This creates a paradox: the closer we are to the present, the less complete the available encyclopedic data becomes. On the other hand, sources covering the early to mid-20th century (before 1971) provide a more stable and representative picture of gender distribution in composition, despite their own historical biases.

Importantly, statistical data on conservatory graduates and national composers' unions tell a different story. By the end of the 20th century, the number of active composers – both male and female – increased significantly compared to the early decades. This growth is not yet fully reflected in traditional reference sources. The discrepancy highlights the temporal gap between artistic activity and institutional recognition, and it disproportionately affects underrepresented groups such as women composers.

Therefore, while encyclopedic sources remain valuable for long-term comparative analysis, their limitations must be clearly acknowledged. The patterns identified – particularly those showing lower female representation in recent decades – should not be interpreted as actual decline, but rather as evidence of documentation practices. For more accurate and current insights, complementary sources such as academic databases, institutional records, and digital platforms should be integrated into future research.

According to the data from *Grove Music Online*, the global share of female composers remained below 8% until the mid-20th century – 5.7% for those born between 1900 and 1930, and 7.7% between 1931 and 1950. In the second half of the century, this figure increased to 12.1% among those born between 1951 and 1970, indicating gradual progress toward gender inclusion in the field of composition (see Figure 2). However, the data for the most recent generation (post-1970) is incomplete and shows a decline to 8%, which is likely attributable to the underrepresentation of younger or currently active composers in traditional reference works. As such, while the *Grove* dataset offers valuable insight into long-term trends, it provides only partial and indirect evidence for assessing contemporary gender dynamics in the profession.

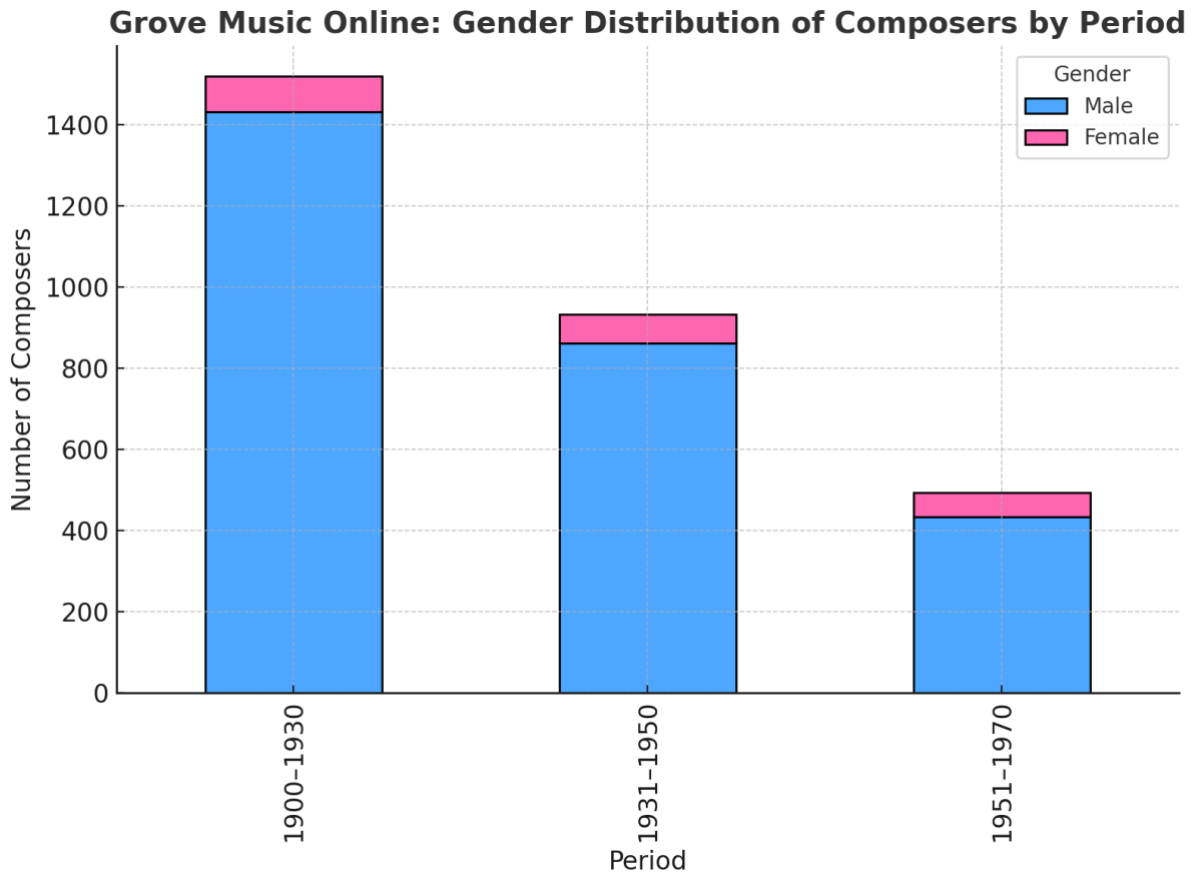


Figure 2. The Number of Composers and the Gender Ratio According to *Grove Music Online*

Thus, the aggregate data from *Grove Music Online* indicate that, over the past century, women have comprised approximately 7.4% of composers globally – 222 women out of a total of 2,970 entries (see Figure 3). While this percentage reflects a persistent gender imbalance, significant regional disparities are evident. For example, Poland shows a relatively high level of female representation, with women accounting for 11.1% of listed composers (11 out of 99). In contrast, Austria demonstrates markedly lower representation, with only 2 female composers among 90 entries (2.1%). These variations suggest that national contexts, institutional policies, and historical legacies play a crucial role in shaping gender dynamics within compositional traditions.

It is also noteworthy that *Grove Music Online* includes only 9 composers from Kazakhstan, of whom just one is a woman – Gaziza Zhubanova. This limited representation likely reflects broader editorial and historical biases within the sample, rather than the actual scope of Kazakh compositional activity. Such omissions underscore the importance of supplementing international databases with national and regional sources to achieve a

more accurate and inclusive picture.

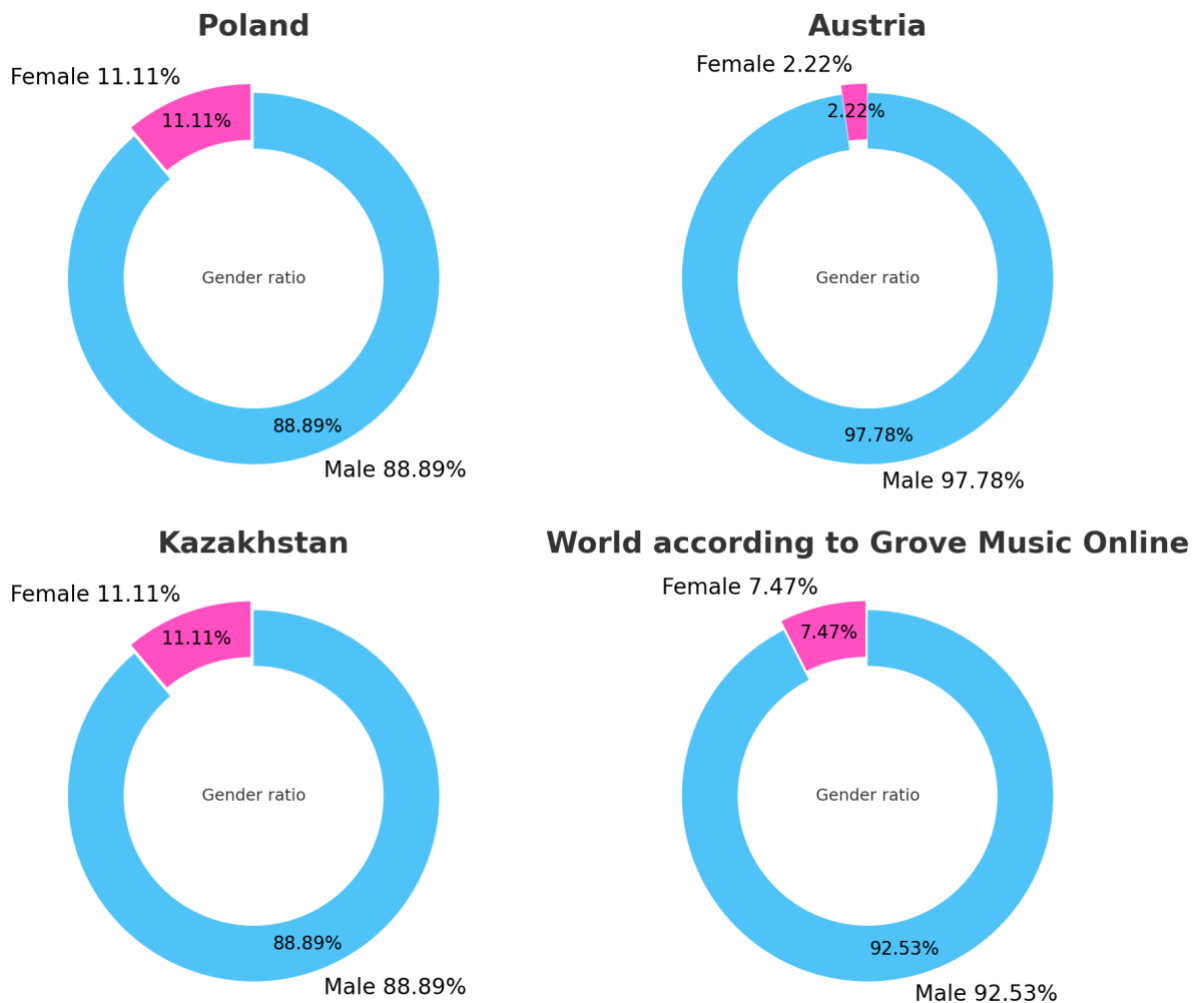


Figure 3. Share of Women Composers According to *Grove Music Online*

Data from *The Living Composers Project* indicate that, of the 4,654 composers listed as active from 1900 to the present, 642 are women – representing 13.7% of the total. This proportion is notably higher than in traditional encyclopedic sources and likely reflects the database’s broader inclusion criteria and its focus on living composers.

Interestingly, this figure aligns closely with the findings of Richard O’Bannon (2014), who analyzed programming trends in American symphony orchestras during the 2014–2015 season. His study revealed that 14.8% of the works performed were composed by women. Although not a direct measure of the number of composers, this statistic offers complementary evidence of women’s growing presence and recognition in contemporary concert life. The similarity in proportions suggests that performance practice and

composer visibility are increasingly reflective of actual gender participation rates – at least in some national contexts.



Figure 4. Map: Share of Women Composers According to *The Living Composers*¹

Countries with very small sample sizes – fewer than ten composers – were excluded from comparative analysis in this article, as such cases do not provide statistically reliable information (see Figure 4). Nonetheless, even among countries with moderate representation in *The Living Composers Project*, substantial variation is observed in gender distribution.

For instance, South Korea shows the highest share of female composers in the dataset, with women comprising 54.5% (12 out of 22 composers). In contrast, the Czech Republic exhibits a much lower proportion, with only 7.7% of the composers listed comprising women (2 out of 24). These extremes highlight how national contexts – including cultural attitudes, institutional support, and policies related to gender equality – can significantly influence the representation of women in professional composition (see Figure 5). However, these figures should be interpreted with caution due to the relatively small sample sizes involved.

¹ <https://prezi.com/i/m4oyb8u5mmrt/>

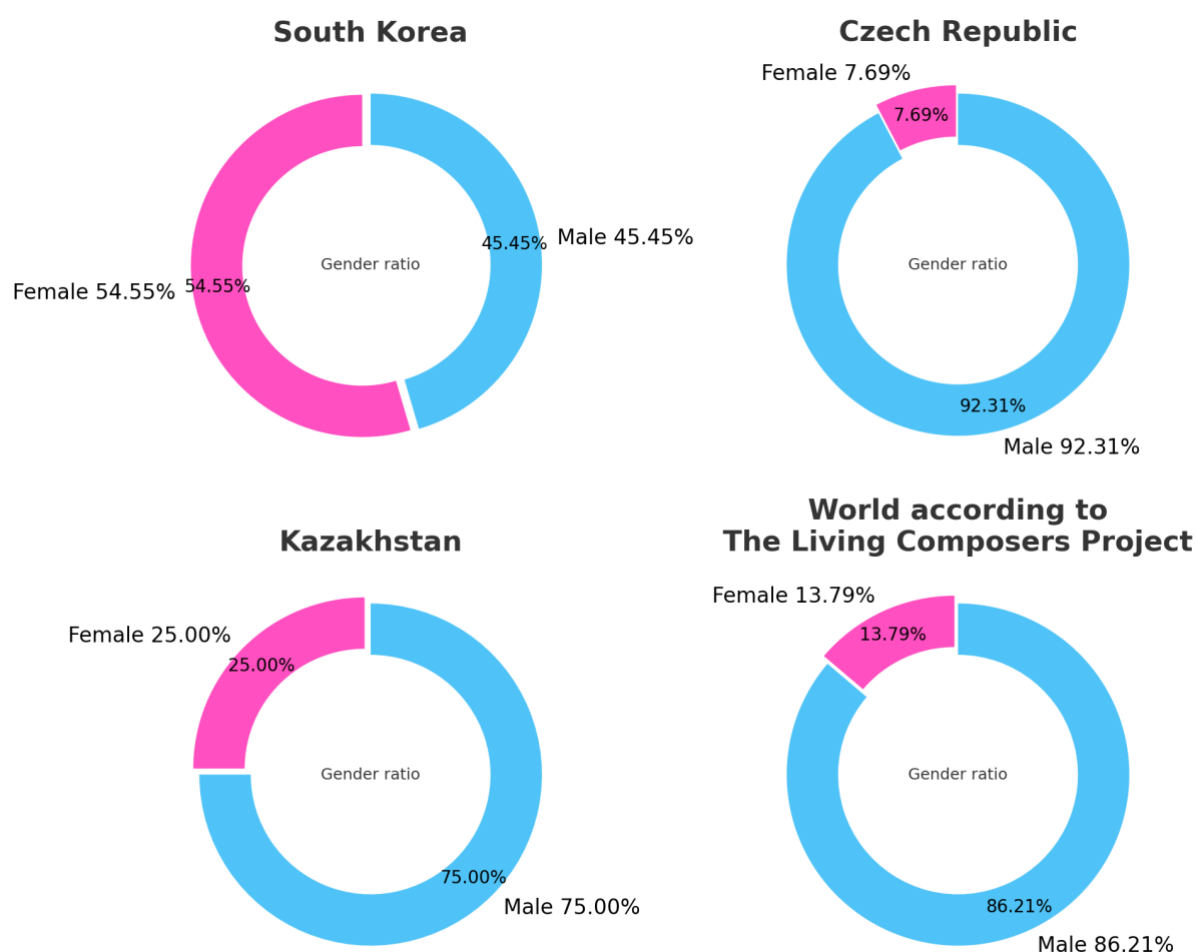


Figure 5. Share of Women Composers According to *The Living Composers Project*

According to data from the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, the proportion of female composers has shown a steady increase throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. Between 1900 and 1930, women accounted for 12.6% of composers (100 out of 767). In the subsequent generation (1931–1950), this figure rose to 16.8% (113 out of 672). The trend continued, reaching 21% in the following two decades (1951–1970). Overall, across the entire sample of 2,311 composers, women represent 15.8% (366) of the total (see Figure 6).

Unlike traditional encyclopedic sources, *Wikipedia* includes a specific gender category – ‘Women composers’ – which distinguishes female figures explicitly. This editorial feature enhances the visibility of women but also introduces methodological inconsistencies. Notably, the number of composers listed in the ‘Women Composers’ category (902) far exceeds the number of female names found within the general category of ‘20th Century

Classical Composers.’ Moreover, *Wikipedia* does not maintain a corresponding ‘Men composers’ category, making it difficult to establish a reliable denominator for comparative analysis.

These discrepancies point to a broader issue: *Wikipedia*’s structure relies on decentralized, crowd-sourced contributions, which leads to non-uniform standards in list curation. As a result, while the upward trend in female representation is notable, the absolute numbers must be interpreted with caution. The overall number of composers – particularly male – is likely higher than reflected in the formal category listings, suggesting that the actual share of women may be lower than *Wikipedia* statistics imply.

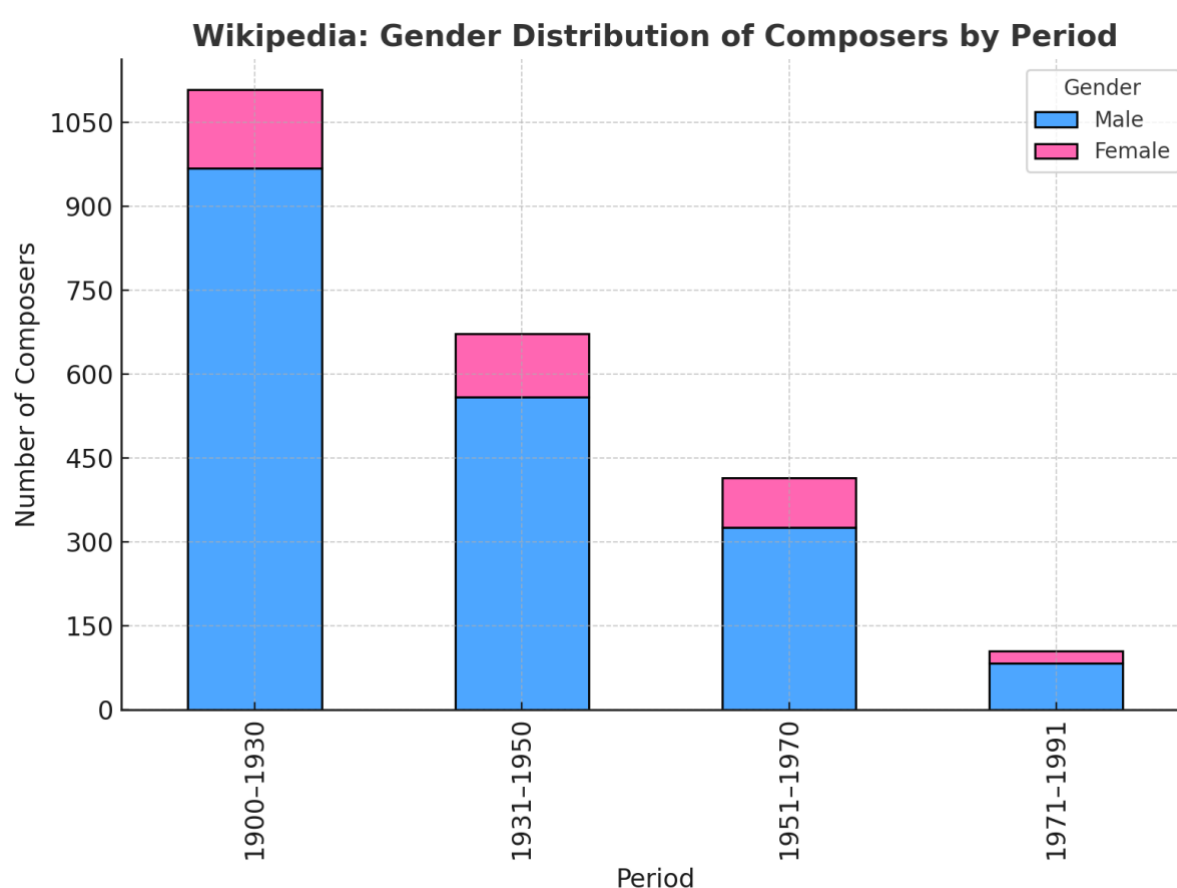


Figure 6. Gender Ratio According to *Wikipedia*

A comparison between the gender representation trends in *Wikipedia* and the Kazakhstan dataset reveals growth in both cases, though the Kazakhstani sample demonstrates a more stable and consistent upward trajectory (see Figure 7). While *Wikipedia* data show notable fluctuations across generations – partly due to

inconsistencies in category curation – the Kazakhstani data reflect a more linear and sustained increase in the proportion of female composers over time.

Despite this positive dynamic, it is important to emphasize that, on a global scale, the share of women in the field of composition remains relatively low. Across all examined sources, the average proportion of female composers rarely exceeds 22%, underscoring the persistence of gender imbalance in professional music composition.

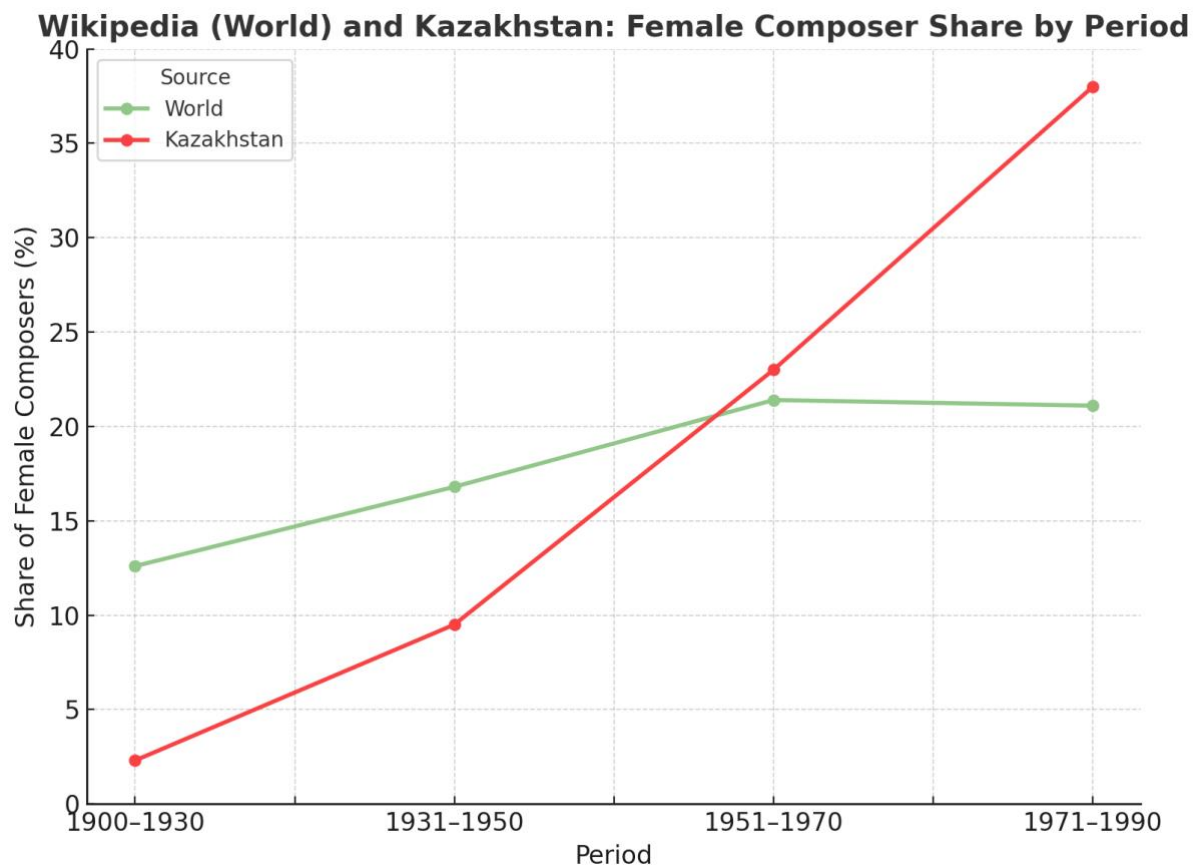


Figure 7. The Growth of Women Composers' Share

The gender balance in composition on a global scale differs markedly from that observed in Kazakhstan. Data analysis reveals that, at the beginning of the 20th century, when professional composition was just emerging in Kazakhstan, women were virtually absent from the field. Gaziza Zhubanova stands out as the only prominent female composer of her generation. However, by the end of the century, the share of women among younger generations had risen substantially, reaching 38%.

This development raises two key questions: To what extent can Kazakhstan's relatively favorable environment for women composers be attributed to cultural traditions? And how much is it a product of the broader Soviet system within which the national school of composition was formed? In search of answers, Kazakhstan's data were compared with that of other post-Soviet countries – both culturally similar and different.

To establish a wide range of comparison, the study considered Eastern European, non-Turkic, and non-nomadic states such as Russia and Belarus, where national composition schools had developed earlier. At the same time, the comparison included culturally closer Central Asian countries – Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan – whose composition traditions also emerged during the Soviet era.

The Composers' Union websites of Russia and Belarus indicate relatively high female representation. In Russia, 113 out of 409 composers are women (27.6%), and in Belarus, 33 out of 101 (32.6%). By contrast, in Uzbekistan, women make up only 10.6% of the total – 13 out of 122 composers. A similar pattern is observed in Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan: 5 women out of 58 composers (8.6%) and 11 out of 94 (11.7%), respectively (see Figure 8).

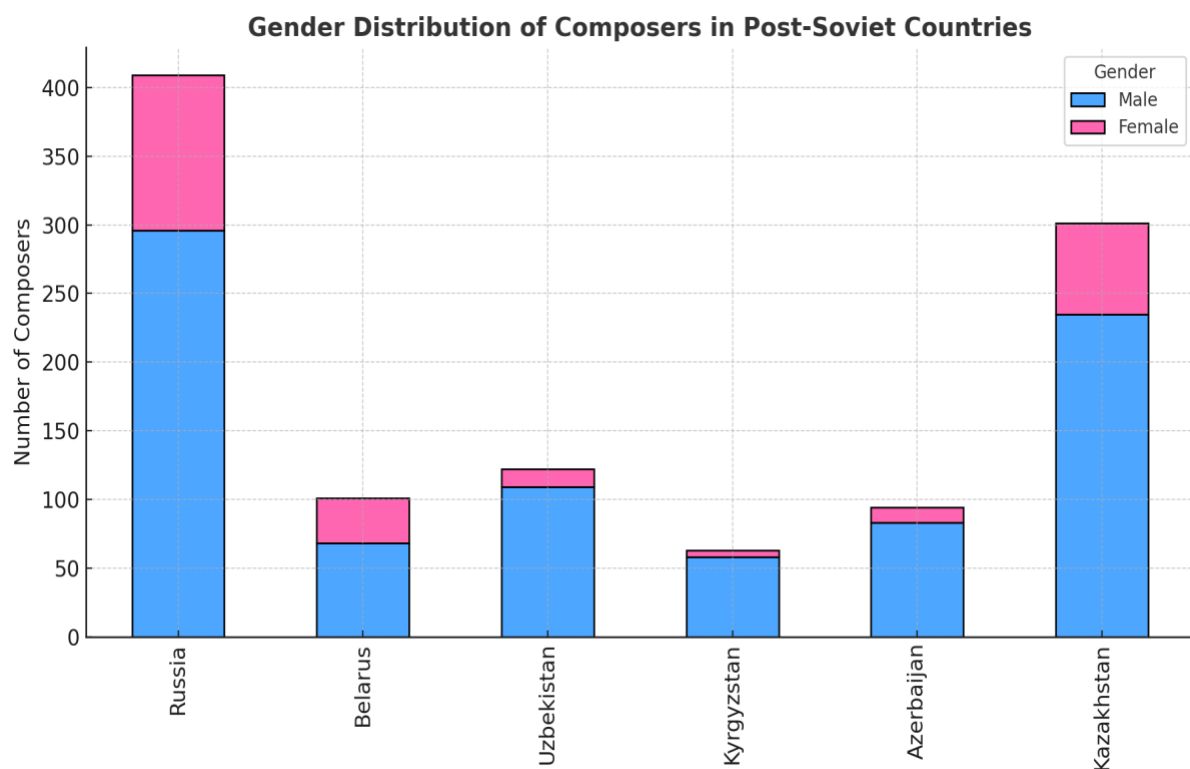


Figure 8. The Number of Composers and the Gender Ratio in Post-Soviet Countries

These disparities suggest that while Soviet-era educational and institutional systems promoted a degree of gender equality, their outcomes varied significantly depending on cultural, regional, and perhaps linguistic factors. Kazakhstan's position – intermediate between Slavic republics and other Turkic-speaking Central Asian nations – reflects the interplay between shared ideological structures and distinctive national traditions.

Results of the First Stage of Research

Despite the previously acknowledged methodological limitations and biases in the available sources, the comparative statistical data enable several meaningful conclusions. Most notably, the gender composition in Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan appears significantly more balanced than the global average. This suggests that the relatively high proportion of women composers in Kazakhstan should not be attributed solely to cultural or national mentalities, but also to the broader ideological framework of the Soviet Union.

The socialist worldview, particularly its emphasis on gender equality in the workforce, played a crucial role in shaping these outcomes. As one of the union republics, Kazakhstan was integrated into a system where professional roles – aside from physically demanding occupations – were not explicitly gendered. This ideological foundation provided women with more opportunities to choose careers in the arts, including composition. This point is underscored by the well-known composer Sofia Gubaidulina, who reflected in an interview:

There are many women composers in America. They have created special societies because they feel some kind of discrimination against women who have chosen music as their life's work. When I was asked about the female composer's position in the USSR, I replied that we do not have such a problem; therefore, there are no such societies either (Vlasova and Zeyfas, 1996: 6).

Indeed, the Soviet educational and institutional system created conditions that facilitated the emergence of women composers. However, even in this seemingly progressive environment, the proportion of women in the profession rarely exceeded 30%. This limitation likely reflects the inertia of social consciousness and persistent gender stereotypes. Gaziza Zhubanova, one of Kazakhstan's most prominent composers, commented on this contradiction:

I did not take girls into my class. Not because they cannot be composers. It is just that this profession is so difficult, not only in a professional sense but maybe even more difficult in the struggle 'for survival'. From century to century, this profession was considered purely male, and I myself think so today. But in the 20th century, especially in the second half of it, women proved their latent creative potential – female composers appeared, in terms of talent and skill, not only not inferior to men, but sometimes even superior to them (Zhubanova, 1996: 247).

At the same time, comparisons with culturally similar Turkic-speaking countries that were also part of the Soviet Union – such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan – reveal significantly lower proportions of women composers. This contrast suggests that Kazakh culture may possess distinctive features that supported women's creative participation more strongly than in neighboring societies. Among these features are deep-rooted traditions of public female artistic expression and a historically inclusive musical culture. Composer Gulzhan Uzenbayeva supports this interpretation, noting: "The impressive number of women composers in Kazakhstan is due to the interpenetration of national traditions and new forms of creative expression in the 20th century" (Gulzhan Uzenbayeva, personal communication, February 10, 2023).

In this context, the Kazakh case illustrates a complex interplay between Soviet institutional support and pre-existing cultural attitudes that favored women's creative self-realization. These factors together contributed to a gender profile in composition that is notably more inclusive than in many other parts of the world.

The Second Stage of Research: Ethnographic and Cultural Context

The vast cultural space of the Turkic-speaking world – from Siberia to the Mediterranean – encompasses a wide array of ethnic groups and musical traditions, including those of the Yakuts, Tuvans, Khakas, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Uighurs, Turkmens, Karakalpaks, Azerbaijanis, Tatars, Bashkirs, and Turks. Historical and ethnographic sources confirm that, throughout centuries, women participated in musical creation and held important roles in both nomadic and settled societies of Central Asia.

Based on an analysis of musical practices across Turkic-speaking cultures, the following typology of gender-related genre structures and performance traditions is proposed:

- 1) Gender-segregated systems, where genres are strictly divided by sex and public performance by women, especially before men, is taboo;
- 2) Genre division with performance neutrality, where genres are traditionally associated with one gender, but public performance is not formally restricted;
- 3) Gender-neutral systems, in which musical genres and performance practices are equally open to all genders.

As Yelena Vasilchenko (2014: 51) observes, gender stereotypes – and the limitations they impose – are not uniform across cultures: “Practically every confession, including Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam, in its own way limited the participation of women in social life (and music is one of the most important forms of socialisation) by a certain set of rules.”

In *the first category*, gender inequality is linked to strong religious or ritual taboos. For example, in many Central Asian settled communities, women were traditionally secluded and restricted from public performance. As noted by Raziya Sultanova (2014), Tanya Merchant (2015), and Gulbakhor Makhkamova (2004), women were permitted to sing only at private gatherings – such as weddings, women’s councils (*gap*), lullabies, or funerals – and exclusively in front of other women and children. Religious customs, particularly Islamic norms of gender separation, also gave rise to female-dominated spheres such as *shamanic* healing, where only women could treat other women.

In *the second type*, prohibitions are more conditional. For instance, in Tuvan culture, women were traditionally discouraged from performing *khoomai* (throat singing). While often explained as a religious taboo, researcher Yekaterina Karelina (2009: 84) suggests physiological justifications: “Significant physical effort during throat singing is harmful to the female body, the main function of which is the birth of healthy offspring.” Yet, in recent decades, the revival of national traditions has led to growing acceptance of women performers of *khorekteer* (chest voice throat singing), and the profession of *khoomaizhi* is gaining prestige among women. Interestingly, even genres historically viewed as female-only in Kazakh culture, such as *tusau kesu* (a child’s first steps ceremony) and *zhoktau* (lamentation), have been recorded in male performance – suggesting that such taboos are not absolute but culturally adaptive.

The third type – gender-neutral genres – is predominantly found in nomadic cultures, such as that of the Kazakhs. Numerous travelers and ethnographers have noted the remarkable freedom and public activity of Kazakh women compared to women in more orthodox Islamic societies. As early as the Middle Ages, writers such as Ahmed Ibn Fadlan and Ibn Battuta remarked on the relatively equal status of women in Turkic nomadic communities. The Russian orientalist Vladimir Tiesenhausen cites Ibn Battuta's impression: "In this region, I saw miracles in terms of the great honour in which women are held" (1941: 87). Zhanat Kundakbayeva (2017: 56) reinforces this interpretation by noting that: "Patriarchal relations in Kazakh society are considered not so much as relations of domination and subordination but as a mechanism for maintaining the balance of the social relations system in the conditions of nomadic life."

These gender dynamics may be rooted in Tengrism, the spiritual belief system of early Turkic peoples. Raziya Sultanova emphasizes the synthesis of Islamic and pre-Islamic female figures, tracing them back to the dual-gender cosmology of *Tengri* (*Tanir*) – the Sky God. The female principle, *Tengri Umai* (also known as *Ot Ana*, or Mother Fire), was associated with warmth, family, and creativity. Later, these beliefs were transformed into the Islamic cults of mother Aisha, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad, and mother Fatima, his daughter.

Musical genres in Kazakh culture often reflect this balance. Mixed-gender participation was common in both *aitys* (poetic duels) and *tartys* (instrumental competitions). Alibi Abdinurov et al. describe an example of *tartys* between the renowned *kuishi* Tattimbet and a girl from the Naiman tribe, known for her dombra playing. After exhausting their repertoires, Tattimbet composed a new *kui* (Kazakh musical piece) on the spot – *Sylkyldak* (Laughing) – and was declared the winner. Whether the girl yielded out of respect or was genuinely outplayed remains a matter of legend (2021: 69).

The Soviet era introduced a new context for women in music, emphasizing ideological emancipation through access to education and professional institutions. However, ethnographic data suggest that Kazakhstan's pre-Soviet cultural foundations already supported women's participation in music, making the Soviet push for gender equality more effective and less culturally disruptive than in neighboring societies.

Today, scholarly debate continues over whether the strong representation of women in Kazakh composition reflects traditional cultural patterns or is primarily a legacy of Soviet policy. The case studies of women composers presented in the next section aim to address this question by examining the intersection of gender, tradition, and artistic agency.

In sum, the ethnographic findings support and extend the statistical patterns identified in the first stage of the research. Kazakhstan stands out from neighboring Central Asian countries in offering women greater access to musical self-realization, both historically and in contemporary practice. The nature of musical genres, their gendered or gender-neutral characteristics and the cultural worldview embedded in nomadic life, continue to shape the role of women in national compositional traditions.

The Third Stage of Research: Gender Balance as Perceived by Modern Women Composers

When analyzing the cases of individual composers, the specificity of gender dynamics in Kazakhstan becomes particularly apparent. Equally relevant is how women themselves perceive gender relations in the country's musical sphere. The selected composers represent two generations: the older, whose careers began during the Soviet period – Aktoty Raimkulova, Gulzhan Uzenbayeva, and Kadisha Onalbayeva – and the younger, whose professional development took place in the years following Kazakhstan's independence – Nargiz Khinkov-Aitbayeva, Shirin Bazarkulova, and Togzhan Karatai.

To ensure consistency in the study, each participant was asked a similar set of questions covering key topics such as the position of women in Kazakh society, the influence of traditional responsibilities, career development, societal attitudes, stylistic features related to gender, the legacy of Soviet ideology, and comparisons with other cultural contexts. Notably, their responses showed a high degree of convergence, suggesting a coherent and internally consistent view of gender among Kazakh women composers.

Assessing the position of women in Kazakh society, all respondents noted the exceptional freedom and the role of gendered responsibilities in preserving intergenerational continuity. At the same time, they observed a clear trend in contemporary Kazakhstan: more women are becoming socially and professionally independent, achieving success in areas such as business, art, education, and public administration. As Aktoty Raimkulova put it:

In ancient times, the survival of the entire extended family depended on the observance of gender roles. Now, when it seems life has become easier, and it is no longer necessary to maintain the viability of the family with hard work, Kazakh women keenly feel their unique mission in transferring the values of the nomadic culture to the new generation. (Aktoty Raimkulova, personal communication, February 04, 2023)

Representatives of the younger generation pointed to a cultural tension between the historically patriarchal image of Kazakh women and the actual roles they occupy in today's society. According to Togzhan Karatai:

In 21st century, a 'Kazakh woman' can work in several places simultaneously, provide for herself and her children without being tied to a man, and successfully overcome various barriers to building her career. (Togzhan Karatai, personal communication, March 15, 2023)

For most respondents, traditional female responsibilities have not been an obstacle to professional self-realisation. Rather, many view them as integrated into their success. Aktoty Raimkulova drew parallels between the family and the professional spheres, stressing that understanding social hierarchy and embracing appropriate roles has helped in career development. With age, she noted, societal pressure decreases, and women gain greater autonomy in choosing their own balance between family and professional life.

The respondents highlighted that pursuing a career in music, despite its demanding nature, has been possible largely due to the preservation of traditional family values. Many cited the common Kazakh practice of shared responsibility, where elder family members assist in raising children, allowing women more flexibility in their careers. As Kadisha Onalbayeva noted:

On the one hand, a woman's self-actualisation in her career interferes with the performance of household chores. On the other hand, it provides the means to solve these issues differently by delegating household issues. (Kadisha Onalbayeva, personal communication, September 13, 2022)

Nearly all respondents expressed a strong connection with Kazakh traditional culture. They encountered folk music, *kui*, and national instruments early in life, and these experiences continue to influence their individual compositional styles. Togzhan Karatai is a professional *kobyz* (Kazakh musical instrument) player and represents a lineage of traditional musicians. Shirin Bazarkulova, who began with *dombra*, recalled:

While studying at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, I learnt traditional music with even greater interest, trying to delve into the roots and genres of Kazakh music. It is what distinguished my work from other young composers. (Togzhan Karatai, personal communication, March 15, 2023)

The environment in which the older generation studied contributed to their openness and tolerance, both culturally and in terms of gender. Gulzhan Uzenbayeva reflected:

There was no difference. It is essential, I think, to note that Uzbeks, Russians, Armenians, Georgians, Jews, Poles, Kazakhs, Tatars, Germans and so on studied in our class ... Of course, there were no questions about the equality of nations. (Gulzhan Uzenbayeva, personal communication, February 10, 2023)

The Soviet educational model prioritised broad, interdisciplinary competence over gender identity. Students were encouraged to combine specialisations and deepen their theoretical and compositional understanding. All interviewees from the older generation regretted the erosion of this model in the post-Soviet period, though none perceived gender equality to have worsened. The Soviet ideological framework, according to several respondents, supported independent thinking and allowed artists to focus on creativity without financial pressures. As Aktoty Raimkulova stated: “The most enthusiastic remain in the profession.” (Aktoty Raimkulova, personal communication, February 04, 2023)

This point was echoed by Gulzhan Uzenbayeva and Kadisha Onalbayeva, the latter of whom experienced the collapse of the USSR during her transition from school to conservatory. Despite this, her values remained rooted in Soviet ideals. She recalled:

It used to be better. Composers wrote a lot. They wrote much more than today. At school, we sang modern music in the choir, Gaziza Zhubanova’s oratorios ... Who is singing

oratorios now? There are no commissions, no operas, no ballets. (Kadisha Onalbayeva, personal communication, September 13, 2022)

Younger composers, trained by teachers with Soviet backgrounds, also reflect on today's challenging conditions for composers. Financial constraints, lack of commissions, and limited institutional support often discourage large-scale creative undertakings. Nargiz Khinkov-Aitbayeva remarked:

Time has changed. Economic changes lead to people of creativity or science having to deal with 'earning money'. (Nargiz Khinkov-Aitbayeva, personal communication, March 05, 2022)

As for gender-based challenges, some respondents recalled experiencing different attitudes toward boys and girls in performance training – due to assumptions about strength and stamina – but unanimously agreed that composition instruction is gender-neutral. As Togzhan Karatai noted:

Like many others, the 'composer' profession is gradually erasing its gender binding – as a purely 'male' profession. (Togzhan Karatai, personal communication, March 15, 2023)

Still, some stereotypes persist. Aktoty Raimkulova spoke about the deeply embedded image of the composer as male, and the resulting pressure women feel to prove themselves:

Serving music involves some sacrifice and a different arrangement of priorities. For a woman, family and children always come first. We subconsciously had to constantly prove our compliance with the high title of 'composer'. (Aktoty Raimkulova, personal communication, February 04, 2023)

Opinions varied on the question of whether music itself reflects gender. Some composers perceived women's music as more intuitive, emotionally complex, and uniquely expressive:

Some remarkable depth, and a different feeling of space, while 'female' music can be fragile and strong, like 'male' music. It is a unique combination. (Kadisha Onalbayeva, personal communication, September 13, 2022)

Others insisted that music transcends gender, echoing the views of composers like Sofia Gubaidulina and Galina Ustvolskaya:

It is unlikely that, while hearing this or that composition for the first time, it will be possible to say with certainty that a woman or a man wrote it. We are all human, first and foremost. We all have the same values – universal. (Aktoty Raimkulova, personal communication, February 04, 2023)

In comparing Kazakhstan with neighboring Central Asian countries, the interviewees agreed that Kazakh society is more open and liberal regarding gender. This was especially noted by Gulzhan Uzenbayeva and Nargiz Khinkov-Aitbayeva, both of whom were born and educated in Uzbekistan:

Kazakh women were more free, courageous and open personalities, not afraid of conventions, compared to Uzbek women. In Kazakhstan, as nowhere else, there is active female composer creativity. (Gulzhan Uzenbayeva, personal communication, February 10, 2023)

In Uzbekistan, meeting a girl who aspires to be realised in her career was rare. The women there are very busy. In Kazakhstan, people are freer. (Nargiz Khinkov-Aitbayeva, personal communication, March 05, 2022)

Taken together, the responses point to two major conclusions: on one hand, patriarchal structures and gender expectations continue to shape women's experiences; on the other, modern Kazakh women composers exhibit a high degree of flexibility and adaptability. Their ability to integrate multiple roles – professional, cultural, and familial – is seen not as a limitation but as a strength. This multivectorial engagement with both artistic and everyday life is viewed by the composers themselves as a competitive advantage, one that enables them to navigate and succeed in an evolving cultural environment.

Results and Discussion

The responses of the interviewed composers demonstrate a clear adherence to traditional cultural values, including those related to gender, and allow for several generalisations regarding the conditions of women's participation in professional composition in Kazakhstan.

First, the dominance of the second and third types of gender structures in Kazakh traditional musical culture – those involving *gendered genre divisions without performance restrictions*, and fully *gender-neutral systems* – has historically precluded the emergence of gender-based limitations in music-making. Kazakh girls are socialised from an early age to adapt to multiple social roles, moving fluidly between life stages that require various forms of responsibility and engagement. This social flexibility has translated into cultural norms where women experience creative freedom regardless of the make-up of audiences. The absence of gender taboos in public performance has contributed to a lack of internal psychological barriers to artistic self-expression.

Secondly, during the Soviet period, Kazakh women gained full access to education and the freedom to choose their profession and lifestyle. Urbanisation and extended family support systems allowed many domestic responsibilities to be delegated, creating more favorable conditions for women's participation in professional and cultural life. In this context, the egalitarian values of socialism complemented the egalitarian features already embedded in Kazakh nomadic traditions. In contemporary society, these culturally rooted gender roles continue to function as a competitive advantage, allowing women to adapt successfully to changing social and economic conditions.

Thirdly, this adaptability became especially important in the post-Soviet period, when many composers could no longer rely exclusively on composing as a source of income. Women with additional competencies in performance, teaching, or administration were better positioned to sustain their careers. All interviewed composers acknowledged both the objective obstacles facing women in the field and the flexibility and multifunctionality that characterize their professional lives.

Analysis of successful careers indicates that versatility is a major factor in professional sustainability, regardless of gender. The most competitively positioned individuals are those able to engage simultaneously in multiple roles: composing, performing, teaching, or administration. Among Kazakh women composers, this pattern is especially pronounced. Gulzhan Uzenbayeva, Kadisha Onalbayeva, and Nargiz Khinkov-Aitbayeva actively combine composition with performance and teaching; Aktoty Raimkulova balances creative work with high-level administrative responsibilities. Younger composers such as Shirin Bazarkulova, Togzhan Karatai, and Aigerim Seilova earn their

livelihood exclusively through artistic practice.

However, it would be inaccurate to conclude that versatility alone determines success, or that this applies only to women. Many male composers, including Serik Yerkinbekov, Tolegen Mukhamedzhanov, Adilzhan Tolukpayev, Satzhan Shamenov, and Rinat Gaysin, have also built prominent, multifaceted careers. Overall, very few Kazakhstani composers – regardless of gender – rely solely on composition as a primary source of income today.

Interestingly, younger composers are more likely to pursue purely creative careers, though often in popular or commercial genres rather than in ‘art’ music. This reflects broader shifts in the musical landscape, where mass genres offer greater financial opportunities and social visibility. The transformation of musical culture has thus changed the career structure for emerging generations of musicians.

The strong orientation toward versatility in both male and female careers reflects the influence of Soviet educational ideals, which encouraged the integration of multiple competencies. At the same time, the shift in ideological values since independence has not significantly disrupted gender dynamics in composition. Women in Kazakhstan continue to enjoy equal opportunities for creative self-realisation, suggesting that traditional cultural foundations remain a decisive factor.

The combination of traditional gender norms with Soviet institutional frameworks appears to have laid the groundwork for a sustained and relatively high representation of women in Kazakhstan’s compositional community. In comparison with culturally similar regions, this balance stands out and reflects both the resilience of national values and the legacy of a system that enabled women to pursue artistic careers on an equal footing with men.

Conclusions

This study of gender dynamics in Kazakhstani art music reveals not only patterns specific to Kazakhstan but also broader challenges and trends shared by many national music cultures. The relatively high proportion of women involved in professional composition in Kazakhstan can be attributed to a combination of interrelated factors:

- 1) The structure of the traditional genre system, which historically allowed for gender-

neutral or inclusive performance practices;

- 2) The traditional way of life, in which women were socially prepared to navigate multiple roles and responsibilities;
- 3) The Soviet legacy, particularly its emphasis on gender equality in education and professional life;
- 4) The versatility of artistic practice, which allows composers to combine multiple forms of creative and professional engagement.

The statistical analysis supports the conclusion that Kazakhstan, in comparison with culturally similar Central Asian countries, demonstrates a more favourable gender balance in the field of composition. This is due not only to the influence of Soviet ideological frameworks but also to deeper cultural traditions that never imposed rigid prohibitions on women's creative expression.

The uniqueness of Kazakhstan's gender balance lies in the successful convergence of a traditional worldview and the Soviet system's egalitarian infrastructure. Together, they fostered an environment in which women gained equal access to professional training and cultural participation. According to the interview data, contemporary Kazakh women composers report neither discrimination nor discomfort related to their gender. On the contrary, their adaptability, multifunctionality, and cultural fluency appear to give them a relative advantage in navigating the modern musical environment.

Although men continue to dominate the global composition profession, the Soviet legacy suggests that institutional frameworks – such as state-sponsored music education and cultural programming – can influence gender representation in meaningful ways. This observation may be particularly relevant in national contexts where patriarchal norms persist alongside a degree of openness in the creative sphere. The case of Kazakhstan illustrates how targeted support for cultural participation can foster greater gender inclusivity, even within traditionally hierarchical or male-dominated environments.

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that women composers remain significantly underrepresented compared to their male counterparts, both globally and regionally. While Kazakhstan shows a more balanced profile, the proportion of women still rarely

exceeds one-third, even in the most progressive generations. It remains unclear to what extent this disparity is a result of social inertia – the persistence of long-standing gender norms – or broader socio-economic factors that shape access to professional and creative opportunities. This issue calls for dedicated scholarly inquiry to disentangle the complex interplay of cultural, institutional, and economic dynamics that continue to affect gender equity in composition.

Future research could benefit from a systematic analysis of the thematic content of works composed by women, with particular attention to the subjects, conceptual frameworks, and recurring motifs that characterize their creative output. Such inquiry would help assess whether and how gendered experience, social positioning, or cultural identity are reflected in artistic choices. It would also contribute to broader feminist musicological debates on whether there exists a distinctly “female” voice in composition, and how this voice evolves in different cultural and historical contexts.

Furthermore, the role of versatility – as noted among Kazakhstani women composers – deserves closer analytical attention. While often framed as a competitive advantage, this multifunctionality may also be a response to structural constraints, such as lack of institutional commissions, financial insecurity, or limited support for full-time composition careers. Interrogating the gendered dimensions of this flexibility can shed light on how women adapt to systemic challenges, and whether such strategies reinforce or resist existing inequalities.

Thus, the case of Kazakhstan provides a compelling model for understanding how structural, historical, and cultural factors can interact to foster gender balance in artistic professions. The trends observed here point to the potential for even broader participation of women in composition, making Kazakhstan a unique and instructive example within the Central Asian region.

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