

# The role of music in Azerbaijani folk theatre performances

## Azərbaycan halk tiyatrosu performanslarında müziğin rolü

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### ABSTRACT

The theatre art of the Azerbaijani people constitutes a significant part of their centuries-old and rich cultural heritage. As an integral element of the nation's spiritual wealth, this art form has evolved, enriched by a variety of ceremonies, games, and performances. The present article specifically investigates the types of Azerbaijani folk theatre and the role of music employed in these performances. The primary aim of the study is to analyze the characteristics and functions of music within Azerbaijani folk theatre.

This theatrical tradition serves as a vivid reflection of both national culture and musical folklore. Particularly in folk performances, the musical pieces are typically short, repetitive, lively, energetic, and sometimes combative. These melodies are usually performed on the traditional wind instrument zurna. Each piece often begins with a repeated motif that functions as an intrada—a call to attention—directing the audience's focus toward the forthcoming performance. Furthermore, turning points and significant moments in the play find vivid expression through music. Thus, folk performances are inconceivable without musical accompaniment.

The research methodology is based on analysis, comparison, and empirical observation. Musical samples used in games and performances held during festivals and ceremonies across various regions were collected, transcribed into musical notation, and analyzed. The findings of the study underscore the importance of selecting music in Azerbaijani folk theatre by stage conditions and artistic requirements.

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, dance, folk performances, musical folklore, Novruz holiday, song

### ÖZ

Azərbaycan halkının tiyatro sanatı, yüzyıllara dayanan köklü və zengin kültürel mirasının önemli bir parçasını oluşturmaktadır. Ulusun manevi zenginliğinin ayrılmaz bir unsuru olan bu sanat dalı, çeşitli törenler, oyunlar ve gösterilerle şekillenmiş, zamanla zenginleşmiştir. Bu çalışma, Azərbaycan halk tiyatrosunda kullanılan müziğin türler üzerindeki etkisini inceleyerek, müziğin işlevsel ve biçimsel özelliklerini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Bu tiyatro geleneği, hem ulusal kültürün hem de müzik folklorunun canlı bir yansımasıdır. Özellikle halk gösterilerinde kullanılan müzik parçaları genellikle kısa, tekrar eden, hareketli, enerjik ve kimi zaman da mücadeleci niteliktedir. Bu ezgiler çoğunlukla, geleneksel üflemeli çalgı olan zurna ile icra edilmektedir. Parçalar genellikle intrada işlevi gören, yani izleyicinin dikkatini sahneye yönelten tekrar eden bir motifle başlar. Oyunun önemli dönüm noktaları ve dramatik anları da müzik aracılığıyla vurgulanır. Bu nedenle, halk tiyatrosu müzikal eşlik olmadan düşünülemez.

Araştırma yöntemi analiz, karşılaştırma ve gözleme dayanmaktadır. Çeşitli bölgelerde bayramlar ve törenler sırasında düzenlenen oyunlarda, gösterilerde kullanılan müzik örnekleri toplanarak, nota yazımına aktarılmış ve analiz edilmiştir. Elde edilen bulgular, Azərbaycan halk tiyatrosunda müzik seçiminin sahne koşulları ve sanatsal gereklilikler doğrultusunda yapılmasının önemini ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Azərbaycan, dans, halk gösterileri, müzik folkloru, Nevruz bayramı, şarkı

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Azerbaijani people have a rich and centuries-old history of culture and art. In particular, the theatrical art, which is an essential part of this culture, forms the core and inseparable element of the nation's spiritual wealth. Azerbaijani folk theatre, in terms of its roots, is closely connected to the ancient customs and traditions, ceremonies, rituals, entertainments, and games that reflect the people's intellectual expressions and ideals. Having passed through the trials of time, these traditions and customs, ceremonies, and games have retained traces of folk theatre art in their development. The people have demonstrated their customs and traditions through outdoor performances. The outdoor performances staged in city squares, rural areas, and caravanserais are part of traditional folk theater. In the area surrounded by spectators, and performed in an open space, it is called "orta oyunu" (theatre in the round) or "meydan tamashalari" (square performances). The term "meydan tamashalari" primarily refers to narrative-based, plot-driven folk games performed in Azerbaijan. These performances, as ancient as the people themselves, were conducted in a sincere atmosphere between the performers and the audience. They were developed by clowns, storytellers, minstrels, comedians, and puppet players, who, through their contributions, formed the core of traditional folk performances (Asgar, 2017).

### 1.1. Aim of the Study

- To examine the characteristics and functions of music in Azerbaijani folk theatre.
- To identify the types of musical samples used in folk performances and analyze their suitability for stage requirements.
- To explore the role of music in cultural and religious ceremonies such as the Novruz holiday and Shabih performances.
- To contribute to the preservation and understanding of Azerbaijani musical folklore within folk theatre.

### 1.2. Importance of the Study

Although Azerbaijani folk theatre is rich in musical content, there is limited academic research analyzing the functional and structural aspects of the music used in these performances. In particular, there is a lack of comprehensive studies exploring how music aligns with the narrative and staging of folk performances and how it influences audience perception and engagement. The absence of systematic documentation and analysis also poses a threat to the preservation of this intangible cultural heritage.

Analyzing how musical elements integrate with staging and narrative will contribute to a deeper understanding of this traditional art form. Furthermore, the findings of this study hold cultural significance in terms of preserving Azerbaijani musical folklore and transmitting it to future generations. The research is also important for addressing gaps in the academic literature and supporting the documentation of intangible cultural heritage.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary aim of this research is to identify the functional and aesthetic characteristics of musical elements used in Azerbaijani folk theatre. Therefore, the methodology employed encompasses both theoretical and empirical approaches. Initially, a thorough analysis was conducted of the existing scholarly literature, including monographs, academic articles, and archival materials related to Azerbaijani musical folklore and folk theatre.

In the empirical phase, traditional ceremonies, folk performances, and events such as the Novruz holiday and religious plays like "Shabih" were observed across various regions. Musical samples used in these events were collected on-site, documented through audio and video recordings, and subsequently transcribed into musical notation for further analysis. The musical analysis focused on melodic structure, rhythmic patterns, dynamic features, and the instrumental means of performance.

Additionally, comparative and analytical methods were employed to identify similarities and differences between the musical and performative styles of different regions.

Thus, the study combines theoretical evaluation with field observation and practical experience to reveal the functional and aesthetic dimensions of the musical components within Azerbaijani folk theatre.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Azerbaijani folk theatre is incredibly diverse in its genres and forms. It is particularly closely related to the theatre traditions of ancient and medieval Eastern countries. This connection is particularly evident in the traditions of puppet theatre, the features of seasonal ceremonies, the conduct of athletic competitions, and the use of theatre stages in religious propaganda (Teymur, 2012).

Having gone through a significant development process, Azerbaijani folk theatre stands out due to its wide range of themes and content, as well as its clear and specific characteristics. In this regard, it can be divided into several groups:

1. Seasonal ceremonies
2. Puppet theatre
3. Folk dramatic performances:
  - a) Religious-mystical
  - b) Garavelliler (traditional performances)
4. Square performances (such as tightrope walking, wrestling, etc.).

The seasonal ceremonies created by the people, folk comedy, and puppet theatre were widely accompanied by jokes, joy, and fast-paced dances. The plots of these performances were based on themes of the people's work and daily life, often aiming to expose shortcomings within those aspects.

One of the key features of folklore is collectivity. Since ancient times, people have engaged in collective labor, and all the problems, joys, and sorrows of everyday life have been reflected in plays and games. "Folklore examples created by the collective participation and labor of the people, and continuing to spread through collective performance, show that collectivity is one of the most important characteristics of folk creativity" (Mammadova, 2023). In the life of the Azerbaijani people, music has played an important role in both work and celebrations, and unique music for folk performances, games, and festivities has emerged. Music has been an inseparable part of these performances, enriching their content and making them more vibrant through various songs, dance melodies, *tasnifs*, and *mugams*. Thus, the art of music has been closely intertwined with folk theatre art for centuries.

As is well known, natural phenomena have played a significant role in the lives of the Azerbaijani people, who have traditionally been engaged in animal husbandry and agriculture. The oldest songs and entertainments of the Azerbaijani people are also closely linked to nature, agricultural activities, and labor. Due to the hardworking character of the people, a variety of ceremonies, particularly seasonal rituals, emerged over time. In particular, ancient Azerbaijanis eagerly awaited spring's arrival, viewing nature's awakening as a symbol of joy and prosperity. This event, believed to bring happiness to people, led to the emergence of the national holiday known as Novruz ("New Day"). This festival, which has retained its cultural influence on this day, is a widely celebrated public holiday and continues to be officially recognized as a national celebration (Khalil, 2010).

#### 3.1. Novruz Holiday

Research shows that Novruz, a holiday that fosters rich feelings of peace, unity, care, and kindness among people, has been a beloved folk holiday since a time before our era. Information about this can be found in the works of great classical authors such as Nizami ("Iskandarnama"), Ferdowsi ("Shahnameh"), and Omar Khayyam. Some researchers have associated this holiday with Zoroastrianism, while others have linked it to Islam. However, prominent writer M. S. Ordubadi, Professor M. H. Tehmasib, writer Y. V. Chemenzeminli and other scholars and writers refute this idea. M. S. Ordubadi, in his article "Spring Holiday," wrote that the first spring holiday is not related to Islam or the religions that existed before Islam, and it is proven that this holiday has existed among various peoples for many ancient times (Eyvazli, 2018).

According to the solar calendar, Novruz begins every year on March 21st, marking the spring season's arrival. "The celebration of Nowruz festivities in Anatolia was influenced by ancient Turkic spring festivals and springtime celebrations. During the Ottoman period, Nowruz was observed as one of the notable days of the year. It was customary to consume a special paste or sweet known as Nowruziyeh when the sun entered the zodiac sign of Aries." (Chay, 1996) On this day, the night and day become equal in length. The people celebrate this holiday with joy, sweets, and *semeni* (a sprouted wheat dish). Preparations for the holiday are made, homes are cleaned, new clothes are worn, sweet breads are baked, and visits are made to relatives' homes to celebrate. On the last evening, a fire is lit, and everyone jumps over it, symbolizing purification from the misfortunes of the past year (Figure 1). The last Wednesday night of Novruz is also known for "ear fortune-telling," where people make a wish in their hearts, visit other homes, and listen to the first words they hear from a door to determine their future destiny. During the days of the Novruz holiday, several games and performances are held in Azerbaijan. "Valuable information about the games and performances enacted during the Novruz holiday can be found in the work 'Old Baku' by prominent Azerbaijani artist H. Sarabski. In his memoirs, he provides a detailed account of the games performed in Baku on the eve of Novruz. This work remains one of the most valuable sources available today on traditional folk games" (Aydamirova, 2012). "This holiday has become a permanent system regulating the life and life of many peoples living in the northern hemisphere. Novruz has fundamentally defined the spiritual values of the Near and Middle East, and was the material and spiritual source of the great religions and traditions, such as shamanism, fireworship and Islam, existing in this region (Mammadova, 2024).

**Figure 1**

*Novruz holiday in Baku (Novruz bayramı tonqalı, n.d.)*



### 3.2. "Khan-Khan" Game Performance

During the Novruz holiday, equestrian events, wrestling competitions, a variety of mass games, dances, the famous *yalli* dance, performances by tightrope walkers, singing, and *ashik* duels are organized. One of the most notable and widely spread performances among the people during this holiday is the "Khan-Khan" ("Khan dressing up") game-performance. In the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, which is part of Azerbaijan, the "Khan-Khan" game performance is still held today, especially in the cities of Ordubad and the villages of Nehrem and Beneniyar, with great pomp and celebration. While the form of the performance in these places may differ, its main theme centers around the victory of good over evil and the transition from winter to spring, marking the arrival of the new season.



"In those days, various performances were organized by the people in Nakhchivan, such as 'Khanbezeme' and 'Kosa and Kechel' where wrestlers, tightrope walkers, and masters of various crafts display their skills in a large square. During the performed rituals and ceremonies, bayatis (traditional folk songs) are sung, instrumental dance melodies are played, and both lyrical and lively dances, as well as song-dances, are performed. The folklore examples included in these performances are executed in a recitative style, accompanied by rhythmic clapping, and are performed solo, in a choir, or a soloist-choir exchange form" (Mammadova, 2024, p.56).

The performance is organized by the people in Ordubad and takes place in a wide square, gathering everyone from children to adults (Figure 2). Upon arrival, the audience is greeted with kind words and sprayed with rose water. In return, those attending throw money into a tray placed at the entrance of the square, contributing to the festive atmosphere.

**Figure 2**

*"Khan-Khan" game performance (Ordubad) (Nərimanoğlu, 2021)*



The people choose a wise, prudent Khan, capable of ruling, to celebrate the Novruz holiday. This Khan must not speak or laugh during the performance. Because the Khan does not speak during the performance, his orders are conveyed to the people by his vizier and representative. The Khan dresses in red and wears a crown, sitting on a high throne. Behind the throne, boards are displayed, depicting an abundance of produce. Below the throne, a group of musicians is stationed. The instruments typically include the zurna, balaban, and nagara (Mammadova, 2022).

Throughout the performance, participants try to make the Khan laugh, but those who fail to do so are given special "punishments" by the Khan. Under his command, the person must sing, dance, or carry out various tasks. A Kosa also participates in this game. He maintains order among the spectators and uses all his skill to make the performance even more joyful and entertaining. Throughout the performance, the Yalli dance is performed, and various games are shown.

In the "Khan-Khan" performance, as a symbol of which animal the year will be dedicated to, either a decorated model of that animal or a live one is displayed, and praises are sung in its honor (Elxan, 2015). The "Khan-Khan" performance held in Ordubad lasts for three days and is extremely entertaining. During these three days, if the Khan laughs, he is thrown off the throne and into a pool of water. A new Khan is selected in his place. However, if he does not laugh, he remains the Khan for the full three days (Huseynova, 2005).

This performance does not have a script, and it continues from dawn until sunset. Especially after sunset, when all the people gather, the performance becomes even more intense. The funds collected from the performance are recorded and later given to families in need or used for charitable purposes.

In the "Khan-Khan" game performance held in the village of Beneniyar, Culfa district, there is a script, and it is written by the people's representatives. The performance takes place in a special square. In this version, in addition to the Khan, vizier, and representative, the Khan is guarded by soldiers and yasavuls (guards). Each participant has a special costume. Usually, the Khan dresses in red and wears a Bukhara hat. His soldiers wear old coats and carry wooden swords.

The Khan enters the square with his entourage, accompanied by music. Unlike the Khan in Ordubad, this Khan speaks. He listens to the complaints of individuals and gives appropriate punishments. There are also gallows, an axe, and a red-colored block for punishment. At the Khan's command, the person being punished is either "beheaded," "hanged," or made to sing and dance. Pahlavans (wrestlers) also wrestle and demonstrate their skills during the performance.

In the "Khan-Khan" performance, widely popular folk music numbers are played. For example, the Khan enters the stage to the sound of "Cengi," and after his arrival, the "Kocheri" Yalli dance is performed. During the performance, folk songs such as "Sari gelin," "Azerbaijan marali," and others are sung, and Terekeme and Yalli dances are performed. However, the musicians' program is not fixed, meaning that the program can change at different times. In general, the use of well-known songs, compositions, and dances in folk performances has its reason. This is because well-known, popular, and widely spread types of music that touch the hearts of the people help strengthen the communication between the theater and the audience, providing an opportunity to convey the essence of the performance to large crowds (Abdulaliyev, 2020).

According to participants in the "Khan-Khan" game performed in Nehrem village, Babak district, a poor man is chosen to be the Khan and placed on the throne in the center of the square. Then, his vizier and representative announced to the people: "People, a new Khan has arrived in the village; come to his presence." The people gather to watch the performance, bringing money and valuable items as much as they can. Here, the Khan does not speak; his words are conveyed to the people by his vizier and representative. For this reason, they are extremely quick-witted and strive to make the performance lively and interesting. Particularly, various dance melodies are played by the zurna group, and the performance concludes with everyone dancing the Yalli dance together. The most interesting aspect is that the "Khan-Khan" performance in these areas is not organized by professional actors, but by the people themselves, using their financial resources. This proves the people's deep love for their ancient heritage and lineage.

In the research on Novruz customs and traditions, it is observed that the zurna musical instrument has been one of the most important and frequently used instruments in folk performances, especially during the accompaniment of dances such as Yalli, Cengi, etc. "The zurna, which has a very loud sound and a wide pitch range, is mainly used during weddings and holidays for performing Yally dances. Since the zurna is made from the horn of a black bull, it is also called 'gara zurna' (black zurna) among the people" (Mammadova, 2022).

### 3.3. The "Shebih" Performances

With the spread of Islam in Azerbaijan, certain forms of theater were integrated into religious rituals and ceremonies, leading to the emergence of religious forms of folk theater. A complete example of religious theater is the "Shebih" of the Muslim East. Research conducted in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic indicates that in the city of Ordubad, "Khan-Khan" performances were held during Novruz celebrations, while "Shebih" performances took place during the Muharram period, and even though these two performances ideologically contradicted each other, they used the same decorations and featured the same actors and performers.

Shabih, a form of folk theatre, represents an advanced stage in the development of the tragic wing of popular performance, achieved through centuries of search and progress. It distinguishes itself from other genres of open-air theatre through its closer affinity with the European-style theatre. A defined script, role distribution, staging, and the involvement of a director characterize it (Huseynov, 2012).

Despite its religious and tragic themes, mourning performances and Shabih plays have preserved all the essential characteristics of folk theatre as open-air performances. In these plays, both the performers and the audience are integral parts of the spectacle. In this sense, Shabih is a composite form that combines both speech and movement, music and pantomime, as well as prose and poetry (Bayat, 2022).

Researcher S. Seyidova, in her article "Azerbaijani Music and the Şebih Mystery Play," writes that the "Shebih" performances, which were a form of open-air theater, were held during the Muharram ceremonies commemorating the death of the Muslim imams at the desert of Karbala. The word "Shebih" means "similar" or "resembling." This ritual, which emerged in the 16th century, became the foundation for religious plays and mystery theater. The main purpose of the "Shebih" was to reflect the victory of God and the triumph of Islam over tyranny and oppression through the symbolism of Karbala. The Shebih plays were inspired by religious literature and included the poetry of religious poets such as Muhammad Tagi Qumri, Molla Hussein Dakhil, Abulhasan Raji, Molla Bihuddin, Mirza Hasan Gudsı, and Mohammadamin Dilsuz (Khanlarova, 2020).

In terms of genre, the "Shebih" is a tragedy and develops solely along tragic lines. "Shebih" plays were primarily written in verse and composed in the style of behri-tehvıl (a traditional poetic form) and were one-act plays. The participants in the performance are divided into two opposing factions: the Imam and his supporters (such as Hussein, Hasan, Ali, Sakina, etc.) and the enemies of the Imam (such as Yazid, Shumur, etc.).

The great Azerbaijani composer Uzeyir Hajibeyli regarded Shabih as one of the key factors in the emergence of Azerbaijani national opera art. Mystery theater, Shabih performances, and dervish plays had a significant influence on the development of Azerbaijani theater and the formation of a genuine opera tradition.

Firudin Shushinski, a scholar of music history, wrote that in Shusha, young men with good voices were invited to recite elegies (marsiya) and lamentations (nawha) during Muharram mourning ceremonies and gatherings. The most renowned music expert of that time, Kharrat Gulu, son of Muhammad (1823–1883), would gather the most talented young singers for the Muharram commemorations he organized. He would teach them to perform in Shabih roles such as Sakina, Zeynab, Ali Akbar, and others (Huseynov, 2002).

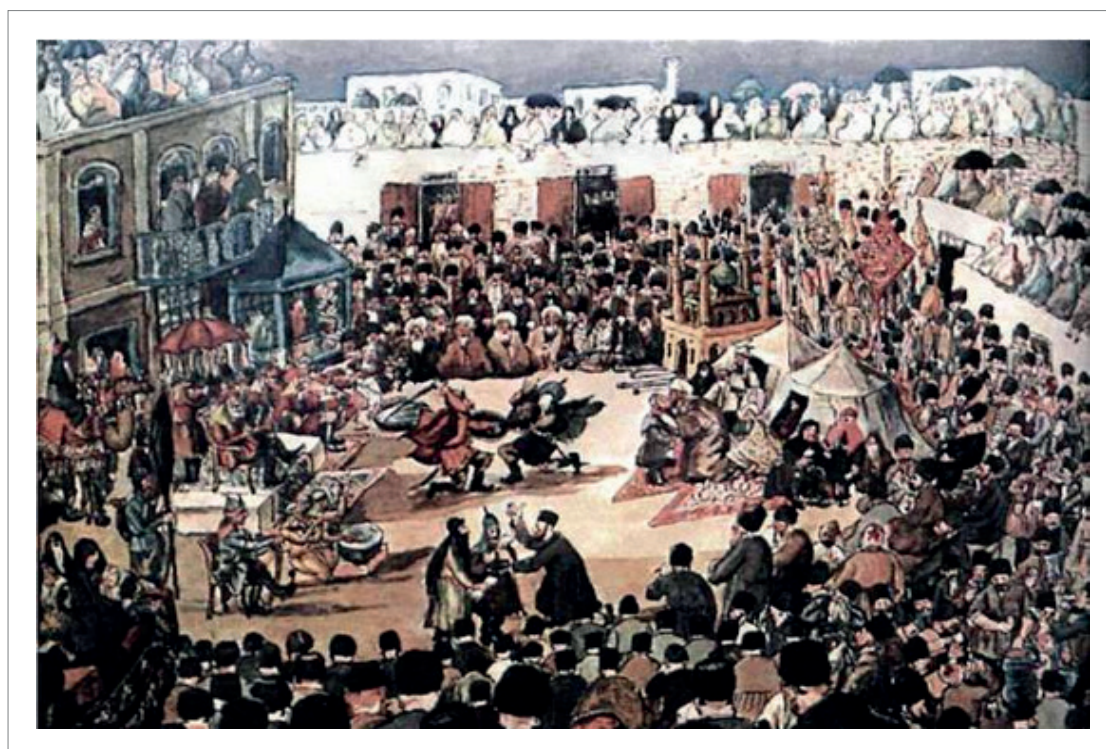
Historically, "Shebih" performances gained great popularity in Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, India, and Azerbaijan before 1917. In Nakhchivan, this play was performed for many years, but it gradually faded after 1936, leaving behind only the mourning poetry and lamentation traditions. According to Sheikh Muradali, who lived in Nehrem village in the current Babek district of Nakhchivan and personally participated in "Shebih" performances, this play was eagerly performed by the people in various regions of Nakhchivan. Sheikh Muradali noted that in the performance, a large container filled with water was placed in the center of the square to symbolize the Euphrates River. On one side of the square, the Imam and his followers sat on a carpet, while the enemies of the Imam sat on a throne and chair on the other side. Various colored flags (alams) were hung in the square, and participants wore black and white clothing. According to Sheikh Muradali, during the performance, funeral marches were played by the ney, zurna, nagara, and sheypur, and during the procession, Cengi-type music was performed. The person leading the procession sang alone while the others repeated the lyrics in unison.

The "Shebih" performance was primarily staged outdoors, in mosque courtyards or public squares. Thousands of people would walk the streets of the city, crying, shouting, and in a state of spiritual ecstasy, beating their heads, striking themselves with chains, and displaying their grief. The events depicted by the Mersiyekhan and Novhekhan performers were vividly reenacted by the participants of the "Shebih" play. It is important to note that the "Shebih" performances had their own distinct style, repertoire, actors, and directors. In the photo below, all the elements related to the performance are depicted in the painting of the "Shabih" play by the prominent Azerbaijani artist Azim Azimzade (Figure 3).



**Figure 3**

"Shebih" performance. (Artist: E. Ezimzade) (getarchive.net, n.d.)



### 3.4. The Role of Music in "Shebih" Performances

The role of music in "Shebih" performances is crucial. In these plays, the dramaturgy and the musical language form a harmonious unity. In particular, music enhances the emotional impact of the tragedy. All performers address each other either through musical declamation or by singing. Those playing the martyrs typically sing with an extremely sorrowful voice, while the performers portraying the enemies speak in angry recitatives (Khanlarova, 2020). Gasidas (religious hymns) and novhas (mourning songs) are sung over the framework of mugham (a traditional Azerbaijani music genre). The music genres commonly used in "Shebih" can be divided into three groups:

1. Mugham singing;
2. Song-like recitations;
3. Instrumental music.

As is well known, the rise of mugham art in Azerbaijan coincided with the widespread spread of Islam in the region. Researchers also note that in Muslim worship, all recitations, such as verses from the Quran, the call to prayer (adhan), and other religious texts, are performed in an improvised manner, often with a mugham accompaniment. The music of "Shebih" performances is largely composed of mugham singing. The great composer U. Hajibeyli wrote about this: "During the month of Muharram, the performance of a 'Şebih' on Ashura Day is a well-known event. The Shebih is a type of religious performance, similar to the oratorio of the Western world, which portrays and symbolizes events from the Karbala tragedy. As in an oratorio, the participants in this performance sing with a vocal style and perform the corresponding mugham movements" (Hajibeyov, 1985).

In "Shebih" performances, religious vocalizations that lack a fixed musical meter, such as saalat, gaside, mersiye, and novhe, serve as examples. Let's focus on three novhes collected and transcribed by musicologist R. Huseynova. The word novhe, which refers to a mourning song, literally means "lament" or "dirge." The examples provided below occupy an intermediate position between song and tasnif in terms of style. These novhes also demonstrate the influence of the style of zurna music, that is, instrumental music (for example, in the second section of the first example, yalli intonations can be heard). The close connection with the song culture is evident in the tonal basis of the novhes (here, the Rast and Segah maqams are used), their metrorhythmic characteristics, the outlines of the song form, and the convergence of poetic text and music.



Moreover, each of these three figures confirms the inherent structure of the song style in its unique manner, and the expression of the text in the music is visible.

**Figure 4**

*Novhe. (musical notation by Huseynova R.)*

Zey- nəb gə- zər- di hey- ran mey- da- nı Kər- bə- la- nı

gör- dü dü- şüb- dü bey- sər sol- ta- nı Kər-

bə- la- nı sol- ta- nı Kər- bə- la- nı.

Gül pey- kə- rin- dən hər- giz bir- ca- yi bu- sə yox- dur

əl van e- dib sə- ra- sər öz qa- nı Kər- bə- la- nı,

öz qa- nı Kər- bə- la- nı. Hər yer- dən əh- li a- ləm

bu rəs- mi dir ca- han- da qur- ban a- şı

ve- rər- lər ba- şın- kə- sən za- man- da

qur- ba- nı Kər- bə- la- nı

In the second figure, the song-tesnif tradition is evident.

**Figure 5**

*Novhe. (musical notation by Huseynova R.)*

The image displays a musical score for a song titled 'Novhe'. The notation is written on seven staves, each with a treble clef and a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The time signature is 8/8. The lyrics are written in Azerbaijani script below the notes. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some measures containing rests. The lyrics are as follows:

Mir- zə ba- şın- da xu- da nu- ri tə- cə  
 la gö- rü- nür Gö- rü- nür cis- me- yi- dir  
 nu- ri mi- sal qur- şı qə- mər ya mə- lək -dir bu  
 kə- sik ba- şı xu- da ya ki- bə- mər  
 Ne- cə Ək- bər de- yim Al- lah be- lə- gül  
 rən- gin so- lub yel- vu- rub zül- fün a- tır  
 kə- be- yi ley- la gö- rü- nür

Figure 6, on the other hand, is an original example that occupies an intermediate position between the song-tesnif structure and mugham.

**Figure 6**

*Novhe. (musical notation by Ruxsare Huseynova)*

Mə-ni bi-nə-va-a-yi a-xir çö-lə

meh-ri-ba-nım əm-mə Ha-ça-na ki-mi

xə-ra-bə o-la-caq mə-ka-nım əm-mə o-la-

caq mə-ka-nım əm-mə. Bu-xə-ra-bə iç-

rə-ə-şim tö-kü-lüb bu rən-ci zər-dən bə-li rəs-mi-dir

zə-ru-sim o-lu-çün xə-ra-bə yer-də.

The structure of the first novhe consists of repeated lines of 7-7 syllables: a b a b c b c b1. This novhe is built on the alternation of the fluid sections of the Rast mode and its Vilayeti subdivisions. The repetition of section b and the repetition of its last two lines as a refrain bring it closer to a song form. This feature is also present in the other two examples. The third novhe is particularly interesting in terms of performance style. Since the division of the verses is difficult, the melody is based on the division of the lines. Here, syllables are elongated, and the elongation of the syllables brings the novhe somewhat closer to a mugam performance. The novhe written in the Sol Segah mode has a small range, and the melody develops within the same intonation framework.

As mentioned earlier, instrumental music was also used in the Shebih performances. According to musicologist S.Seyidova, it can be noted that although instrumental musicians did not accompany the performance in Shebih, instrumental music was still used (Seyidova, 1979). This was particularly heard when the performers gathered on stage before the performance began, during battle scenes, and in tragic scenes. During the performance, percussion and wind instruments such as sinc, tabil, nagara, zurna, ney, balaban, etc., were typically used. Even battle scenes were accompanied by heroic, military-style folk music, such as cengi.

As we noted earlier, the Shebih, as a theatrical genre, has been phased out in the present day. However, the musical pieces that were part of it and kept the art form alive are still preserved in the folk memory today. Particularly in Nakhchivan, the tradition of singing novhe and mersiye (mourning songs) is widespread. These are usually transcribed by women into notebooks and recited during mourning and Meherremlik ceremonies with a special declamation or recitative style, expressing sorrow, grief, and mourning. The reason this genre has survived to the present day is that although it is written with religious texts, its music is a form of folk musical creativity.

### 3.5. Garavelli Performances

One type of folk dramatic performance was created by the Garavelli group. "Garavelli" ("garabelli", "gara camaat") refers to a performance that mocks those whose sins are known, revealing events that occur in life. Through this type of performance, the people fought against the vices of the existing environment, expressing their innermost thoughts, protests, hatred, joy, and sorrow. Garavelli performances were shown during all seasons of the year, on holidays, ceremonial days, in town squares, and in caravansaries. Particularly, folk jokes, satirical household tales, and romantic epics played a central role in the performances. These performances were essentially syncretic, as they combined music, dance, song, word, and lyrical segments with criticism in a unified manner. Examples of Garavelli performances include "Ogru molla" (The Thieving Priest), "Gudurgan akhund" (The Mad Cleric), "Hammal ve khanim" (The Porter and the Lady), "Hekim" (The Doctor), "Adakhlilar" (The Bridegroom and the Bride), "Kosa ve gelin" (The Clown and the Bride), "Bic noker" (The Clever Servant), and others. The main characters in Garavelli performances were the clown and the bald man, with other participants including blindfolded performers, ashiq (folk poet-musicians), khanende (traditional singer), telkhek (jester), and others. Particularly, the ashiq played a leading role in the performance, telling epics or stories and playing the saz (a traditional string instrument). The ensemble of musicians truly played a significant role in accompanying the performance. Led by the vocalist known as El Ashigi (Folk Ashig), the ensemble would frequently change melodies throughout the play by the dramatic and psychological shifts of the epic. They would transition from one song to another, accompanying the performance of the masked characters with various musical pieces. In addition to the "Ustadnameh", the well-known piece "Gozelleme" was also performed here. During the performance, songs were sung by khanendes (singers) under the accompaniment of tebil (drum), balaban (a wind instrument), zurna (a double-reed instrument), and nagara (drum), and lively dances were performed.

### 3.6. Puppet Theater Performances

One of the oldest forms of art and the most interesting branches of folk theater is puppet theater. Traditional, national forms of puppet theater were among the most widely spread types of performances among the Azerbaijani people. Many types of puppet theater have nonverbal characters. These performances were presented with the continuous accompaniment of music, using miming and hand and arm movements.

Puppet theater performances were played during large folk festivals, holidays, and also during weddings and celebrations. Games such as "Tapdig choban" (The Shepherd Tapdig), "Kaftar kosa" (The Clown and the Cat), "Tenbel gardash" (The Lazy Brother), and "Maral oyunu" (The Deer Game) were among the most popular games among the people (Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*The Deer Game Puppet Show (Kukla tamaşaları Maral oyunu, n.d.)*



In these performances, songs and tasnifs were played with the accompaniment of musical instruments such as saz, kaman, tabla, ganun, and gosha nagara. A puppet theater performance unique to Azerbaijan and widely spread in this region was the "Kilimarası" puppet show. This performance is played with puppets



made from clay. The performer lies on their back on a carpet while two assistants lift the edges of the carpet, making it function as a kind of curtain, hiding the performer from the audience. Three puppets are used in the game. This performance, which is based on family and domestic themes, has one puppet representing a woman, another representing a man, and a third representing the woman's lover. Two of the puppets are worn on the hands, while the third is worn on the knee. In the "Kilimarasi" puppet show, there is no dialogue, and it is performed with the accompaniment of music. In addition to the comical movements of the puppets, the lively and light music plays a significant role in making the performance humorous. The most frequently used musical numbers in the show are the "Heyvagulu" and "Semenderi" folk dance tunes played by the zurna player. The "Heyvagulu" folk dance tune, written by the famous zurna player Eli Kerimov in the Segah mode, is moderate in tempo and smooth and flowing in melody.

**Figure 8**

*"Heyvagulu" Folk Dance (Behmenli, 2002)*



A two-part melody (a-a1 b-b1) is highly suitable for puppet theater performances. The zurna player, while performing this tune, seems to "converse" with the puppets, and the music effectively reflects the movements of the puppets. The puppets move slowly and gradually in time with the music, walking from side to side, up and down. The second part of the melody begins in a higher octave, and the sudden sharp sound of the zurna corresponds to the appearance of new puppet movements. From this, we can conclude that in puppet theater performances, it is not just any melody that should be used but rather musical examples that fit the stage conditions and artistic requirements. The "Kilimarasi" puppet show is still performed and preserved today in the Kelbajar region of Azerbaijan.

### 3.7. Tightrope Walker Performances

A popular form of mass public entertainment, typically performed during weddings and holiday celebrations, includes tightrope walking and strength performances. Tightrope walker shows were one of the most widespread folk street performances in Azerbaijan until the early 20th century. A suitable location would be selected for the performance. Two or three wooden beams were joined to construct upright poles. A rope was tied to the forked tops of these poles, with both ends firmly embedded into the ground and reinforced with stones and soil. The tightrope walker, holding a long balancing pole with small bags filled with earth attached to its ends for resistance, would ascend the rope and prepare to demonstrate his performance, skill, and dexterity.

Two people participated in the performance. One of them was the tightrope walker, who performed complex and dangerous movements on the rope in sync with the rhythm of the zurna's tune. The walker would initially move slowly and steadily along the rope and later perform agile dances with mastery. The other participant was the tightrope walker's assistant, known as "Kechapapag" (a nickname for the helper), who would mimic the walker's movements below and entertain the audience.

It is also important to note that these performances had a significant influence on the development of circus arts. Tightrope walker performances were always accompanied by music, and each performance had its own unique musical style. In particular, dance tunes like "Gaytagi," "Kendirhengi," and "Tek chalma" were performed by zurna and balaban, making the show highly entertaining.

Today, these performances are still practiced in many regions of Azerbaijan, especially during the Novruz festival. The number of acts performed on the tightrope has significantly increased. These include acts such as riding a bicycle on a rope, climbing a ladder, sitting on a stool, and more.

### 3.8. Zorkhana Performances

In Zorkhana performances, wrestlers demonstrate their strength and power with the accompaniment of zurna, dumbul (a type of drum), and daf (frame drum). The word "Zor" means "strength," and "khana" means "place," referring to a designated space for such performances. Special buildings were constructed for these games, and even today, some ancient locations where Zorkhana events were held still exist. Notable examples include the Zorkhana in the Old City of Baku, dating back to the 15th century, and the 17th-century Qeyseriyye monument in Ordubad.

The zorkhana performances, which are accompanied by music, begin with slow, heavy movements and gradually speed up. The music for these performances typically includes battle-like tunes such as Cengi, Misri, Pehlevani, and Koroğlunun Qaytarması (The Return of Koroğlu). In modern times, Zorkhana wrestling has evolved into a popular national sport in Azerbaijan.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The music heard in folk theater is closely connected with various types of folk music. This is not a coincidence, ideologically speaking. The songs, tasnif (a type of folk vocal genre), and mugam (traditional music) sung by the people are a manifestation of the musical thinking of the Azerbaijani people themselves. The types of music used in folk theater also fall within this framework. In performances, music plays an essential role in creating the special mood, atmosphere, and meaning of the drama, as well as in setting the stage for the action. It is responsible for sensitively revealing the essence and character of the drama. Furthermore, the interaction between the theater, the performance environment, and the music plays a significant role in shaping the musical elements, often influencing the music's form and expression in a way that aligns with the needs of the performance. Through this research, it becomes clear that:

- The "Khan-khan" game performance, organized during the Novruz holiday, is an ancient ritual that is still preserved today in the Ordubad region of Nakhchivan.
- In the "Khan-khan" performance, widely popular music numbers such as the "Cengi" dance and the "Kocheri" yalli are performed, along with folk songs like "Sari Gelin" and "Azerbaijan Marali."
- In Shebih performances, the music works in harmony with the words and can be regarded as a powerful psychological tool of expression, playing a major role in the impact of the performance.
- Stage movement in Shebih performances is relatively limited, and the tragic mood is primarily created through music, followed by decorations and costumes. The character of the music specifically gives these performances a unique harmony, transforming them into human or personal dramas.
- In the modern era, Shebih, as a theatrical genre, has disappeared.
- The Garavelli performances, once an important part of folk life, are no longer performed today. These performances used musical instruments like the tabil, balaban, zurna, and nagara, with singers performing songs and lively dances being executed.
- In puppet theater performances, music and stage movement are closely intertwined. Various lively songs were performed, and different melodies were played by ashigs (minstrels). The music created a cheerful mood, helping to convey the meaning of the performance.
- The Kendirbaz performances, which have historically held a special place in folk life, featured significant use of music. In these performances, dance melodies such as Gaytagi, Kendirhengi, and Tek Chalma were performed with the accompaniment of zurna and balaban. These performances, which greatly influenced the development of circus arts, remain popular today, especially during the Novruz holiday in various regions of Azerbaijan.
- In Zorkhana performances, the most frequently used tunes were Cengi, Misri, Pehlevani, and Koroghlu, which all instilled a sense of chivalric spirit.

### **Ethical approval**

This study does not require ethics committee approval as it does not involve human, animal or sensitive data.

### **Author contribution**

Study conception and design: RH, GM; data collection: IM, AG; analysis and interpretation of results: RH, GM; draft manuscript preparation: IM, GM. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the article.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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