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The Pan-Eastern Unity of Form and Content in Azerbaijani Mugham Performance

Azerbaycan Muğam İcrasında Form ve İçeriğin Pan-Doğu Birliği

Abstract

This study examines the philosophical and artistic dimensions of mugham—maqam art as one of the shared cultural expressions of the Near and Middle East. It argues that Azerbaijani mughams, as an integral part of this broader tradition, are shaped by a fundamental coherence between form and content. Despite the passage of centuries, mugham has maintained its artistic vitality and continues to be transmitted as a living tradition. At the same time, in parallel with developments observed in other post-Soviet contexts, the philosophical dimension of mugham in Azerbaijan—particularly its association with esoteric knowledge and its sacral character—has gradually lost its former centrality. The non-linear organization of musical material and the role of poetic text as a vehicle of philosophical and ideological expression therefore call for renewed scholarly attention. In this context, the article suggests that future research should aim at a more nuanced and methodologically grounded understanding of the semantic and conceptual depth of Azerbaijani mughams. Such an approach would also contribute to a more informed and internally coherent contemporary performance practice.

Keywords: Eastern mughams, Azerbaijani mugham, Sufi philosophy, poetic text, esoteric knowledge

Öz

Bu çalışma, Yakın ve Orta Doğu'nun ortak kültürel ifade biçimlerinden biri olan muğam—makam sanatının felsefi ve sanatsal boyutlarını ele almaktadır. Azerbaycan muğamlarının, bu geniş geleneğin ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak form ile içerik arasındaki güçlü uyum temelinde şekillendiği ileri sürülmektedir. Aradan geçen yüzyıllara rağmen muğam, sanatsal canlılığını korumuş ve yaşayan bir gelenek olarak varlığını sürdürmüştür. Bununla birlikte, diğer post-Sovyet toplumlarda gözlemlenen dönüşümlere paralel biçimde, Azerbaycan'da muğamın felsefi boyutu—özellikle ezoterik bilgiyle ilişkisi ve sakral niteliği—zamanla önceki belirleyici konumunu kısmen yitirmiştir. Müzikal yapının doğrusal olmayan örgütlenişi ile şiirsel metnin düşünsel ve ideolojik bir ifade aracı olarak üstlendiği rol, bu nedenle yeniden ve daha dikkatli biçimde ele alınmayı gerektirmektedir. Bu

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çerçeve de çalışma, Azerbaycan muğamlarının anlamsal ve kavramsal derinliğinin daha incelikli ve yöntemsel olarak temellendirilmiş bir yaklaşımla değerlendirilmesi gerektiğini vurgulamaktadır. Böyle bir yaklaşımın, çağdaş icra pratiğinin daha bilinçli ve içsel olarak tutarlı bir zemine oturmasına da katkı sağlayacağı düşünülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Doğu muğamları, Azerbaycan muğamı, tasavvuf felsefesi, şiirsel metin, ezoterik bilgi*

Introduction

This article explores the philosophical, aesthetic, and structural dimensions of Azerbaijani mugham within the broader context of Eastern mugham traditions. Mugham–maqam art, as one of the most significant cultural phenomena of the Near and Middle East, embodies a complex synthesis of music, poetry, and metaphysical reflection. Azerbaijani mugham, while deeply rooted in national identity, simultaneously reflects a wider pan-Eastern system of artistic and philosophical values.

The study focuses on the unity of form and content as a fundamental principle of mugham performance. It examines how musical structure, poetic expression, and philosophical meaning interact within a coherent artistic system. In doing so, the internal logic of mugham is approached not merely as a musical sequence but as an integrated expressive continuum shaped by historically accumulated aesthetic norms.

Particular attention is given to the transformation of mugham in modern Azerbaijan, especially the gradual weakening of its esoteric, sacral, and philosophical dimensions under the impact of historical and socio-political processes. This shift is considered in relation to broader changes in performance practice, audience perception, and institutional frameworks that have influenced the transmission of tradition.

By addressing both theoretical and performance-related issues, this article seeks to deepen the understanding of mugham as a multidimensional artistic and intellectual phenomenon and to underscore the necessity of re-evaluating its position within contemporary cultural and scholarly discourse.

Eastern Mugham: Between Universality and National Identity

The principal qualities of the art of mugham are monumentality and dynamic development. These qualities encapsulate the ancient history and culture of the entire East. The concept of Eastern mugham, viewed from the perspectives of its formation, its unified existence in the form of dastgah or dastgah-like structures—including individual sections and gushehs—as well as from the standpoint of precise rhythmic meters and non-metric metrorhythmic organization, undoubtedly possesses a wide range of generalized characteristics common to all peoples of the Near and Middle East who are bearers of the mugham tradition. These characteristics encompass musical material, poetic content and form, as well as performance practices.

From a theoretical perspective, however, Eastern mugham traditions—despite their profound historical divergences—are classified according to the national musical and poetic features of each people. In other words, each nation has created its own mugham. This very process of creation appears conceptually complex and requires careful interpretation. Inevitably, one is compelled to ask how a particular community within a given geographical space was able to develop an art form such as mugham, characterized by highly defined structural parameters and a relatively conservative framework. More broadly, the explanatory limits of the concept of “folk creativity” must be approached with analytical caution, as it does not fully account for the systemic and historically layered nature of mugham formation.

Nevertheless, although mugham is a profoundly national and folk-based art form, it simultaneously retains a universal and Eastern character. “Easternness” itself constitutes a distinct aesthetic and epistemological category which, similar to certain modes of existence in science and philosophy, functions as a foundational determinant in shaping mugham art. Within this process of “Easternization,” however, specific contents and forms emerge that are unique to each people, reflecting particular cultural and mental creative frameworks. While the broader cultural matrix is Eastern, the dominant qualities of this “East” vary depending on historical and regional configurations.

This issue can be addressed through the long-term characteristics shaped by historical, geographical, and national formation processes, which reveal mugham as both a pan-Eastern and a specifically national artistic phenomenon. This duality manifests through the interaction of general and particular features. The general feature lies in the free yet structurally conservative nature of mugham, which distinguishes it from other artistic systems and resists full assimilation into alternative formal frameworks. This structural logic constitutes one of the defining attributes of the aforementioned “Easternness.” At the same time, even this general feature acquires a distinct configuration within each national context, illustrating the dialectical unity of universality and particularity.

Another defining characteristic lies in the specificity inherent to each national manifestation of mugham. This specificity is more adequately explained through historically shaped national and geographical values rather than through abstract universal categories. Such values encompass domains including folklore, ethnography, archaeology, and history, each contributing to the articulation of culturally specific features. Over time, ethno-regional identity transforms both the representation and, to some extent, the content of universal cultural elements, effectively reconfiguring universality within a national framework. Nevertheless, despite this transformation, these values retain their universal essence. A critical point here is that universal values are not attributable to a single national author; rather, their very inclusion within a broader pan-Eastern cultural system depends on their transnational

and supra-ethnic character. In this sense, universality is associated with scale, monumentality, and conceptual openness, whereas conservatism, in this context, is understood as a category linked to national-ethnic and regional boundaries.

As an illustrative example, debates have emerged at the level of international cultural institutions, particularly UNESCO, among several countries—including Afghanistan, Turkey, and Iran—regarding the cultural attribution of the prominent poet Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi. Each perspective draws on historically grounded arguments: his birth in Balkh (present-day Afghanistan), his life and burial in Konya (modern-day Turkey), and the Persian language of his literary works, which situates him within the broader Iranian cultural sphere. While each claim holds historical validity, none is sufficient in isolation. The intellectual and artistic legacy of figures such as Rumi transcends national and ethnic boundaries, positioning them within a universal and pan-Eastern cultural continuum—an interpretative framework that parallels the nature of mugham art itself.

Methodological and Philosophical Foundations of Mugham

The purpose underlying these explanations is to demonstrate that it is neither possible nor methodologically sound to conceptualize or analyze Azerbaijani mughams separately from the broader Eastern mugham tradition. At the same time, it must be noted that the notion of “*Easternness*” invoked here should not remain merely a historical concept, as such an approach would constitute a significant methodological limitation. From a scientific-theoretical standpoint, treating Azerbaijani mugham solely as a historical fragment of a once-existing pan-Eastern mugham unity offers limited analytical value. One may legitimately ask: where is this unity of pan-Eastern mugham performance today? Such a phenomenon no longer exists in contemporary reality. Attempting to substantiate this claim exclusively through historical sources or medieval music-theoretical treatises is methodologically insufficient. More specifically, that notion of unity—that magnificent “*palace of mugham*”—no longer exists not only in Azerbaijan, but anywhere in today’s Near and Middle East; it has become a matter of historical reconstruction rather than lived artistic reality.

Moreover, theoretical methodologies—particularly in music theory—cannot be implemented solely through historical approaches. Under these circumstances, the question arises: how can Azerbaijani mugham art, having undergone extensive nationalization (as has occurred among other Eastern peoples), be analyzed within a pan-Eastern framework, and how can it be explained as both a scientific-theoretical and philosophical component of Eastern mugham aesthetics?

It is an established fact that the art of mugham is not a purely national-ethnic phenomenon. Furthermore, the assertion that this art form belongs exclusively to a particular people and subsequently spread throughout the East from that specific origin lacks sufficient scientific grounding.

An art form as structurally complex and philosophically profound as mugham cannot be adequately interpreted within the confines of a single national-mental value system. Such an analysis requires engagement with the broader philosophical framework of the East, including the intricate relationship between human and metaphysical dimensions, as well as its esoteric intellectual traditions. As noted, *“The high semiotic density characteristic of medieval Islamic culture leads to the conclusion that a complete deciphering of the texts of this period, including musical treatises, is impossible, and demonstrates that musical treatises can be studied only through traditional historical methods”* (Babayeva-Rashidova, 2017, p. 15).

Music and poetry may be understood as primary vehicles through which this non-linear and conceptually layered philosophical system is articulated and preserved. The Azerbaijani people, shaped by a long and continuous historical formation, belong to the broader cultural sphere of the East. This *“Easternness”* represents a holistic construct encompassing universal, religious, and philosophical dimensions. Accordingly, Azerbaijani mughams should be examined within the framework of the contemporary East—an East that maintains continuity with its historical foundations while adapting to modern cultural conditions. Mugham, as an artistic system, cannot be separated from its philosophical and historical structure without losing its essential identity.

As emphasized in the literature, *“Mugham art as a whole was created, developed, and shaped in accordance with the shared spiritual essence of Eastern peoples. In this process, the contribution of the Azerbaijani people is particularly significant. Ə. Bədəlbəyli notes that within the national classical music traditions of the peoples of the Near and Middle East there exist ninety-five mugham sections and gushehs. Of these, eighteen are performed in Morocco, seventeen in Tunisia, while others are found in Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Uzbekistan, and other Eastern countries. Mughams sound distinctively in the language of each people. There are mughams whose geographical range extends far beyond the borders of our country, encompassing a vast territory. Such mughams are as native to us as they are to other peoples. Examples include ‘Rast,’ ‘Nava,’ ‘Ushshaq,’ ‘Segah,’ ‘Hijaz,’ and others”* (Nəcəfzadə & Məmmədəliyev, 2017, p. 42).

As this analytical perspective demonstrates, it is not feasible to consider Azerbaijani mugham independently from the broader system of musical, philosophical, literary, ethical, and aesthetic values of the East. Nevertheless, in certain strands of musicological discourse, the concept of mugham has occasionally been approached from a narrowly defined perspective. It is therefore necessary to reiterate that the monumentality and depth of mugham art are not determined solely by its antiquity or by its association with a particular nation.

The historically transmitted characteristics of mugham performance—preserved through oral tradition yet governed by a precise internal system—indicate that attributing its origins to vaguely defined archaic epochs with indistinct philosophical and aesthetic frameworks is methodologically problematic. More precisely, within such early and insufficiently structured worldviews, it would have been difficult for a form of art as systematized and conceptually refined as mugham to emerge in its known form. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that contemporary dastgah-based mugham performance—particularly in Azerbaijan and Iran—does not fully correspond to medieval theoretical descriptions. This discrepancy reflects broader transformations observed throughout the Near and Middle East, where current performance practices differ significantly even from those of a century ago.

The Unity of Form and Content in Azerbaijani Mugham

Under such circumstances, why does a persistent tendency remain to situate mugham art—especially in its fully developed dastgah form—within excessively remote historical periods? It appears that the underlying motivation behind such interpretations is the attempt to associate mugham with pre-Islamic epochs. However, such approaches often overlook the fact that Islam cannot be reduced merely to a religious system, nor can Islamic culture be equated with Arab culture. As discussed previously, with the advent of Islam, the aesthetic system of the East underwent a process of qualitative transformation grounded in its own internal cultural logic. Consequently, assertions claiming that *“mugham art belongs exclusively to the Azerbaijani people and spread to the entire world from here”* lack sufficient historical and theoretical substantiation.

As emphasized, neither the antiquity of mugham nor its association with a specific nation determines its essential nature. The conceptual nucleus underlying mugham—operating at its structural, expressive, and semantic levels—is not defined by history or nationality, but rather by philosophical depth, theoretical multiplicity, and internally coherent logical development. These dimensions cannot be adequately explained through linear historical chronology or ethnic attribution alone.

In examining Azerbaijani mugham performance within a pan-Eastern framework, two principal analytical directions emerge: form and content, and the unity between them. The central issue here is precisely this notion of unity. It can be approached from two interrelated perspectives. The first concerns the internal unity of Azerbaijani mughams in terms of both form and content; the second concerns the broader significance of this unity within the pan-Eastern mugham system. The first dimension—internal unity—is inherently complex and multidimensional. It encompasses, above all, the logical progression embedded within mugham structures, the organic interrelation between poetic

text and musical expression, and the principle of dynamic development that governs performance practice.

From the standpoint of form and content, Azerbaijani mughams represent an artistic domain in which these two categories do not exist in opposition; rather, they function in a complementary and mutually generative relationship. Each dimension stimulates and transforms the other, producing a unified expressive system. By “form,” one refers to the genre-specific characteristics of both text and music, including technical structure, modal organization, scale, tempo, and related parameters. The formal dimension ensures precision, coherence, and structural integrity, establishing mugham as a measured and purposeful musical-literary genre. This remains true despite the presence of improvisational elements, emotional intensification, states of ecstasy, and spontaneously generated musical passages—features that are integral to Eastern mugham traditions.

The principal components of form include external markers, perceptible structural cues, and the determinative influence these elements exert on the overall organization of the work. As an artistic practice, mugham necessarily incorporates formal parameters and adheres to the principles associated with formal structuring. The second essential component of internal unity is content. It is precisely the inseparable relationship between form and content that allows mugham performance to be understood as a complete and internally coherent artistic phenomenon.

Performance Practice and Contemporary Challenges

Thus, it may be observed that Azerbaijani mughams, like other forms of art, have sustained their centuries-long artistic continuity through adherence to the principles governing this unity. Mugham, as an aesthetic phenomenon, emerges from the internal and external synthesis of form and content. The poetic meters (*bahr*), the *taf'ila* structures of the ghazal genre, and the declamatory features inherited from classical divan literature—together with their development within musical material—are distinctly embodied in Azerbaijani mugham practice.

When considering the content-related dimensions of mugham, however, the issue acquires greater complexity. The thematic scope is so extensive and flexible that certain implicit or explicit tensions between form and content may arise. While the formal system of mugham is sufficiently refined to absorb such tensions through performance experience and tradition, the contradiction in question does not stem from the art form itself, but rather from its execution. More precisely, it is linked to the performer's intellectual horizon, philosophical depth, and artistic responsibility.

A recurring issue, particularly in Azerbaijani performance practice, illustrates this point. It is often observed that a sorrowful, predominantly *irfani* (gnostic) ghazal is followed by a light, rhythmically simplified, and conceptually less coherent *tasnif* or *reng*. Such transitions disrupt aesthetic

continuity and weaken the internal logic of performance. Comparable inconsistencies are less frequently encountered in other Eastern mugham traditions, especially in relation to performer interpretation.

This incongruity may be attributed to a deficiency not in technical skill, but in what may be termed *mugham consciousness*—that is, an integrated aesthetic and philosophical awareness. The historical roots of this tendency are relatively recent. Over the past century, the gradual detachment of Azerbaijani performers from the broader Eastern mugham milieu, combined with socio-cultural transformations initiated in the early twentieth century, has contributed to the emergence of such inconsistencies.

The abandonment of the Arabic script further distanced musicians and scholars from divan literature and the ghazal tradition, affecting not only formal comprehension but also conceptual depth. At the same time, the role of mugham performers shifted, increasingly oriented toward stage performance and public presentation rather than the transmission of philosophical and ethical content. In contrast, in other Eastern traditions, the continuity of ethical, spiritual, and aesthetic principles has been preserved more consistently. As a result, certain theoretical gaps and discrepancies between form and content have become more visible in Azerbaijani mugham performance. These observations confirm that the unity of form and content in mugham is not incidental but fundamental, manifesting across Eastern traditions. The enduring spiritual-intellectual foundation of the East is reflected both in classical divan literature and in mugham, which functions as its philosophical and aesthetic counterpart.

The contributions of Azerbaijani cultural history to this broader context are substantial and have played a role in shaping its intellectual and artistic identity. In this regard, the theoretical legacy of figures such as Şafī al-Dīn Urmawī and ‘Abd al-Qādir Marāghī illustrates the deep-rooted and systematic character of mugham tradition. One of the central factors underlying this continuity is cultural commonality. As noted: “*When studying Azerbaijani cultural heritage within the context of shared Turkic values, it is necessary to emphasize that when cultural commonality is under discussion, priority must be given to the examination of geographical, historical, ethnographic, and religious-spiritual factors*” (Taghisoy, 2018, p. 127).

Finally, the unity of form and content must also be considered within the broader pan-Eastern mugham framework. This corresponds to the dimension of external unity. The general characteristics of Eastern mugham performance are multifaceted, encompassing both formal correspondences—such as the alignment of musical structure with poetic meter—and content-related aspects, particularly the *irfani* essence present across regions such as Central Asia, Iran, and Azerbaijan. Importantly, the

philosophical weight of mugham is not confined to meaning alone; it is also embedded within its theoretical structure. The conceptual frameworks developed in Islamic philosophy—particularly within Sufism—have exerted a significant influence on the organization and development of mugham performance, contributing to its status as an integral component of Eastern intellectual and artistic tradition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Azerbaijani mugham emerges as a multifaceted artistic phenomenon shaped by the inseparable unity of form and content, as well as by its deep connection to the broader philosophical and cultural traditions of the East. While it has undergone significant transformations under historical, social, and political conditions, its essential nature remains grounded in a complex synthesis of musical structure, poetic expression, and metaphysical meaning. The analysis demonstrates that mugham cannot be adequately understood within a purely national framework, nor can its origins and development be reduced to simplified historical narratives. Rather, it should be approached as part of a broader pan-Eastern system of thought in which universality and particularity coexist in a dynamic and dialectical relationship.

At the same time, contemporary performance practice reveals certain tensions, particularly in the gradual weakening of the philosophical and aesthetic coherence that once constituted a defining characteristic of mugham. Addressing these challenges requires not only technical proficiency but also a sustained engagement with the intellectual and spiritual foundations of the tradition.

Ultimately, the future of Azerbaijani mugham depends on the capacity of both scholars and performers to rearticulate and reinterpret its semantic depth, thereby ensuring that this historically rooted yet continuously evolving art form remains an active and meaningful expression of Eastern cultural and philosophical identity.

Author Contributions

The author is solely responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, analysis, and writing of the study.

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