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## **A REFLECTION ON THE PERSONALITY AND EARLY WORKS OF HAJIBEYLI WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF HIS SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES**

**Abstract.** This study explores the early works of Uzeyir Hajibeyli and his publicly expressed views, situating them within the socio-cultural realities that shaped Azerbaijan prior to and immediately following the establishment of Soviet power. The research also examines the interplay between Hajibeyli's creative endeavours and the prevailing cultural doctrines, and the impact of Soviet cultural policies. Additionally, it offers new insights into his contributions to Azerbaijani culture, analysed through the lens of moral standards and ethical considerations that influenced his artistic and personal choices.

**Key words:** Uzeyir Hajibeyli, mugham opera, Soviet cultural doctrine, Azerbaijani traditional musical vocabulary, Eurocentric trends.

**Introduction.** Much has been written and discussed regarding Uzeyir Hajibeyli in Azerbaijani public discourse and musicological studies. In this article, I aim to present the findings of my own reflections on the aesthetics of his early mugham operas, examining their connection to the prominent social ideas of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Additionally, I analyze his socio-cultural views and principles that enabled him – an Azerbaijani aristocrat – to collaborate with Soviet authorities. Finally, I explore his contributions to Azerbaijani culture through the prism of specific moral standards and ethical considerations.

Uzeyir Hajibeyli was only 23 years old when fame came to him. His first opera, «Leyli and Majnun,» though essentially an amateur work, brought him

initial recognition within Azerbaijan and subsequently across the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Iran. What was it about this opera and its novice author that made them so widely popular?

**The interpretation of the main material.** Well, first of all, «Leyli and Majnun» was a talented work of a talented composer, whether professional or amateur. Second, the idea of using the genre of European opera in such a way, i.e., merging it with mugham, was new and original. Lastly, the cultural and artistic trend embodied in this opera – namely, the synthesis or convergence of national and European artistic traditions—met the socio-cultural expectations of a significant segment of the national audience, not only in Azerbaijan but also beyond. This trend gained relevance in countries where European musical traditions were gradually incorporated into local musical cultures, raising questions of their cultural compatibility. Importantly, Hajibeyli's early works, most notably his opera “Leyli and Majnun”, served as a model for the first operatic works of this kind in Iran (“Rastakhize Selatyn-e-Iran”, 1916), Tajikistan (“The Uprising of Bose”, 1939; “Leyli and Majnun”, 1944), and Uzbekistan (“Leyli and Majnun”, 1940).

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by the prominence of Eurocentric trends in global culture; their influence on the local musical cultures of Asia was, in many ways, detrimental, as they engendered stylistic inconsistencies within indigenous cultural languages. In Azerbaijan, from the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, two fundamentally different cultural and artistic traditions coexisted with minimal interaction, thereby fragmenting the cultural unity of society. The author has previously examined the phenomenon of cultural bilingualism that developed in Azerbaijan at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [2, 3, 4]. «This division became particularly pronounced later, in the 1920s, when the clash of different social groups over the path of cultural development reached its peak and spilled into the well-known debates in Azerbaijani newspapers. Hajibeyli became a focal point in these discussions: some critics reproached him for a perceived lack of radicalism in his Eurocentric tendencies, while others accused him of insufficient conservatism toward national culture» [4, p. 78]. However, this ideological confrontation emerged much later. In 1908, when “Leyli and Majnun” was first staged, Azerbaijani society, having experienced a period of cultural coexistence, was searching for a «third way,» although its precise artistic form was not yet fully conceptualized. Leyli and Majnun» was the first to show this

option. Matthew O'Brien articulates the role of this opera in the global music culture this way: "Leyli and Majnun was not only the first opera by an Azeri composer, but also the Islamic world's first opera (...) It was (...) the first opera that attempted to incorporate the ideals of Western opera with traditional Eastern ways of music making" [7, pp. 212-213], or, taking it more precisely, to incorporate Azerbaijani traditional music vocabulary with European musical genre and form. The opera's widespread success with contemporary audiences attested to the acceptance and adequacy of this artistic synthesis. "Leyli and Majnun" actually pioneered an entirely new aesthetic concept in global music – the idea of synthesizing Eastern and Western musical traditions into a cohesive artistic expression.

However, from another perspective, "Leyli and Majnun" can be viewed as a grand Dastgah<sup>1</sup> with its traditional structure. For instance, the opera's introduction can be likened to the *Deramed* and *Berdasht*—the introductory segments of the Dastgah – while the mugham episodes within the opera correspond to the mugham sections (sho'be) of the Dastgah, which guide the logical progression and development of the "plot" within the modal framework. Ultimately, the dramaturgy of the opera mirrors the compositional logic of Azerbaijani dastgah, with its rising emotional tension reaching its culmination at the end of the work. Essentially, the operatic form here functions as a stage adaptation of the Dastgah, a concept that is uncommon for mugham – primarily because mugham, by its nature, is not a theatrical genre. Mugham is better described as an art of musical meditation, possessing its own emotional rhythm and dynamics. It can be argued that the mugham opera transferred the art of mugham from its original chamber genre to the masses, thereby transforming it from the esoteric "art for the initiated" to the exoteric "art for everyone." These artistic outcomes were unlikely to have been part of Hajibeyli's original conception; rather, they surpassed his initial intentions. Between an artist's conscious creative intentions and the final work of art often lies a vast domain of unconscious impulses, urges, and influences.

After "Leyli and Majnun", Hajibeyli composed several additional mugham operas. The last of these, "Harun and Leyla" (1915), was left unfinished, and

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1 Dastgah is one of the big forms of Azerbaijani traditional classical music. It can be described as a kind of musical suite, a music cycle consisting of a few various mughams. Dastgah was historically formed as a multi-genre and multi-modal composition [5, pp. 37-38].

he never revisited the mugham opera form thereafter. It appears that this genre had exhausted its artistic possibilities for him. I guess, he did not want to mark time, but he may not have been ready in artistic sense to move forward toward a full-fledged European opera.

It is known that Hajibeyli began working on “Koroğlu”, his final completed opera and a masterpiece, only in 1932. Between 1915 and 1932, he did not compose any operas or other large-scale works. “Koroğlu” was completed in 1936 and staged the following year. It is difficult to believe that it took nearly twenty years for Hajibeyli to reach a level of artistic maturity suitable for a new phase of his creative development. He could have achieved this sooner if he had dedicated himself solely to composition.

Following the establishment of Soviet power in Azerbaijan in 1920, Hajibeyli was commissioned to head the building of «Soviet» culture in the country and approached this mission with full dedication. During the 1920s and 1930s, he played a pivotal role in creating a system of musical education: on his initiative and under his leadership, the Azerbaijan State Conservatory (1921) and the Turkic Music College (1922) were established. It was also on his initiative that the first mugham program was developed at the Turkic College of Music, which for the first time provided the opportunity for Azerbaijani traditional musicians – *khanendes* and instrumentalists – to receive a professional musical education. Hajibeyli also headed the formation of several important performing groups in Soviet Azerbaijan, including the first many-voiced Azerbaijani choir (1926), the Folk Instruments Orchestra (1931), and the State Symphony Orchestra (1938). Under his leadership, the first Decade of Azerbaijani Literature and Art was held in Moscow in 1938. These achievements represent only a portion of the extensive contributions he made to Azerbaijani culture during the 1920s and 1930s.

Whether or not Hajibeyli agreed with the Soviet regime, it had a certain concept of cultural development that, in many ways, aligned with his own socio-cultural ideas. The goals of Soviet cultural policies, particularly in their early stages, aimed to enlighten the population and democratize culture<sup>2</sup>. None of these objectives conflicted with Hajibeyli’s public views. The dissemination of musical literacy among Azerbaijani

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2 It would be appropriate here to recall such popular Soviet slogans of that time as “Culture to the masses!” or “Art belongs to the people.”

Turks, the opening of national music schools, introducing the masses to musical culture, and establishing a system of musical education in Azerbaijan – including professional training for traditional musicians – were all in harmony with Hajibeyli's understanding of socially necessary tasks in the cultural sphere. (4, 86) Matthew O'Brien in his 2004 article makes cautiously similar assumptions: "it is possible that Hajibeyov did not entirely disagree with the Bolshevik agenda. The final emancipation of Muslim women, a subject close to Hajibeyov's heart, had after all occurred in the early years of Soviet rule in Azerbaidzhan... Hajibeyov very astutely saw the opportunity to take advantage of the Soviet policy of bringing culture to the masses" [7, p. 219].

Another aspect of Soviet cultural development was the integration of Azerbaijani musical culture into the European development pathways. Hajibeyli, even before the Sovietization of Azerbaijan, was a proponent of this idea and actively promoted it through his journalism, dramaturgy, and musical compositions. In this context, Hajibeyli's article "Vəziffeyi-musiqiyyəmizə aid məsələlər" [The tasks of music education in Azerbaijan], written in 1921<sup>3</sup>, served as a kind of programmatic manifesto. In it, he emphasized the importance and even the necessity of Azerbaijanis studying European music [6]. For Hajibeyli, whose public views were shaped by social-democratic ideas of human freedom, social and cultural progress, and the enlightenment of the people, accepting the Soviet cultural construction program was not political hypocrisy, as in the 1920s it articulated similar democratic principles. However, by 1929–1930, the Soviet government's attitude towards culture had taken on new nuances. British researchers Frolova-Walker and Jonathan Walker refer to these years as "The Great Turning Point" ('Velikiy Perelom') in Soviet culture. They argue that "in Soviet historiography, 1929 is known as the year of the Great Turning Point, but Soviet music histories rarely mention the year specifically because there were no significant Party resolutions directly affecting musical life. Nevertheless, musicians at the time certainly felt the change" [8, p. 217]. From the 1930s onward, the Soviet political regime began to exert strict control over the arts and humanities, often pushing ideological dictatorship over creative freedom to the point of absurdity.

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3 The article was published in 1921 in two languages – in Azerbaijani and Russian.

**What was Hajibeyli's true attitude toward this dictatorship?** It is known that the Soviet cultural doctrine of the 1930s – 1940s was based on key ideological principles such as «ideological content, popular spirit, and partisanship in art.» Hajibeyli sincerely adhered to at least one of these principles – the demand for «folk spirit in art.» This was a natural and inherent aspect of his creative style and did not require any external coercion. However, the requirement of “ideological content in art” was more problematic for him. Hajibeyli belonged to the type of artist whose works consistently expressed some public or moral stance. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Azerbaijani society clearly perceived in his early mugham operas and even more in his musical comedies ideas about the freedom of Azerbaijani women—their right to love and to freely choose a partner («Leyli and Majnun,» «Arshin Mal Alan») – as well as his negative attitude toward religious or national intolerance («Asli and Kerem»).

However, Soviet ideologists demanded that a work of art not only be meaningful but also explicitly express certain prescribed meanings. For example, if a work addressed a pre-Soviet historical theme involving «the people and power,» it was expected that «power» would be depicted as the oppressor and «the people» as the victim. In Hajibeyli's opera “Koroglu”, the theme of opposition between the people and authority is, at first glance, interpreted in exactly this way, and this perspective has become entrenched in Soviet scholarship. Azerbaijani musicologist Leyla Abdullayeva believes that «analyzing the musical dramaturgy of “Koroqlu” allows for a new approach to the opera's concept. In Soviet musicology, it was defined by the theme of the struggle of the people for their freedom. Meanwhile, the intonational dramaturgy allows us to define the opera's theme as the ‘Phenomenon of popular revolt: a formula for success.’»<sup>4</sup> In another work, she also states that «a modern reading of operas requires, above all, a rejection of clichés that have become firmly rooted in both spectators' perception and musicology. This applies to “Koroqlu” like no other opera: created during the Stalinist era and intended to embody all the tenets of Soviet ideology, it has received a corresponding ideological interpretation from both music critics and directors. The struggle of the people, led by a fearless hero, against the oppressive khans – such is the plot, and no one

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4 This is a quote from her speech at a conference “From Ashiq Alasgar to Uzeyir Hajibeyli: The Cultural Codes of The Turkic World” (Baku, September 25-26, 2025)

is going to argue with that. But the other fact is that, as in any operatic masterpiece, this narrative framework merely served as a pretext for the creation of a highly artistic text, rich with hidden meanings and metaphors» [1, p. 6]. Abdullayeva finds the hidden meanings of the opera in its musical intonations and the dramaturgy they create, all of which have escaped attention behind the apparent ideological message. For instance, she notes that the same intonations, whose semantic meaning can be understood as «strength, power, will to victory,» appear equally in the musical images of both the people and the power, giving the theme of their eternal opposition a different subtext. Essentially, they appear as two equal forces with equal goals. Hajibeyli's vision of «ideological content in art» differs from Soviet doctrine, although, given the conditions of that time, it was not expressed openly. Finally, regarding the demand for «partisanship in art,» the most absurd and incompatible with the very nature of the creative process, it certainly could not have been sincerely supported by an artist of Hajibeyli's stature.

Reflecting on Hajibeyli's position within the Soviet cultural system, I am inclined to believe that his socio-cultural views could have generally allowed him to accept the concept of cultural construction promoted by the Soviet regime, or at least to accept what was healthy within it during the first decade of Soviet rule. Perhaps he would have preferred a bourgeois revolution to a proletarian one, but the proletarian state offered him the opportunity to take charge of the construction of a new Azerbaijani culture, an offer he did not want (or was unable?) to refuse. It did not bring Hajibeyli any particular benefits, aside from the somewhat risky proximity to the Soviet political elite and the role of the «patriarch» of Azerbaijani Soviet music, which typically drains an artist's creative energy. On the other side of the scale were twenty years of a creative biography spent not on art.

Twenty years is not a long period for the task of building a culture, but it is a significant span for an individual's creative biography. Such a sacrifice could not have been made for minor goals. Much has been written and said about Hajibeyli's contribution to Azerbaijani national culture, but if this contribution is considered from a moral perspective – as a measure of the artist's service to culture – Hajibeyli's personality stands out not only in terms of national culture but also in the broader context of world music history.

**Conclusion.** Hajibeyli's early works met the cultural expectations of the national audience in the first decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, the aesthetic concept they reflected was relevant to a number of Eastern countries. Hajibeyli was the first in world musical history to attempt to transcend traditional Eastern (specifically Azerbaijani) music beyond its usual cultural boundaries and to connect two musical worlds – East and West.

After the establishment of Soviet power in Azerbaijan (1920), Hajibeyli was compelled to collaborate with the new authorities. While he may not have inwardly agreed with the Soviet regime, this regime had a distinct concept of cultural construction, many of whose programmatic goals aligned with his own public and socio-cultural views.

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**Sənubər Bağirova (*Azərbaycan*)**

**ÜZEYİR HACIBƏYLİNİN ŞƏXSİYYƏTİ VƏ İLKİN  
YARADICILIĞI HAQQINDA ONUN SOSIAL-MƏDƏNİ  
BAXIŞLARI KONTEKSTİNDƏ DÜŞÜNCƏLƏR**

Məqalədə Hacıbəylinin erkən musiqi yaradıcılığı və onun ictimai baxışları Azərbaycanı sovet hakimiyyəti qurulana qədər və sonra inkişaf edən sosial-mədəni reallıqlar kontekstində araşdırılır. Bu, həm də mənəvi prinsipləri nöqtəyi-nəzərindən onun Azərbaycan mədəniyyətinə verdiyi töhfələrə yeni bir perspektiv təqdim edir.

**Açar sözlər:** Üzeyir Hacıbəyli, muğam operası, sovet mədəni doktrinası, Azərbaycan ənənəvi musiqisinin lüğəti, avrosentrik meyllər.

**Санубар Багирова (*Азербайджан*)**

**РАЗМЫШЛЕНИЯ О ЛИЧНОСТИ И РАННЕМ ТВОРЧЕСТВЕ  
УЗЕИРА ГАДЖИБЕЙЛИ В КОНТЕКСТЕ ЕГО  
ОБЩЕСТВЕННЫХ И КУЛЬТУРНЫХ ВЗГЛЯДОВ**

В статье рассматриваются раннее творчество и общественные взгляды Гаджибейли в контексте социально-культурных реалий, сложившихся в период до и после установления Советской власти в Азербайджане. В ней также предлагается некоторый новый взгляд на его вклад в азербайджанскую культуру сквозь призму моральных стандартов, как его моральный выбор.

**Ключевые слова:** Узеир Гаджибейли, мугамная опера, советская культурная доктрина, словарь азербайджанской традиционной музыки, европоцентризм.