

UOT 75

<https://doi.org/10.59849/2311-8482.2025.1.369>

ZARİF KARİMOVA\*

## “THE MUSICAL CULTURE OF AZERBAIJAN: TRADITIONS, INNOVATION, AND GLOBAL

*The article on composers and performers of Azerbaijan focuses on the rich musical heritage of the country, encompassing both classical and contemporary music. It examines the contributions of outstanding composers such as Uzeyir Hajibeyov, Fikret Amirov, and Arif Melikov, whose works have had a significant impact on the musical culture of Azerbaijan and beyond. The article also highlights renowned performers, including singers, instrumentalists, and conductors, who have made invaluable contributions to the popularization of national music. Additionally, the article explores the achievements of contemporary musicians in classical and folk music genres, as well as Azerbaijan's role in the international music scene.*

**Keywords:** Azerbaijani music, Uzeyir Hajibeyli, Gara Garayev, Arshin Mal Alan, symphonic mugham, jazz, traditions, innovations, Azerbaijani school, musical culture.

### Introduction:

Speaking about music, conveying its essence through words, and recreating its beauty and depth in the imagination is a challenging yet fascinating task. Azerbaijani musical culture has a history spanning millennia. Folk songs, dances, and the sound of national instruments reflect the country's rich heritage.

### Main content

However, Azerbaijani professional music began to take shape in the 20th century, thanks to the genius of Uzeyir Hajibeyli. By merging European traditions with national roots, he laid the foundation for the Azerbaijani school of composition. This marked a significant milestone as Azerbaijani music entered the global professional stage, with composers and performers achieving international acclaim.

Uzeyir Hajibeyli played a pivotal role in the establishment of Azerbaijani classical music. A world-renowned composer, an eminent musicologist, publicist, playwright, educator, and social activist, he is celebrated as the founder of modern Azerbaijani professional music and national opera. Hajibeyli established the first music school in Baku for Azerbaijani students—the Azerbaijan State Turkish Music School. From 1926, he taught music theory, harmony, and the fundamentals of Azerbaijani music at the Azerbaijan State Conservatory, where he also founded the first polyphonic choir.

One of his groundbreaking achievements was the opera *Leyli and Majnun*, which premiered on January 25, 1908. This was the first opera in the Middle East, inspired by Fizuli's poem. The production blended elements of classical opera—overtures, arias, and choruses—with Azerbaijani traditions, where mugham replaced traditional arias. Choral and orchestral scenes intertwined with folk music, creating a unique musical style. The premiere took place at Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev's theater in Baku. The role of Majnun was performed by Huseynqulu Sarabski, who earned the nickname “Majnun” thereafter. Finding a performer for Leyli proved challenging, as women at the time did not appear on stage. Initially, her role was sung by a young man with a beautiful voice, and later by Ahmed Agdamski, who became famous for such performances.

Another pinnacle of Hajibeyli's career was the opera *Koroghlu*, staged in 1937. Its plot is based on a 16th-century folk epic about rebellion. The music masterfully combines rich national traditions with modern forms. The lead role was performed by the legendary singer Bulbul, who brought profound artistic depth to the character.

Today, Uzeyir Hajibeyli's legacy continues to inspire new generations, preserving traditions and advancing Azerbaijani musical art. Hajibeyli achieved worldwide fame with his operetta *Arshin Mal Alan*. Its unique music and original storyline, addressing family and societal issues of the time, cap-

tivated audiences. The protagonist, in search of a bride, disguises himself as a fabric merchant and selects a girl from among his customers.

The operetta has been translated into numerous languages, including Russian, Ukrainian, Turkish, Persian, English, French, and Chinese, and has been staged in countries like the United States, Russia, Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, Greece, Poland, Egypt, India, and China, among others. In some places, it was performed over 100 times in a single season. A remarkable production took place in India in 1919, staged for the local audience with the participation of British prisoners of war.

*Arshin Mal Alan* has been adapted for the screen several times. The most famous version was filmed in 1945, dubbed into 86 languages, and shown in 136 countries.

Forty years after Uzeyir Hajibeyli introduced mugham-based musical and theatrical works, a new genre emerged in Azerbaijan that combined mugham with symphonic music—symphonic mugham. This genre was pioneered by the distinguished Azerbaijani composer Fikret Amirov, a successor to Hajibeyli's legacy. The symphony is the crown jewel of European music, while mugham represents the essence of Eastern music. Amirov masterfully preserved the philosophy, beauty, and elegance of mugham, transforming it into a unique symphonic genre. His symphonic mughams, such as *Kurd Ovshari* and *Shur*, gained international acclaim.

Previously, Eastern music might have seemed distant and exotic to European audiences, but symphonic mughams presented it in a familiar musical language—crafted within the frameworks of Western classical traditions—while maintaining its distinct identity. This innovative genre was widely discussed in European newspapers and performed on some of the continent's most prestigious stages. In the United States, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of the legendary conductor Leopold Stokowski, performed *Shur* and *Kurd Ovshari*. The concerts, held in cities like Houston, Texas, received widespread acclaim. Inspired by Amirov's success, Azerbaijani composers continued exploring this genre. Amirov himself composed *Gulistan Bayati-Shiraz*, while other composers like Niyazi and Khayyam Mirzazade contributed works such as *Rast* and *Mugamvari Symphony*, respectively.

Another trailblazing figure in Azerbaijani music was Gara Garayev, a composer who expanded the geographical reach of Azerbaijani national art. As a visionary innovator, Garayev created monumental works that harmoniously blended the ancient heritage of traditional Azerbaijani music with the most modern musical forms. His compositions reflect deep philosophical musings on life, humanity, and the passage of time, addressing profound ethical questions. Garayev's repertoire includes two string quartets, choral works, songs, romances, and pieces for piano and violin. He also composed music for renowned plays and films, including *Don Quixote*, *The Tale of the Caspian Oil Workers*, *Vietnam*, *Optimistic Tragedy*, *The Lesson of History*, *Two from the Same Block*, *The Conquerors of the Sea*, and *The Golden Echelon*.

Garayev's *Symphony No. 3* for chamber orchestra (1965), *Violin Concerto* (1967), and the musical *The Dashing Gascon* based on Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* marked significant milestones in his artistic journey. Alongside his creative endeavors, Garayev was deeply involved in Azerbaijan's musical life. He served as artistic director of the Baku Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra (1941–1942), head of the music sector at the Institute of Arts of the Academy of Sciences of the Azerbaijan SSR (1948–1949), and a professor at the Baku Conservatory, where he was rector from 1949 to 1952. A member of the USSR Composers' Union and chairman of its Azerbaijani branch, Garayev was elected to the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences in 1959 and awarded the title of People's Artist of the USSR the same year for his outstanding contributions.

Garayev's legacy lives on through his students, who include prominent Azerbaijani cultural figures such as his son Faraj Garayev, Rauf Hajiyev, Arif Melikov, Khayyam Mirzazade, Vasif Adigozalov, Tofiq Bakikhanov, Oktay Zulfugarov, Frangiz Alizadeh, and Polad Bulbuloglu.

Garayev's ballets, *Seven Beauties* and *The Path of Thunder*, cemented his place in music history. *Seven Beauties*, inspired by the legendary poet Nizami's work, became a global sensation due to its vibrant, colorful music, compelling storyline, and professional staging.

Garayev also explored the serial music genre, developed by Austrian composer Arnold Schoen-

berg, translating Schoenberg's works from German into Azerbaijani. As an individual with encyclopedic knowledge, Garayev was not only a phenomenal composer but also an exceptional educator and intellectual who left an indelible mark on Azerbaijani culture.

One of his most outstanding students was the globally renowned composer Arif Melikov. For over 55 years, Arif Melikov dedicated himself entirely to his culture, creating extraordinary works such as the ballets *Legend of Love*, *Two*, *The Tale of Two Hearts*, *Ali Baba* and the *Forty Thieves* and others. His prolific output also included eight symphonic compositions, cantatas, and vocal-symphonic poems inspired by the works of poets like Nazim Hikmet, Almaz Ildyrym, Tofiq Bayram, and Vaqif Samadoghlu. Additionally, he composed suites and pieces for traditional Azerbaijani instruments, showcasing his deep connection to his nation's musical heritage.

Melikov's creative versatility extended to the world of film and theater. He wrote music for 25 films. His scores enriched numerous theatrical productions, further underscoring the multifaceted nature of his artistry.

One of his most iconic works, the ballet *Legend of Love*, stands as a hallmark of world ballet. Melikov began composing this masterpiece in 1958 at the young age of 25 and completed it two years later. The libretto is based on a play by the celebrated Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, Farhad and Shirin, itself inspired by Nizami Ganjavi's classic Azerbaijani epic *Khosrow and Shirin*. The ballet premiered on March 23, 1961, at the Leningrad State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater (now the Mariinsky Theater) under the direction of the renowned Russian choreographer Yuri Grigorovich and designer Simon Virsaladze. Over the years, *Legend of Love* has been performed on the world's greatest stages, with leading dancers enthusiastically embracing its roles. For decades, the Mariinsky Theater opened its seasons with this ballet, cementing its legendary status.

#### The Evolution of Azerbaijani Music: Songs and Jazz

In the 1930s and 1940s, Azerbaijani music saw the emergence of talented songwriters such as Said Rustamov, Tofiq Quliyev, and Rauf Hajiev. Said Rustamov enriched the repertoire with timeless songs like *Alagöz*, *Gurban Adına*, *Gelmedin*, *Sürəyya*, and *Ohu Tar*. He also composed musical comedies, including *The Five-Manat Bride*, *The Crane*, and *The Chief's Wife*, which became staples of Azerbaijani theater.

Tofiq Quliyev, inspired by Azerbaijani folk music, European pop, and jazz traditions, composed enduring hits like *You Didn't Come*, *The Golden Ring*, *I've Become Happy*, *The Song of Baku*, and *Zibeyda*. These works became luminous examples of Azerbaijan's song culture, blending local and international influences.

During this same period, jazz began to carve out a niche in Azerbaijani music. In the late 1930s, Niyazi and Tofiq Quliyev founded the State Estrada Orchestra, performing not only classical jazz pieces but also their own compositions. By the 1950s and 1960s, interest in jazz had grown significantly despite political restrictions and anti-Western propaganda. Enthusiasts kept the genre alive, and saxophonist Parviz Rustambekov, often referred to as the "Soviet Benny Goodman," became a central figure. Rustambekov formed his own orchestra at the Krasny Vostok cinema, igniting further interest in jazz.

The true renaissance of Azerbaijani jazz emerged in the 1960s with support from luminaries such as Gara Garayev, Niyazi, Tofiq Quliyev, and Rauf Hajiev. Ensembles like *Gaya* and Rafik Babayev's quartet appeared on the scene, but it was Vagif Mustafazadeh who revolutionized the genre. Mustafazadeh pioneered a unique ethno-jazz style, blending the improvisational essence of Western jazz with the intricate traditions of Eastern music. His groundbreaking work created a universal musical language, resonating with audiences worldwide. Iconic ensembles like *Sevil* and *Mugham* further showcased the innovative face of Azerbaijani music, merging ancient traditions with contemporary forms to remarkable effect.

#### Modern Azerbaijani Composers: A Harmony of Tradition and Innovation

Azerbaijani music continues to evolve, blending its rich cultural heritage with innovative approaches to create a unique synthesis of sounds. Contemporary composers, such as Faraj Karaev, Franghiz Ali-Zadeh, Elnara Dadashova, Jeyhun and Vasif Allahverdiyevs, and Azer Dadashov, are

leading this creative transformation.

Faraj Karaev, the son of the legendary Gara Garayev, represents the avant-garde movement in Azerbaijani music. His compositions are marked by bold experimentation, where traditional Azerbaijani motifs intertwine with elements of minimalism and aleatoric techniques, creating thought-provoking musical landscapes.

Franghiz Ali-Zadeh has established her own unique style by combining the essence of mugham, Azerbaijan's traditional musical genre, with elements of contemporary classical music. Her works, ranging from chamber pieces to symphonies, reflect a profound connection to her cultural roots while exploring innovative forms of expression.

The younger generation of composers brings fresh perspectives to the Azerbaijani musical scene. Artists such as Turkar Gasimzadeh, Ayaz Gambarli, Roya Huseynova, and Pika Akhundova are pushing the boundaries of contemporary music, experimenting with genres and expanding the scope of Azerbaijani composition. Their works underscore the vibrancy of the Azerbaijani music school, which continues to captivate audiences both at home and abroad.

These composers are essential links in the chain of Azerbaijan's musical evolution, preserving traditions while boldly charting new paths for the future.

#### The Azerbaijani School of Performance: Excellence on the Global Stage

The Azerbaijani school of performance is renowned for its exceptional professionalism, profound musicality, and distinctive style. Musicians from Azerbaijan proudly showcase the richness of their nation's musical traditions on the most prestigious stages around the world.

Among pianists, Farhad Badalbeyli stands out as an iconic figure. A Soviet and Azerbaijani pianist, composer, and music educator, he is a laureate of the State Prize of the Azerbaijan and a People's Artist of the USSR. As the rector of the Baku Music Academy, his mastery and interpretations of classical works set a standard for younger generations.

Equally prominent is Yegana Akhundova, a People's Artist of Azerbaijan and vice-rector of the Baku Music Academy. Known for her concert performances and dedication to pedagogy, she has nurtured countless emerging talents. Murad Adigezalzade, a renowned pianist and People's Artist, actively performs on international stages, promoting Azerbaijani piano traditions. Murad Huseynov, another People's Artist and an award-winning pianist, further enhances the global reputation of Azerbaijani music.

#### Azerbaijani Vocal and Jazz Heritage

The Azerbaijani vocal school boasts world-class talents like Yusif Eyvazov, a tenor celebrated on the stages of La Scala, the Metropolitan Opera, and other prestigious venues. His expressive voice and emotional depth have garnered acclaim from critics and audiences alike.

Jazz, a vibrant facet of Azerbaijani music, continues to inspire millions thanks to artists such as Aziza Mustafa Zadeh and Isfar Sarabski. Aziza, blending jazz with mugham, has created a distinctive musical style that resonates worldwide. Isfar Sarabski, a laureate of international jazz competitions, enriches the genre with contemporary elements, showcasing the dynamic evolution of Azerbaijani jazz.

#### The Art of Conducting in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijani conductors also play a significant role in shaping the nation's musical identity. Fuad Ibrahimov, a Honored Artist of Azerbaijan, is known for his nuanced interpretations of classical and contemporary works, leading major orchestras with finesse. Ayub Kuliev, an Honored Artist of Azerbaijan, actively conducts on international stages, promoting Azerbaijani musical culture and inspiring musicians with his profound understanding of music.

#### Conclusion

The luminaries of Azerbaijani music serve as cultural ambassadors, elevating the nation's prestige and leaving an indelible mark on global music history. In conclusion, Azerbaijani music exemplifies

a harmonious fusion of tradition and modernity, making it a uniquely multifaceted art form. From the deep roots of folk music to the achievements of renowned performers and composers, Azerbaijani music continues to inspire and captivate audiences worldwide. Modern composers remain true to their cultural identity while embracing new horizons, incorporating innovative ideas and technologies into traditional forms. This vibrant musical tradition, steeped in history and profound emotions, remains a vital part of Azerbaijan's cultural heritage and the world's musical tapestry. Inspired by its rich legacy, today's musicians and composers strive to preserve and expand cultural values, ensuring the continuity and future of Azerbaijani music on the global stage.

## REFERENCES

1. Hajibeyov, U. (1945). *The Principles of Azerbaijani Folk Music*. Baku: Azerbaijan State Publishing House.
2. National Music & Global Culture Society. (n.d.). Uzeyir Hajibeyli: The "Father" of Azerbaijani Classical Music. Retrieved from nm-gcs.org
3. Mammadli, G. (2023). *Chronicle of Life: Uzeyir Hajibeyli's Legacy*. Baku: Visions of Azerbaijan Magazine.
4. Greenberg, R. (n.d.). *The Evolution of Azerbaijani Jazz: Vagif Mustafazadeh and Beyond*. Retrieved from visions.az
5. UNESCO. (n.d.). Documents on Azerbaijan's Musical Heritage. Retrieved from unesco.org
6. AzerNews. (2023). Azerbaijan Composers' Union presents book about Uzeyir Hajibeyli. Retrieved from azernews.az

## Zərif Kərimova

### “AZƏRBAYCANIN MUSIQİ MƏDƏNİYYƏTİ: ƏNƏNƏLƏR, İNNOVASIYA, VƏ QLOBALLAŞMA

Azərbaycan bəstəkarları və ifaçıları haqqında məqalədə ölkənin həm klassik, həm də müasir musiqini əhatə edən zəngin musiqi irsinə diqqət yetirilir. Əsərləri Azərbaycanın və onun hüdudlarından kənarında musiqi mədəniyyətinə mühüm təsir göstərmiş Üzeyir Hacıbəyov, Fikrət Əmirov və Arif Məlikov kimi görkəmli bəstəkarların töhfələrini araşdırır. Məqalədə milli musiqimizin təbliğində əvəzsiz xidmətləri olan tanınmış ifaçılar, o cümlədən müğənnilər, instrumental ifaçılar və dirijorlar da xüsusi qeyd olunur. Bundan əlavə, məqalədə klassik və xalq musiqisi janrlarında müasir musiqiçilərin nailiyyətləri, eləcə də Azərbaycanın beynəlxalq musiqi səhnəsindəki rolu araşdırılır.

**Açar sözlər:** *Azərbaycan musiqisi, Üzeyir Hacıbəyli, Qara Qarayev, Arşın mal alan, simfonik muğam, caz, ənənələr, yeniliklər, Azərbaycan məktəbi, musiqi mədəniyyəti.*

## Зариф Керимова

### “МУЗЫКАЛЬНАЯ КУЛЬТУРА АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНА: ТРАДИЦИИ, ИННОВАЦИИ И МИРОВОЙ

В статье о композиторах и исполнителях Азербайджана основное внимание уделяется богатому музыкальному наследию страны, охватывающему как классическую, так и современную музыку. В ней рассматривается вклад таких выдающихся композиторов, как Узеир Гаджибеков, Фикрет Амиров и Ариф Меликов, чьи произведения оказали значительное влияние на музыкальную культуру Азербайджана и за его пределами. В статье также освещаются известные исполнители, включая певцов, инструменталистов и дирижеров,

которые внесли неоценимый вклад в популяризацию национальной музыки. Кроме того, в статье исследуются достижения современных музыкантов в жанрах классической и народной музыки, а также роль Азербайджана на международной музыкальной сцене.

**Ключевые слова:** *азербайджанская музыка, Узеир Гаджибейли, Гара Гараев, Аршин мал алан, симфонический мугам, джаз, традиции, новации, азербайджанская школа, музыкальная культура.*

*Sənətşünaslıq elmləri doktoru İnara Məhərrəmovə tərəfindən təqdim edilmişdir*

**İlk daxilolma tarixi: 25.02.2025**

**Son daxilolma tarixi: 17.03.2025**