

**Ensemble Shashmaqam**  
Central Asian Music and Dance  
in NYC  
**A Study Guide**



**About the Ensemble**

As one of the United States' premier ensembles dedicated to Central Asian music and dance traditions, Shashmaqam performs a panorama of classical, liturgical, and folk music. Reflecting the ethnic eclecticism of a region where Jewish and Muslim musicians have long coexisted in a flourishing cultural symbiosis, the ensemble brings to life a range of Uzbek, Tajik, Afghan, and Azerbaijani songs, melodies, and pieces. Accordingly, its instrumentation includes Central Asian lutes such as the *tar* or *tanbur*, percussion such as the *doire* (frame drum) and *davvul* (kettle drum), as well as European instruments such as the clarinet and accordion.

## About the Sound World of Central Asia

Central Asia has long been a crossroads where diverse sedentary and nomadic cultures, religions, and empires have influenced each other for millenia, resulting in musical traditions that can be at once Jewish, Muslim, Turkic, Mongolic, and Persian. Residing at the heart of these junctures, Bukhara is an oasis city in Uzbekistan to which, it is said, the descendants of Persian and Babylonian Jews migrated well over a thousand years ago. Since then, they have survived or thrived during the invasions of the Mongols, the conquests of Tamerlane, the feudal rule of various Muslim emirs and khans, and the purges of Stalinist Soviet Union, after which many emigrated to New York in the late 20th century. Most of the members of Shashmaqam belong to this later emigration. The ensemble includes David Davidov (tar/tanbur), Ilyas Gulkarov (doire/vocals), Malika Kalontarova (dancer), Shumieli Kuyenov (doire) and Rustam Samarkandi (vocals).



## About the Music

The above history is reflected in the music of the Shashmaqam ensemble. Just consider the instrumentation, which includes the following:

- The *tanbur*, with its plucked four strings, is the traditional lead instrument of Bukharian classical music. Its ornamental techniques often mimic those of the vocalist.
- By contrast, the *tar*, a long-necked lute from Azerbaijan just across the Caspian sea, mainly provides accompaniment.
- The *doire*, a large tambourine that uses goatskin or sheepskin for its head, provides not only rhythmic accompaniment, but also solo interludes between pieces.
- Kettle drums called *davvul*, which were part of an influx of Azerbaijani musical influences in the early 19th century, also provide accompaniment.
- The clarinet, a part of this same Azerbaijani influx despite its European origins, provides melody and virtuosic solos.
- As for the accordion, it began replacing harmoniums of Azerbaijani and Dagestani provenance when, under Soviet rule, it became popular in Bukhara in the 1960s.

The ensemble's repertoire consists, on the one hand, of *shashmaqam*, an aesthetically complex set of canonized melodies, rhythmic formulas, and pieces. While *maqam* can refer to a system of melodic modes in the Middle East, the term also refers to a suite of musical pieces sequentially organized by melodic mode, metrical pattern, and rhythmic pattern in Central Asia. As for the lyrics of these canonized pieces, they derive from Persian and Tajik classical and post-classical poetry that is notoriously difficult to translate into English. But again, a long history of juncture comes to the fore when one considers how *shashmaqam* was traditionally sung in both Tajik and Uzbek until the advent of Soviet Union nationalities policy, which required it to be performed only in Uzbek. Today, this is no longer the case with the ensemble's own linguistic preferences.

On the other hand, the ensemble's repertoire consists of popular folk tunes, lullabies, laments, dances, and wedding songs from various parts of Central Asia. The group also features a dancer who symbolically interprets selected numbers with the subtle arm and hand movements characteristic of Tajik and Uzbek women's dance. Traditional clothing, made from embroidered and dyed silk, adds even more color to the ensemble's performances. Whether on the concert stage or at a festive community event, Shashmaqam evokes the eclectic spirit of Central Asia.

Learn even more about the ensemble at:

<https://ctmd.org/programs/touring-artists/shashmaqam/>

### **Video links**

Shashmaqam

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1&v=4binKttjtCs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=4binKttjtCs)

Treasures of the CTMD Archive: The Women of Shashmaqam Ensemble

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=XLmcNxu-C7s>

Shashmaqam at Maqam Fest 2015

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pod4ZVtQs4M>

### **Recordings**

Shashmaqam. 1991. *Music of the Bukharan Jewish Ensemble Shashmaqam*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

Levin, Theodore and Jean During. 2002. *The Silk Road: A Musical Caravan*. Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

### **Readings**

Levin, Theodore. 1993. "The Reterritorialization of Culture in the New Central Asian States: A Report from Uzbekistan." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 25: 51-59.

Theodore Levin. 1999. *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God: Musical Travels in Central Asia (and Queens, New York)*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Djumaev, Alexander. 2005. "Musical Heritage and National Identity in Uzbekistan." *Ethnomusicology Forum* 14(2): 165-184.

Levin, Ted and Fairouz R. Nishanova. 2008. "Civil Sounds: The Aga Khan Music Initiative in Central Asia." in *Muslim Modernities: Expression of the Civil Imagination*, edited by Amy B. Sajoo. London: I.B. Tauris, 93-118.

Rapport, Evan. 2014. *Greeted With Smiles: Bukharian Jewish Music and Musicians in New York*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Levin, Theodore, Saida Daukeyeva, & Elmire Küchümkulova. 2016. *The Music of Central Asia*. Bloomington: Indian University Press.

**Websites**

A news and cultural resource by and for the Bukharian community in New York

<https://bukhariancommunity.com/>

**About the Center for Traditional Music**

Founded in 1968, the Center for Traditional Music and Dance (CTMD) assists New York City's immigrant communities to preserve the vitality of their distinctive performing arts traditions and promotes cross-cultural understanding by sharing these art forms with audiences across the city. Nationally renowned for programs that combine research, documentation, presentation and education, CTMD assists immigrant communities in passing traditions to new generations.

Website: <https://ctmd.org/>

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