

**MUSICAL-THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON USUL IN
ABDURAUF FITRAT'S "UZBEK CLASSICAL MUSIC AND
ITS HISTORY"**

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Abstract: *This study analyzes Abdurauf Fitrat's theoretical perspectives on usul in his work "Uzbek Classical Music and Its History." Fitrat regards usul as a fundamental element in Central Asian classical music, serving as the rhythmic and structural basis of a musical composition. He emphasizes the intrinsic connection between musical practice and theory, viewing usul not only as a tool for organizing time and rhythm but also as a principle that governs the aesthetic and dynamic development of a piece. The analysis highlights Fitrat's understanding of the central role of rhythm and usul in shaping the internal energy and balance of a composition through the system of naghma and niqras. Additionally, he notes the historical and conceptual links between usul in Central Asian music and the notions of meter and rhythm in Western music theory. Fitrat's approach provides insight into the structural organization of musical material and the performer's interpretive role, offering a solid theoretical foundation for dissertation research and advanced study of Central Asian classical music.*

Keywords: usul, rhythm, Uzbek Classical Music, Abdurauf Fitrat, naghma, niqra, musical Theory, Central Asian music, structural organization, aesthetic dynamics.

Аннотация: В настоящем исследовании анализируются теоретические взгляды Абдурауфа Фитрата на усул в его работе



«Узбекская классическая музыка и её история». Фитрат рассматривает усул как фундаментальный элемент среднеазиатской классической музыки, служащий ритмической и структурной основой музыкального произведения. Он подчеркивает неразрывную связь музыкальной практики и теории, рассматривая усул не только как средство организации времени и ритма, но и как принцип, управляющий эстетическим и динамическим развитием произведения. Анализ выявляет понимание Фитратом центральной роли ритма и усул в формировании внутренней энергии и гармонии композиции через систему нагма и никра. Кроме того, Фитрат отмечает исторические и концептуальные связи между усул в среднеазиатской музыке и понятиями метра и ритма в западной музыкальной теории. Подход Фитрата предоставляет глубокое понимание структурной организации музыкального материала и роли исполнителя в интерпретации, создавая надежную теоретическую основу для диссертационных исследований и углубленного изучения среднеазиатской классической музыки.

Ключевые слова: *усул, ритм, узбекская классическая музыка, Абдурауф Фитрат, нагма, никра, музыкальная теория, среднеазиатская музыка, структурная организация, эстетическая динамика.*

Introduction: At the beginning of the 20th century, the process of national self-awareness was closely linked with the Jadid reform movement. Among the enlightened intellectuals of this period, Abdurauf Fitrat holds a prominent place. In addition to being a literary scholar, historian, philosopher, and political figure, he was also a thinker who approached the issues of national music with serious scholarly rigor. Fitrat's work, *Uzbek Classical Music and Its History*, represents a significant stage in the development of theoretical thought in Uzbek musicology. This work is one of the first comprehensive

studies aimed at scientifically explaining the historical roots, theoretical foundations, and usul (musical system) of Uzbek classical music.

Fitrat's methodology is based on three main principles:

1. **Historicity** – examining the musical system in the context of its historical development;
2. **Systematic Approach** – explaining music according to its internal laws;
3. **Critical Analysis** – independently verifying existing scholarly views rather than accepting them uncritically.

He interprets music not merely as a practical art form but as an independent theoretical system governed by its own laws.

Fitrat begins musical analysis with the nature of sound. According to his definition, a naghma is a sound that unfolds over a certain period and is perceived through listening. This concept involves two key elements:

- the emergence of the sound;
- the continuation of the sound.

Thus, a naghma is not a simple acoustic phenomenon but a musical unit linked to the dimension of time. Every naghma has a starting point. The initial action produced by plucking a string or striking an instrument is called a niqra. A niqra is the first impulse of a naghma, representing the moment of initiation of sound.

Accordingly, the musical process is constructed based on two interrelated units: niqra (impulse) + naghma (duration). This model forms the cornerstone of Fitrat's theory. He explains the rhythmic and melodic structure of music precisely through the interaction of these two elements.

Main part. In Fitrat's interpretation, the rhythmic system of music is manifested through usul. Usul is a system that organizes niqras in a specific order and establishes the temporal relationships between them. Niqras are expressed in various forms:

- **tan** — sabab-i xafif;

- **tana** — sabab-i saqiyl;
- **tanai** — vatad;
- **tananan** — fosila.

Although these terms originate from the aruz system in poetry, they are applied to express musical rhythm. Fitrat seeks to reveal the internal logic of music, showing that rhythmic units obey certain structural rules. Usuls are conceived in a special circular form, and sources indicate varying numbers of usul cycles—15, 17, or 24–27. Well-known usuls include hazaj, ramal, vofir, duyak, muxammas, saqiyl, chanbar, zarb-i qadim, among others.

In music, usul ensures rhythmic stability, organizes the structure of a composition, and sets the criteria for performance. Thus, usul functions as a theoretical foundation expressing the system of time and movement in music.

A particular focus in Fitrat's work is the relationship between Central Asian music and Arabic aruz. Externally, there are similarities in terminology (sabab, vatad, fosila), the unity of some names (hazaj, ramal), and principles of rhythmic structure. Some researchers have suggested that musical usuls were derived from aruz. However, Fitrat critically examines this view and acknowledges that, after extensive research, he could not find evidence supporting the full dependence of music on aruz. According to him, the aruz system was used merely as a methodological tool to explain musical usuls, while Central Asian music followed an independent historical and aesthetic trajectory. Therefore, the observed similarities arise not from common origin, but from cultural and logical proximity.

Fitrat emphasizes that the original form of usul rukns in classical Eastern music was “tan–tana–tananan.” According to his observations, in musical treatises written during the reigns of Uzbek khans such as Subhonqulixon, Abdullaxon II, and Ubaydullaxon, as well as in sources dating back to Alisher Navoi's era, including Abdurahmon Jomiy's *Risolayi Musiqqa*, usul rukns are consistently presented in this form. These historical sources confirm that the

rhythmic foundation of classical Eastern music initially relied on the structure of naghmas produced by plucked string instruments. In other words, the “tan–tana–tananan” rukns emerged directly as natural replicas (copies) of the sounds of string instruments.

Fitrat notes that over time, performance practices evolved. Highly skilled hafiz performers (ashulachilar), when singing without instruments, transferred the task of maintaining *usul* to the circle (*chirmanda*). However, in this adaptation, not the full rukns were performed; instead, short symbols representing the beginning or ending of each beat were executed. As a result, a strong pluck on a string was rendered with a firm stroke of the circle producing the “bak” sound, while a softer pluck produced the “bum” sound. Two closely connected “bak” beats were pronounced as “baka,” and slightly longer but uninterrupted beats as “bakka.”

Thus, historically, the original “tan–tana–tananan” rukns were gradually replaced by the “bak–baka–bakka–bum” system, which later evolved into a simplified “bumbak” form. Some ancient sources refer to the term “zarb-i asl” (original strike), which, according to Fitrat, also indicates this circular *usul* system.

Fitrat evaluates this process not merely as a technical simplification, but as an important turning point in musical thought. According to him:

1. The “bumbak” system was practically more convenient;
2. The necessity for hafiz performers to increasingly sing without instruments accelerated this process;
3. As a result, the original, full-rukn *usul* was gradually forgotten.

Subsequently, string instruments were adapted to the new, shortened rhythmic pattern, and the naghmas of compositions were organized according to this system.

One of Fitrat’s most significant observations is that today, when performing a *Shashmaqom* piece from the *mushkilot* or *nasr* sections on the

tanbur, the naghmas are not heard in their original “tan–tana–tananan” meter, but rather in a shortened “bumbak” form. This demonstrates the transformation of the historical rhythmic system, following the progression:

original usul → shortened expression via circle (chirmanda) → generalized new rhythmic pattern.

Fitrat’s key conclusions regarding this process are: the original usul system in Eastern music was based on string instrument naghmas, during circle-based performance, rukns were shortened; the simplified form spread due to practical convenience; consequently, the original (full) usul system was gradually forgotten, and contemporary performance practice differs from its historical form.

This perspective highlights Fitrat’s understanding of music as a historical and dynamic process. He interprets music not as a static system, but as a cultural phenomenon that undergoes transformation over time.

Conclusion. Fitrat’s reflections on the transformation of usul rukns can serve as a foundation for several scholarly directions in Uzbek musicology, including:

- Historical rhythmology;
- Evolution of performance traditions;
- Structural transformation of the maqom system;
- Differences between oral tradition and written theory.

Thus, Fitrat’s analyses not only record historical facts but also reveal the internal mechanisms of the development of musical thought.

Fitrat’s musicological perspectives are significant in several ways. He systematized Uzbek classical music theoretically, scientifically explained the internal relationships between naghma, niqra, and usul, defended the autonomy of music, and applied critical methodology in the scholarly study of Eastern music.

His approach laid a methodological foundation for the subsequent development of Uzbek musicology. His insights enabled the interpretation of national music theory within a historical and philosophical context. Abdurauf Fitrat made an important scholarly contribution to establishing the theoretical basis of Uzbek classical music by explaining music through primitive units such as *naghma* and *niqra*, and by interpreting the *usul* system as a rhythmic criterion.

Additionally, he conducted a thorough analysis of the relationship between **music and aruz**, aiming to substantiate music as an **independent art form** with scholarly evidence. In this way, Fitrat's musical-theoretical perspectives represent a crucial stage in the formation of scientific thought in Uzbek musicology and continue to remain relevant for contemporary research.

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