

A man with dark hair and a mustache, wearing a brown traditional Afghan garment, is seated and playing a rubab, a traditional stringed instrument. He is looking upwards and to the right with a slight smile. The background is dark.

*Music of
Central Asia*

VOL.3

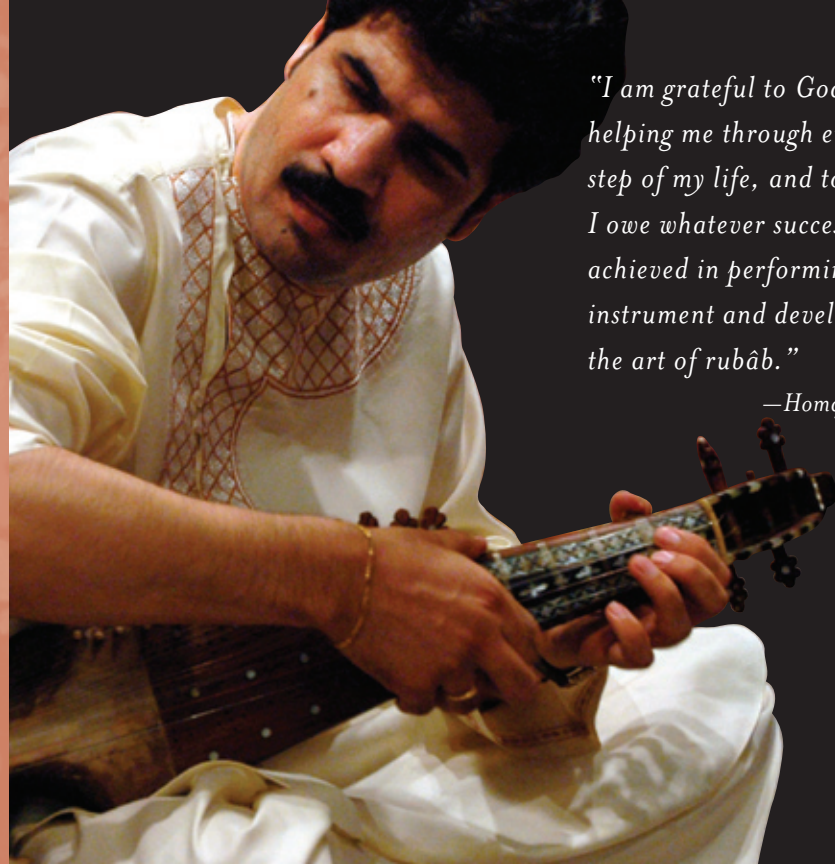
HOMAYUN SAKHI

THE ART OF THE
AFGHAN RUBÂB



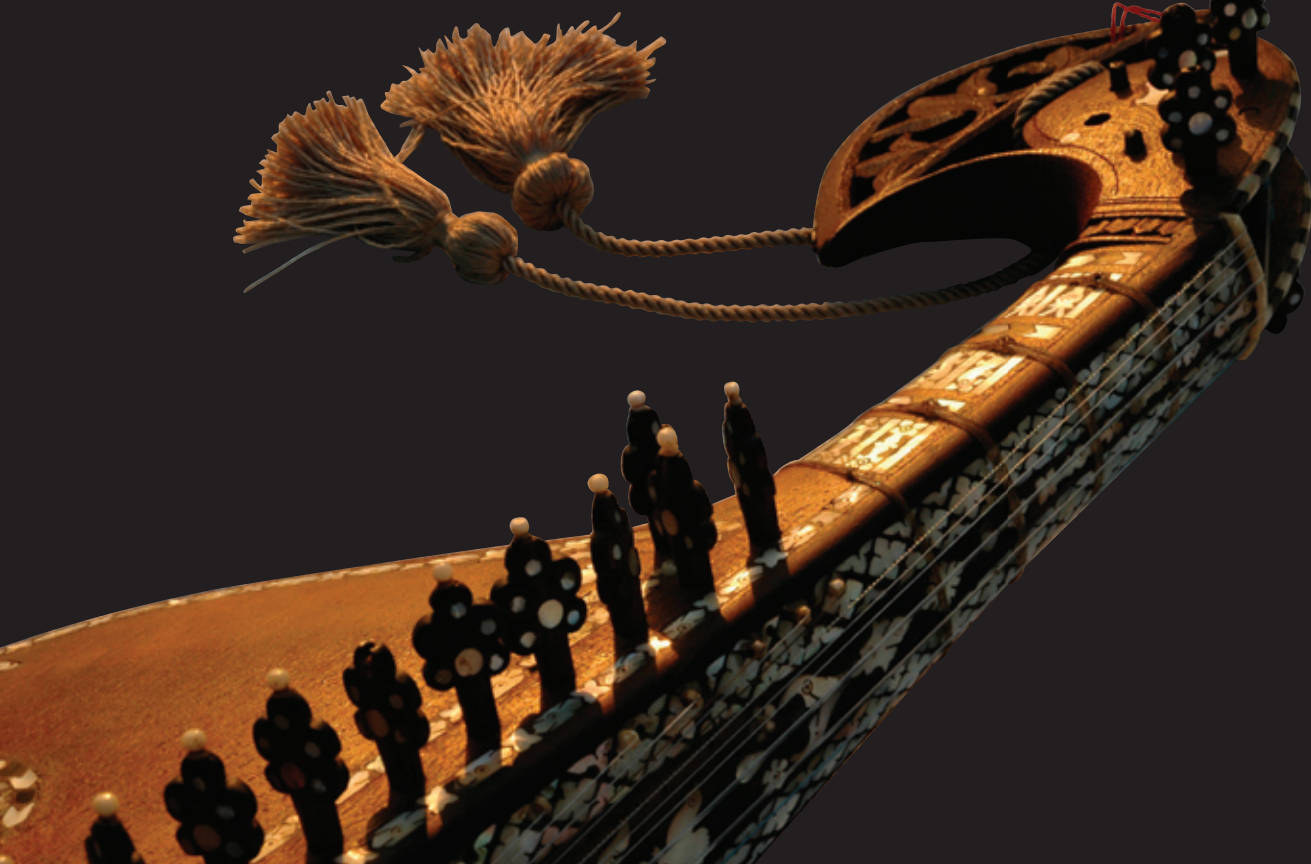
Smithsonian Folkways

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"I am grateful to God for helping me through every step of my life, and to Him I owe whatever success I've achieved in performing on my instrument and developing the art of rubâb."

—Homayun Sakhi



CD TRACKS

- | | | |
|----|-----------------|-------|
| 1. | RAGA MADHUVANTI | 34:32 |
| 2. | RAGA YAMAN | 31:40 |
| 3. | KATAGHANI | 4:01 |

DVD

*MUSIC OF CENTRAL ASIA AND THE
AGA KHAN MUSIC INITIATIVE*

*HOMAYUN SAKHI: THE ART OF
THE AFGHAN RUBÂB*

*INTERACTIVE INSTRUMENT
GLOSSARY*

MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA

*Music of Central Asia Vol. 3
Homayun Sakhi: The Art of the Afghan Rubâb*

SFW CD 40522 © 2005 Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

CENTRAL ASIAN MUSIC: *An Overview*

Central Asia is commonly understood to encompass the territory of six nations: Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (see map). Yet patterns of settlement and cultural links that predate the establishment of current political boundaries argue for a broader definition of the region. For example, the Uyghurs, a Muslim, Turkic-speaking people whose traditional territory is in western China, have old cultural affinities with other Central Asian groups. The Turkmen, who comprise the titular ethnic group of Turkmenistan, are strongly represented in the Iranian region of Khorasan that flanks Turkmenistan to the southwest. Shia Isma'ili Muslims in mountainous Badakhshan, the eastern region of Tajikistan, share cultural and religious traditions with Isma'ilis living in the nearby Northern Territories of

Pakistan, Afghanistan, and western China, as well as in Khorasan and other parts of Iran.

Beyond Central Asia itself, diaspora communities created by recent emigration have spread cultural influences from the region far beyond its geographical borders. Some of Afghanistan's finest musicians were among the hundreds of thousands of Afghans who fled to Pakistan and later emigrated to the West following the Soviet invasion of their country in 1979 and the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s. Outstanding musicians were also among the tens of thousands of Central Asian ("Bukharan") Jews who left Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to resettle in New York City and Tel Aviv when the USSR opened its borders to Jewish emigration in the mid-1970s. Central Asian Jews long lived as a Persian-speaking minority population among their Muslim neighbors. Indeed,



an overwhelming majority of Central Asia's Persian-speaking and Turkic-speaking population identifies itself with Islam, as an active religious practice, a cultural legacy, a worldview that informs everyday social life, or all of these. Excluded from this group are Russian-speaking Slavs and other non-Muslim immigrants who began to populate Central Asia after the tsarist conquests in the latter half of the 19th century and during the Soviet era accounted for half or more of the population of the region's major cities.

Central Asia's history has been shaped by its strategic position at the intersection of two great axes of civilization. One axis points southwest, toward the sophisticated urban culture of Iran. The other axis points northeast, to what has been called Turan—the nomadic world of the Inner Asian steppe, where pastoralists belonging to myriad Turkic and Mongolian clans created a succession of powerful steppe

empires. Iran vs. Turan, sedentary vs. nomadic, urbanite vs. steppe-dweller—in broad strokes, these contrasting pairs represent the distinctions of worldview and way of life that echo strongly in Central Asia's musical traditions despite centuries and millennia of intermingling among its diverse social groups.

In nomadic cultures, the consummate entertainer is the bard, and music is characterized by a strong narrative dimension. Epic tales as long as thirty times the length of Homer's *Iliad*, and instrumental pieces whose wordless melodies and rhythms relate beloved stories through a kind of musical onomatopoeia all reflect a nomadic sensibility. Traditional nomadic spirituality ascribes spiritual power to a range of natural phenomena and living creatures, and nomadic music and sound-making often serve as a means of representing and accessing the power of spirits.

The music of sedentary-dwellers, by contrast, reflects the deep impact of Islam as a spiritual and cultural force. The central artifact of musical performance is the elaboration and embellishment of words and texts by a beautiful voice. Singers are typically accompanied by small ensembles of mixed instruments that almost always include percussion. The beauty of the voice may also be represented symbolically by a solo instrument such as a plucked lute, violin, or flute, which reproduces the filigree embellishments and ornamentation characteristic of a great singer.

In the years following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Soviet Union tried to bring about fundamental transformations in the organization, transmission, and expression of indigenous culture among the inhabitants of its vast empire. Since the beginning of the post-Soviet period, musicians throughout Central Asia have sought to recover and

reanimate older musical traditions in response to growing interest in their cultural heritage, among both local inhabitants and outsiders. These traditions are firmly rooted in local musical practices, but none of them is "pure." Central Asia's long history of contact and exchange with other cultures continues to evolve in our own time. And as the musicians whose performances come alive on *Music of Central Asia* leave their own creative imprint on the region's musical legacy, there can be no doubt that authentic traditional music remains forever contemporary.



INTRODUCTION

Hodayun Sakhi and the Art of the Afghan Rubab

Hodayun Sakhi is the outstanding Afghan *rubab* player of his generation, a brilliant virtuoso endowed with a charismatic musical presence and personality. During Afghanistan's long years of armed conflict, when music was heavily controlled, censored, repressed, and, finally, totally banned, the classical *rubab* style to which Hodayun has devoted his career not only survived but reached new creative heights.

Hodayun's artistry demonstrates how an imaginative musician working within a traditional musical idiom can enrich and expand its expressive power while respecting the taste and sensibility passed down from master musicians of the past. Moreover, Hodayun's personal story illustrates the extraordinarily challenging conditions

under which he and his fellow Afghan musicians have pursued their art.

The art music tradition of the Afghan *rubab* featured on these recordings is very much a hybrid creation. Indeed, Afghan music represents a confluence of cultural influences whose sources lie to the east, north, and west of present-day Afghanistan, in the great historical empires of Persia, Central Asia, and India. Each region has contributed instruments, genres, and performance styles to Afghanistan's diverse musical landscape. The *rubab* itself is of Central Asian origin—one of a family of double-chambered lutes that includes, among others, the Iranian *târ*, Tibetan *danyen*, and Pamir *rubab*. While rooted in the raga tradition of North India, the cultivated art music performed on the Afghan *rubab* also has strong stylistic links

A VIEW OF THE TIMUR SHAH MAUSOLEUM IN KABUL, RESTORED BY THE AGA KHAN TRUST FOR CULTURE.



to Iran. The tabla, the pair of drums that accompany the *rubâb* and express the music's sophisticated rhythmic element, is indisputably Indian, but its creators seem to have drawn inspiration from older forms of Central and West Asian kettle and goblet drums. Finally, Hodayun's performance style has been shaped not only by the musical traditions to which Afghan music is geographically and historically linked, but by his lively interest in contemporary music from around the world.

Hodayun Sakhi was born in Kabul in 1976 into one of Afghanistan's leading musical families. From the age of ten, he studied *rubâb* with his father, Ghulam Sakhi, in the traditional form of apprenticeship known as *ustâd-shâgird* (Persian: "master-apprentice"). Ghulam Sakhi was a disciple and, later, brother-in-law, of Ustâd Mohammad Omar (d. 1980), the much-revered heir to a musical lineage that began in the 1860s, when the ruler



Opposite page: A VIEW OF KUCHEH KHARABAT, THE MUSICIANS QUARTER IN THE OLD CITY OF KABUL.

Right: A MUSIC SHOP IN KABUL'S OLD CITY THAT REOPENED AFTER THE FALL OF THE TALIBAN.



of Kabul, Amir Sher Ali Khan, brought a number of classically trained musicians from India to perform at his court. He gave them residences in a section of the old city adjacent to the royal palace so that they could be easily summoned to court when needed, and this area, known as Kucheh Kharabat, became the musicians quarter of Kabul. Over the next hundred years, Indian musicians thrived there, and Kabul became

a provincial center for the performance of North Indian classical music. The royal patrons of this music were Afghans who were at ease with Persian culture as well as Indian and loved classical Persian poetry. To please their patrons, the Kharabat musicians created a distinctive form of vocal art that combined elements of Persian and Indian music. One of the principal Persian verse forms is the *ghazal*, constructed

from a series of couplets that follow a particular rhyme scheme. *Ghazals* provided the texts for the new style of Afghan vocal music, while the music itself was based on the melodic modes (*raga*) and metrical cycles (*tala*) of Indian music. The Kabuli style of *ghazal* singing later spread to other Afghan cities. Musicians in Kabul also cultivated the art of playing the *rubâb*, which was prominent in regional folk music. Today the *rubâb* is regarded with great pride by the people of Afghanistan as their national instrument.

Homayun's study of the *rubâb* was interrupted in 1992, when his entire family moved to the Pakistani city of Peshawar, a place of refuge for many Afghans from the political chaos and violence that enveloped their country in the years following the Soviet invasion of 1979. In Peshawar, Homayun quickly became a popular entertainer. "I played a mixture of ragas and songs," Homayun recalled, "and I earned

a good income from music. I played on television and on the radio. Peshawar has a lot of popular singers, and I often played with these singers."

The unofficial headquarters of Afghanistan's émigré music community in Peshawar was Khalil House, a modern apartment building where between thirty and forty bands established offices. The building's apartments—each one essentially a single large room—became the headquarters of a group of musicians to which potential clients came to arrange for the musicians' participation in wedding parties and other musical events. For several years, Khalil House was a hotbed of musical activity for Afghan musicians in exile. Some musicians ran their own music schools, and informal jam sessions where young musicians competed to show off their virtuosity and technical skills were common. Long hours and a spirit of camaraderie in Khalil House enabled the musicians from



INSTRUMENT-MAKER USTÂD AZIM QADERI, WHO TEACHES AT A MUSIC SCHOOL IN KABUL, FOUNDED AND SUPPORTED BY THE AGA KHAN MUSIC INITIATIVE IN CENTRAL ASIA.

Kabul to maintain and further develop key musical skills.

Homayun rented a room in Khalil House and opened a small music school. "The people of Peshawar—the way they play the *rubâb* is different," Homayun explained. "I introduced a Kabul style to

them. For example, traditionally, *rubâb* players didn't touch the instrument's sympathetic strings, but I used them a lot, in addition to the melody strings. Before, players just picked down with the plectrum, but I picked both up and down. I thought these things up. I listened to



violin music from different places, and to guitar and sitar music, and symphonic music. I listened to a lot of different things that I found on cassettes, and I wondered, why couldn't I play with these kinds of techniques on the *rubâb*? And I started to try them. I understood that the *rubâb* isn't just an instrument for backing up a singer.

I worked hard and played for long hours every day to create more of a style—a complex picking style that uses rhythmic syncopation and playing off the beat.”

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, many Afghan musicians in Peshawar returned to Kabul, but by this time, Hodayun was on his way to Fremont,

Opposite page: THE HAZRAT ABU BAKR SEDDIQUE MOSQUE IN HAYWARD, CALIFORNIA SERVES THE LOCAL AFGHAN COMMUNITY

Right: TORYALAI HASHIMI

California. He brought with him the sophisticated and original *rubâb* style that he had developed during his years in Pakistan, but little else. Fremont, a city of some 200,000 that lies southeast of San Francisco, claims the largest concentration of Afghans in the United States. Afghans flocked to Fremont and nearby Hayward and Union City in the 1980s, joining an older community of émigrés from the Asian subcontinent. In Fremont, just as in Peshawar, Hodayun quickly established himself as a leader of the local musical community. He opened a school to teach Afghan music to children, recorded compact discs of popular Afghan songs,



and became a sought-after performer, appearing together with Toryalai Hashimi, a tabla player and well-known exponent of Afghan music who had also grown up in Kabul. But while continuing his community activities, Hodayun devotes as much as

eight hours a day to practicing the *rubâb*. His exceptional talent and unswerving dedication to his art have brought him success on the concert stage, and he maintains an active performance schedule that takes him to cities around the world. Yet Homayun never appears satisfied with his own performances. He rejected the honorific title of *ustâd* (master) that his fellow Afghan musicians proposed to confer on him, claiming that his abilities represented "only a drop in the vast sea of music and musical knowledge." Asked to comment on his own music-making, Homayun says, "I am grateful to God for helping me through every step of my life, and to Him I owe whatever success I've achieved in performing on my instrument and developing the art of *rubâb*."



Above: HOMAYUN SAKHI WITH AFGHAN RUBÂB PLAYER USTÂD GHOLAM HOSSEIN AND TABLA PLAYER USTÂD WALI MOHAMMAD NABIZADA AT A CONCERT IN LONDON.

Right: HOMAYUN SAKHI TRIES OUT A PAMIR RUBÂB FROM THE BADA KHSHAN REGION OF TAJIKISTAN.



TRACK NOTES

The first and second tracks present classical pieces whose form and melodic character display strong connections to the classical instrumental music of North India, but also suggest abiding stylistic links to the art music tradition of Iran. The third track, “Kataghani,” represents a folk genre popular in northern Afghanistan, and illustrates a lighter side of the *rubâb* repertory.



RAGA MADHUVANTI

In Indian classical music, melody is organized according to the principles of raga. Raga is an abstract musical structure that provides performers with the key information necessary for its exposition and development in a performance. This musical structure is typically linked to extramusical associations that may include the time of day when a raga should be performed, and the particular mood, feeling, or emotional color that a raga is believed to personify. The raga that comprises track I is *madhuvanti*, whose traditional performance time is in the late afternoon.

Homayun’s exposition of *madhuvanti* begins with an extended introductory section (*shakl*) in which he explores the core pitches, intervals, and characteristic melodic motifs of the raga. *Shakl* is analogous to the improvised *âlâp* of Indian classical music, and, as in *âlâp*, the initial part is extemporized in free rhythm. Later, a strong rhythmic pulse and pattern

emerge within the melodic framework, analogous to the *jor* and *jâlâ* performed on North Indian stringed instruments such as the sitar and sarod.

One notable feature of Homayun’s performance that distinguishes it from typical renditions of Indian raga is the absence of a steady drone accompaniment. The effect of drones, whether produced on a Scottish bagpipe, Indian *tânâpûrâ*, or Armenian *duduk*, is invariably to frame a listener’s perception of melody so that each pitch is heard and felt in relation to the drone. The interval that each note of a melody forms with a drone pitch creates states of relative tension and relaxation, and the ebb and flow of these relative states provides drone-based music with a strong expressive power. Afghan music, however, like most indigenous music in Central Asia and Iran, is not traditionally performed with a drone instrument, although a drone effect may be created by strumming or plucking patterns on stringed instruments that repeatedly sound an open string or strings. Rather than hearing melody pitches always in relation to a drone, as in Indian music, listeners experience perceptual shifts in which a drone-against-melody mode of listening alternates with the perception of pure melodic pattern. Skillful permutation and variation of such patterns, both melodically and rhythmically, are at the heart of the performer’s craft. For a listener, the perception of continuous variations in pattern may become an act of contemplation or meditation, much like viewing the floral and arabesque designs that figure so prominently in textiles and ceramics from Afghanistan, Iran, and Central Asia. In performing North Indian classical music from an Afghan perspective, Homayun reunites raga with one of its original sources, the cultivated musical traditions of the Iranian world.

Like the treatment of melody, the treatment of rhythm in the classical Kabuli tradition is rooted in Indian music, yet has developed a distinctively Afghan performance

style. The tabla, masterfully played in these recordings by Toryalai Hashimi, frames the melody in the conventional metric cycles of Indian classical music, for example, the 12-beat cycle known as *ek-tâl* and the 16-beat cycle known as *tîn-tâl*. Toryalai follows Homayun's lead in moving back and forth between fixed compositions and improvisatory sections within the raga, and joins him in improvising complex rhythmic variations on the simple patterns of the fixed composition.

"Raga Madhuvanti" is presented in the form of a classical instrumental piece often called *naghma-ye klasik* in Dari (Afghan Persian). Performance versions of such pieces are typically 10–15 minutes in length, but Homayun's expansive development of both melodic and rhythmic elements of the *naghma* creates a much longer work.

Using the pitch names of Western music, the collection of pitches that form the core of *madhuvanti*'s melodic exposition are: B- C – D – Eb – F# – G – A – (Bb)–B – C. (In the Indian *sargam* system that Afghan musicians have adopted in a slightly modified form, *madhuvanti*'s pitch collection would be expressed as *Ni- Sa-Re- Ga-Me-Pe-De-(Na)-Ni-Sa*). The 7th scale degree is alternately rendered as Bb and B (*Na* and *Ni*). Note that the initial pitch (B, or *Ni*) lies below the central octave of the raga, yet is a key element of its opening melodic motif.

As the introductory section (*shakl*) explores core intervals, characteristic melodic motifs, and emphasized pitches, it ascends gradually through the compass of an octave. One of the core intervals that gives *madhuvanti* its particular "color" is the augmented second (Eb–F#) heard in the opening of the *shakl*. As the *shakl* becomes strongly rhythmic, fast melodic passages encompass the *rubâb*'s upper register.

Following the *shakl* [11:53], Toryalai joins in on tabla, and together Homayun and



Toryalai perform a composition (*naghma*) that consists of two elements, *âstâi* and *antara*. *Naghma* is characterized by a clearly defined melody in a lower register, while in the extemporized *antaras*, rapid passage work ranges higher up the instrument's neck. It is here that Homayun introduces the trademark technique he learned from Ustâd Mohammad Omar, known as *parandkari*, in which a high drone note is periodically added to the rhythm by plucking an open string [for example, at 18:45–19:15].

The tabla frames the melodic development in *ek-tâl*, consisting of 12 equal time units (*mât-râs*) that can be expressed by syllables representing the different tone colors of the drum strokes. For example, DHIN indicates a sound made from the combination of TIN (damped index finger stroke on the right drum) and GE (deep, undamped resonance played on the left drum). Syllables written in lower case indicate that the left-hand

resonance is completely absent. Syllables written with a prime (DHA') indicate a sharp stroke of the forefinger on the right drum. Following is a schematic of one cycle of *ek-tâl*:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
DHIN	DHIN	DHA'GE/	tirakita	tu	na	kat	ta/	DHA'GE	tirakita	DHIN	na

In the *âstâi*, Homayun alternates between passages that subject the fixed composition to extended series of rhythmic variations, many using the high drone string, and passages of melodic improvisation. Following the *naghma* in *ek-tâl* [ending at 25:40], the performers shift to a faster section—a *naghma-ye drut* (fast instrumental piece) in *tîn-tâl*, a commonly used cycle of 16 *mâtrâs*.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
DHA	DHIN	DHIN	DHA/	DHA	DHIN	DHIN	DHA/	DHA	tîn	tîn	ta/	ta	DHIN	DHIN	DHA

After a series of melodic improvisations, the piece approaches its conclusion with a fast passage that uses the repeating high drone string, and concludes with a *seh*, a rhythmic figure repeated three times (analogous to the *tihâi* in Indian music).



RAGA YAMAN

In this distinctively Afghan type of classical composition, sometimes known as *naghma-ye chahartuk* (four-part instrumental piece), or as *lareh*, Homayun and Toryalai interpret raga *yaman*. *Yaman*, an evening raga, has the scale: C-D-E-F#-G-A-B-C (in Indian *sargam* syllables: *Sa-Re-Ge-Me-Pe-De-Ni-Sa*). Such compositions are played as an overture to an evening's vocal performance of *ghazals*, and are also favored as solo instrumental pieces for *rubâb*, and for *tanbur* or *dutar* (Central Asian long-necked lutes). Ustâd Mohammad Omar popularized several such pieces by teaching them to his many *rubâb* students, and recorded one of them himself (available on Smithsonian Folkways CD 40439). Comparing Homayun's version of *yaman* with that of Ustâd Mohammad Omar reveals the extent to which Homayun has developed the art of *rubâb* playing in new directions.

Homayun's introductory *shakl* opens in free rhythm and gradually develops a sustained rhythmic pulse, with the *parandkari* strumming patterns that incorporate the use of the drone string before the section ends [at 10:53]. Next comes the *âstâi* section of the composition, with tabla accompaniment in *tîn-tâl*. Here again, the performance is characterized by alternations between melodic improvisation and repetitions of a fixed composition using a variety of strumming patterns. At 22:20, the *antara* section begins, followed by a return to the *âstâi*. A new section, *bhog* ("addition"), begins at 26:36, marked by the introduction of a new melody. At 27:52 a fourth section, *sanchari* ("moving"), is introduced, containing short, pre-composed melodic variations known as *paltas* (in Indian performance practice, *sanchari* typically precedes *bhog*). The piece concludes with the common cadential device (*seh*) of a thrice-repeated rhythmic figure. Ustâd Mohammad Omar's version of the piece uses

different *âstâi* and *antara* compositions, but the *bhog* and *sanchari* are the same as those played by Hodayun.



KATAGHANI

“Kataghani” denotes a regional musical style native to Kataghan, in northern Afghanistan, which begins east of Mazar-i Sharif and rises toward the high mountains of Badakhshan. The music of northern Afghanistan comprises a distinct regional tradition that reflects the large number of ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks in the Afghan north. This popular melody is known throughout Afghanistan, and here Hodayun performs it in his own elegant Kabuli style. Traditionally played as background music in teahouses, where men gather on market days for conversation and relaxation, the Uzbek-style single-line melody and duple rhythm referenced in “Kataghani” was also used in the dancing-boy tradition (*bacha-bazi*) that was censored by the religious authorities but existed underground. Typically performed on a long-necked lute such as the *dambura*, Hodayun adapts it to the *rubâb* in a stylized performance that provides an appropriate conclusion to his brilliant exposition of Kabul art music.

INSTRUMENT GLOSSARY

AFGHAN RUBÂB

The Afghan *rubâb* is a double-chambered lute with 3 main strings (originally made of animal gut, now nylon), 4 frets, 2–3 long drone strings, and up to 15 sympathetic strings (made of copper and steel). It was probably invented in the 18th century in Kandahar, Kabul, Peshawar, Ghazni, or another city with a sizable Pashtun population. In the 19th century it was also known in Rampur and in Punjab (northern India). In India the Afghan *rubâb* was modified to become the *sarod*.



TABLA

The pair of hand-played, tunable drums that is the principal percussion instrument in North Indian classical music, also used since the middle of the 19th century in the Kabuli art music tradition. The *bâyân* (“left”) is a metal kettle drum whose pitch is modulated by pressure from the heel of the hand on the drum skin. The *tabla* or *dâhinâ* (“right”) is a wooden drum whose skin can be tuned to a precise pitch.



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