Music of Central Asia
VOL. 3
HOMAYUN SAKHI
THE ART OF THE AFGHAN RUBÂB
Smithsonian Folkways
Music of Central Asia is a co-production of the Aga Khan Music Initiative in Central Asia, a program of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, and the Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. The aim of the series, released worldwide by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, is to present leading exponents of Central Asia’s rich and diverse musical heritage to listeners outside the region. As a new generation of talented performers reinterprets this heritage — much of it ruptured or lost during the Soviet era — older traditions are reanimated and transformed. Music of Central Asia documents the work of musicians who represent both a mastery of their own tradition and a contemporary spirit of innovation expressed through new approaches to performance style, repertory, and technique. Each release includes a DVD with a documentary film on the featured performers as well as a map, musical instrument glossary, and short introduction to Music of Central Asia and the Aga Khan Music Initiative. These intimate, often poignant, musical portraits bring to life a group of remarkable artists whose creative achievements proclaim Central Asia’s prominence on any musical map of the world. — The Aga Khan Music Initiative in Central Asia was created in 2000 by His Highness the Aga Khan to contribute to the preservation, documentation, and further development of Central Asia’s musical heritage. The Music Initiative pursues its long-term goals both within its region of activity and worldwide. In Central Asia these goals include revitalizing important musical repertories by helping tradition-bearers pass on their knowledge and craft; building sustainable cultural institutions that can eventually be maintained by local organizations and communities; and supporting artists who are developing new approaches to the performance of Central Asian music. Worldwide, the Music Initiative strives to increase knowledge about Central Asia’s music and culture, particularly among students, and to nurture collaborations among musicians from different parts of Central Eurasia and beyond. For more information, see: http://www.akdn.org/Music

“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
Music of Central Asia and the Aga Khan Music Initiative

Homayun Sakhi: The Art of the Afghan Rubāb

Interactive Instrument Glossary

Map of Central Asia

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Homayun Sakhi: The Art of the Afghan Rubāb

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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’ils 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.
Homayun Sakhi is the outstanding Afghan rubāb 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 rubāb style to which Homayun has devoted his career not only survived but reached new creative heights.

Homayun’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, Homayun’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 rubāb 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 rubāb itself is of Central Asian origin—one of a family of double-chambered lutes that includes, among others, the Iranian tār, Tibetan dangen, and Pamir rubāb. While rooted in the raga tradition of North India, the cultivated art music performed on the Afghan rubāb also has strong stylistic links.
to Iran. The tabla, the pair of drums that accompany the rubab 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, Homayun’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.

Homayun Sakhi was born in Kabul in 1976 into one of Afghanistan’s leading musical families. From the age of ten, he studied rubab 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 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 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,
Homayun was on his way to Fremont,
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, Homayun devotes as much as
eight hours a day to practicing the rubāb. His exceptional talent and unwavering 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 ustād (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 rubāb."

Above: Homayun Sakhi with Afghan rubāb player Ustād Gholam Hossein and tabla player Ustād Wali Mohammad Nabizada at a concert in London.

Right: Homayun Sakhi tries out a Pamir rubāb from the Badakhshan region of Tajikistan.
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 tânpûrâ, or Armenian dûdûk, 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

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**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 1 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
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 rubab’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 (mâtrâs) 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-tāl:

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In the āstāi, 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-tāl [ending at 25:40], the performers shift to a faster section—a naghma-ye drut (fast instrumental piece) in tīn-tāl, a commonly used cycle of 16 mātrās.

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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 tihāā 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 lāreh, 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–Ga–Ma–Pa–Do–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 rubāb, and for tanbur or dutar (Central Asian long-necked lutes). Ustād Mohammad Omar popularized several such pieces by teaching them to his many rubāb students, and recorded one of them himself (available on Smithsonian Folkways CD 40439). Comparing Homayun’s version of yaman with that of Ustād Mohammad Omar reveals the extent to which Homayun has developed the art of rubāb playing in new directions.

Homayun’s introductory shāk 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 āstāi section of the composition, with tabla accompaniment in tīn-tāl. 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 āstāi. 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. Ustād 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 Homayun.

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 Homayun 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 damura, Homayun adapts it to the rubâb in a stylized performance that provides an appropriate conclusion to his brilliant exposition of Kabul art music.

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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