



Research Article

Musical instruments and wedding performance practice in 16th-century Azerbaijan: An iconographic analysis of a Safavid miniature

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Abstract

This study examines the 16th-century Safavid miniature entitled “The Ceremonial Display of the Wedding of Zuleykha and Aziz” as an iconographic source for Azerbaijani wedding music and performance practice. Although the painting visually illustrates a scene derived from Abdurrahman Jami’s masnavi “Yusuf and Zuleykha,” it simultaneously functions as a historical document reflecting musical ensemble structure, instrumental typology, and ceremonial acoustics in Safavid-period Azerbaijan. The primary aim of the research is to identify and analyze the musical instruments depicted in the miniature and to reconstruct the performance practice represented in the wedding scene. The study employs an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology combining iconographic analysis, organology, historical-literary interpretation, and performance-based examination. The spatial arrangement of musicians, the hierarchical placement of loud and soft instruments, and the relationship between instrumentalists, vocalists, and dancers are systematically evaluated. The findings reveal the collective performance of twelve musical instruments, including wind, percussion, and string instruments, organized within a structured ensemble model. The differentiated acoustic positioning of performers indicates a deliberate understanding of sound projection in open-air ceremonial settings. Furthermore, the presence of the ashik–balaban pairing and the sazanda ensemble demonstrates the integrated character of Azerbaijani wedding music, where ashik art, mugham elements, dance, and festive ceremonial music coexist within a syncretic performance framework. The study concludes that the miniature should be regarded not merely as a literary illustration but as a valuable musicological and organological source documenting ensemble organization, acoustic awareness, and wedding performance practice in 16th-century Azerbaijan.

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Introduction

The formative history of Azerbaijani miniature art has not been precisely determined. However, the stylistic and artistic characteristics of the miniatures created by Abdülmömin Muhammad al-Khoyi for the manuscript “*Varqa and Gulsha*” in the early 13th century (Topkapı Museum, Istanbul) indicate that these works were not the earliest examples but were based on an already established tradition. This suggests that miniature art had existed in Azerbaijan long before that period. The miniatures produced for “*Varqa and Gulsha*” are considered among the earliest known examples of this art form in Azerbaijan.

The content of miniature paintings generally consists of scientific, historical, and classical Eastern poetic works. These works constitute highly valuable sources not only in fields such as history, literature, and geography, but also in musicology. During the medieval period, several renowned miniature painters lived and worked in Azerbaijan. Artists who lived between the 13th and 17th centuries were often introduced to the world community by the names of the cities in which they lived and worked, particularly Tabriz.

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The pinnacle of the Azerbaijani miniature painting school is considered to be Nizamaddin Sultan Muhammad (1470–1555). Although many outstanding painters lived before him, Sultan Muhammad differed from earlier masters in that he did not merely imitate previous traditions; rather, he established a new stylistic approach that was continued by subsequent generations of artists. These painters worked in various Eastern countries and successfully represented what came to be known as the “Sultan Muhammad School.” For this reason, the well-known German art historian Philipp Walter Schulz (1864–1920) described the Tabriz school as a “mother school” (“Mutter Schule”) that exerted a fundamental influence on the development of miniature art in neighboring Eastern countries (Schulz, 1914, p. 57). Unfortunately, works belonging to the Tabriz painting school have at times been presented as examples of Persian art.

During this period, Azerbaijani painters were particularly active in three major cities—Tabriz, Qazvin, and Herat in Khorasan (present-day Afghanistan). Collectively, they established the Azerbaijani miniature painting school. Each of these centers developed its own distinctive handwriting and stylistic features.

Azerbaijani miniature works are highly diverse in subject matter. As noted above, their content primarily consists of scientific, historical, and classical Eastern literary texts. In addition to serving as important sources for various branches of scholarship, they are especially valuable for musicology. Alongside representations related to the mugham tradition, scenes depicting choreographic performances are of particular interest. Miniature paintings frequently portray musical instruments, vocal performers, and dancers. While dance scenes are clearly depicted, it is difficult to determine with certainty whether the vocal and instrumental performers represented are specifically performing mugham. Nevertheless, it may reasonably be assumed that figures holding a qaval or daf are engaged in mugham performance.

The Doctor of Art History, Professor Jamila Hasan-zade (1947–2022), discusses in her book *“The Magical Tales of Tabriz”* the miniature entitled *“The Ceremonial Display of the Wedding of Zuleykha and Aziz”* (Figure 1) (Hasan-zade, 2014, p. 97). The work was commissioned by Prince Sultan Ibrahim Mirza Safavi (1540–1577), nephew and son-in-law of Shah Tahmasp I (full name: Abul-Muzaffar Abul-Fath Sultan Shah Tahmasp ibn Shah Ismail al-Safavi, 1514–1576). Sultan Ibrahim Mirza served as the governor of Mashhad between 1556 and 1565. In 1560–1561, he commissioned an unknown Tabriz painter to prepare a refined manuscript decorated with Safavid miniatures.

The presence of an âşik ensemble in the miniature indicates that the depicted scene represents a Tabriz wedding. Although the painting formally portrays the wedding of Zuleykha and Aziz (the Prophet Joseph), the artist appears to have interpreted the Egyptian setting through the lens of his own experience, rendering the scene in the form of a Tabriz wedding—illustrating the principle that “the âşik sings what he sees.” By titling her book *“The Magical Tales of Tabriz,”* Jamila Hasan-zade likewise included miniatures associated with Tabriz in her collection.

The manuscript in question was based on the work *“Haft Awrang”* (“Seven Thrones”) by the Tajik poet and music scholar Abdurrahman Jami (1414–1492). More specifically, the figures of Zuleykha and Aziz depicted in the wedding scene are the protagonists of Jami’s poem *“Yusuf and Zuleykha.”* Jami composed *“Haft Awrang”* between 1468 and 1485. The collection includes seven masnavis, one of which is titled *“Yusuf and Zuleykha.”*

In the upper right section of the miniature titled *“The Ceremonial Display of the Wedding of Zuleykha and Aziz,”* the following Persian verses are inscribed:

To honor the Aziz of Egypt,
To scatter before that howdah,
There are golden trays filled with gold and jewels,
And other trays filled with gold and dirhams.

In the lower right and left sections of the miniature, the following lines appear:

The givers scattered jewels in such abundance,
As if rain were falling upon buds in a meadow.
So much gold and jewels were scattered by their hands
That the howdah remained submerged in gold and gems.

In the poem, the “Aziz of Egypt” refers to the Prophet Joseph in his role as the vizier of Egypt. It should be noted that these poetic excerpts were translated into Azerbaijani in a philological style by orientalist Haji Rauf Sheikhzamanli, senior researcher at the Fuzuli Institute of Manuscripts, and were rendered into poetic translation for the first time by poet, historian-ethnographer, screenwriter, and military officer (Lieutenant Colonel) Rafail Oguzturk Dagli.

This literary clarification is not merely contextual but foundational to the present study. While the miniature visually represents a scene derived from Jami’s poetic narrative, its significance extends beyond literary illustration. The painting

simultaneously functions as a visual record of ceremonial culture, ensemble organization, and instrumental practice in 16th-century Azerbaijan.

Accordingly, the primary aim of this research is to examine the miniature not only as a depiction of a literary episode, but as an iconographic source that documents Azerbaijani wedding music, instrumental typology, ensemble structure, and acoustic arrangement. By integrating literary interpretation with musicological and organological analysis, the study seeks to reveal how visual art preserves and reflects historical musical practice within its ceremonial and cultural framework.

Method

This study employs an interdisciplinary qualitative research approach combining iconographic analysis, organology, historical-literary interpretation, and performance-based examination. First, the miniature entitled “*The Ceremonial Display of the Wedding of Zuleykha and Aziz*” is analyzed through iconographic methodology. The spatial arrangement of performers, instrument positioning, gesture representation, and ensemble hierarchy are examined to identify structural and functional relationships within the depicted wedding ceremony. Second, an organological analysis is conducted. The musical instruments represented in the miniature are classified and compared with historically documented Azerbaijani instruments. Particular attention is given to instrument morphology, structural features, and performance techniques. The visual evidence is cross-examined with archaeological, literary, and ethnographic sources. Third, historical-textual analysis is applied to identify the literary context of the miniature. The poetic inscriptions included in the painting are examined in relation to Abdurrahman Jami’s “*Yusuf and Zuleykha*” in order to clarify narrative and symbolic elements. Finally, a performance-based analytical method is employed. The instruments depicted in the miniature are compared with corresponding instruments preserved in the author’s personal collection. Practical sound production and performance characteristics are considered in order to evaluate ensemble structure, acoustic organization, and rhythmic interpretation. This integrated methodological framework allows the miniature to be examined not only as a visual artwork, but as a historical document reflecting musical practice, ensemble structure, and ceremonial acoustics in 16th-century Azerbaijan.

Findings

In this miniature painting, we observe for the first time the collective performance of twelve Azerbaijani musical instruments. In the upper left section of the image, performers playing the karnay (straight trumpet, also known as geranay), two kos (large kettledrums), two zurnas, two qoshakos, a qoshanaghara (paired drum), and a spiral horn are depicted. In the lower left section appear a singer-daf player, a balaban performer, an ashik playing the saz, performers of the kamancha and the musiqar, as well as several dancers holding shakhshakh (clappers) in their hands.

The presence of a balaban player positioned next to the ashik is particularly noteworthy, as it suggests an ensemble-based performance practice rather than a strictly solo tradition (Abdurrahman Jami manuscript, Freer Gallery, Washington).

It should be noted that this work is preserved at the Freer Gallery of Art of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The foundation of the Eastern art collection housed there was established by the American businessman Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919) from Detroit, Michigan (Hasanzade, 2014, p. 170).

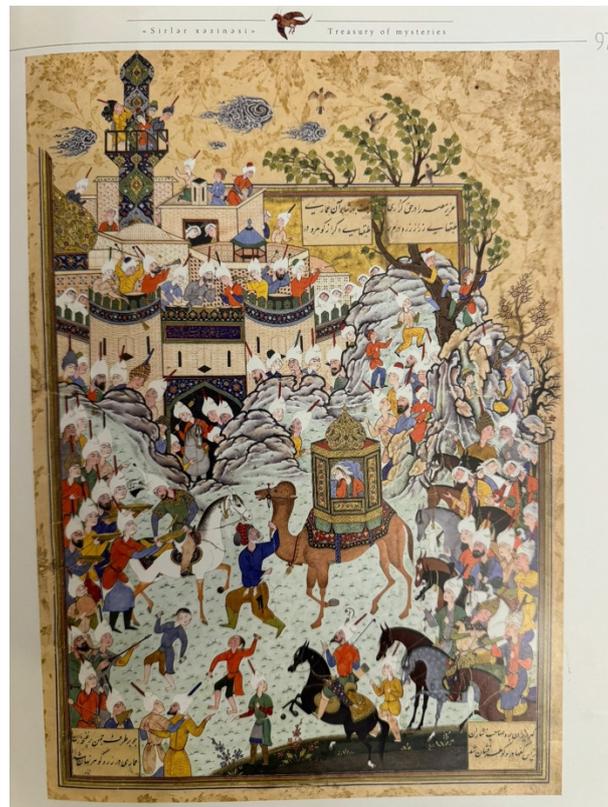


Figure 1. The Ceremonial Display of the Wedding of Zuleykha and Aziz. Freer Gallery. Washington

I present the miniature “*The Ceremonial Display of the Wedding of Zuleykha and Aziz*” in three formats:

- The complete original composition;
- A fragment focusing on the ensemble of percussion and wind instrument performers;
- A fragment depicting the instrumental ensemble (sazanda group) — the ashik playing the saz, the singer-daf player, and the performers of the balaban, kamancha, and musiqar.

In this scene, young women holding the ancient self-sounding instrument known as shakhshakh are shown dancing.

Our purpose in presenting the work in fragmentary form is to provide a broader and more detailed representation of the musicians under discussion. The performers are arranged in a specific manner in the square in order to achieve optimal acoustic resonance. The musicians playing the louder instruments are positioned on the balcony of the fortress (Figure 2). This arrangement ensures that the powerful and penetrating sounds of the loud instruments do not overwhelm or fatigue the audience. Instead, their sound projects outward through the upper air layer, allowing it to travel over greater distances.



Figure 2. The ceremonial display of the wedding of Zuleykha and Aziz. Fragment from the performance of the percussion ensemble

In Figure 3, the performers of the softer-toned instruments are depicted performing almost among the guests. In the lower section of the miniature “*The Ceremonial Display of the Wedding of Zuleykha and Aziz*,” the balaban player accompanying the ashik presents a highly unique organological image.

As is well known, the balaban is one of the instruments that has been subject to politicized claims. However, various reliable sources confirm its belonging to the Azerbaijani people. From historical-archaeological, etymological, linguistic, literary, ethnographic, miniature-painting, and performance-practice perspectives, all available parameters indicate that the balaban was created by the Azerbaijani Turks. The presented miniature painting constitutes a clear visual example supporting this conclusion.

In the fragment shown in Figure 3, the singer-daf player, the ashik playing the saz, and the performers of the balaban, kamancha, and musiqar appear together as part of the sazanda ensemble. Although the specific piece they are performing cannot be determined, the hand and foot movements of the dancers holding shakhshakh provide insight into the rhythmic character of the melody.

From the dancers' poses, one can clearly perceive the 6/8 meter—expressed in folk terminology as the “three almonds and one walnut” rhythm. This rhythmic structure is visually reflected in their gestures.

Figure 3 also offers evidence that the now-forgotten instrument musiqar once adorned Azerbaijani wedding ceremonies, serving as an integral component of festive musical performance.



Figure 3. The ceremonial display of the wedding of Zuleykha and Aziz. Fragment from the performance of the sazanda ensemble

The number of musical instruments preserved in my personal collection is close to one hundred. I intend to perform all of the instruments depicted in the miniature painting (with the exception of the qoshakos). The instruments will be listed in accordance with the Azerbaijani alphabet based on the Latin script.



Figure 4. Silver Balaban decorated with mother-of-pearl and gemstones

Balaban (Mey) – All parameters (archaeological, historical, etymological, ethnographic evidence, literary sources, miniature illustrations, etc.) confirm that this instrument belongs to the Azerbaijani Turks. The name of the instrument is derived from the combination of two Turkic words: *bala* (small, delicate, subtle, gentle, tender) and *ban* (sound or voice).

In some regions of Azerbaijan, as well as in Türkiye, the balaban is referred to as *mey*. Here, the word *mey* does not denote wine or an intoxicating alcoholic beverage. Rather, in a figurative sense, it signifies captivating, pleasurable, and emotionally affecting beauty. It is therefore not coincidental that Turks sometimes give beautiful girls the name *Meykhanim*.

In 2023, the sound range of the balaban was expanded by Ramesh Pashayev, a student of the Azerbaijan National Conservatory (currently a graduate at the bachelor's level), from the pitch D of the small octave to E of the second octave.

The “silver balaban” presented in Figure 4 belongs to the well-known master instrument maker Balabey Balabeyov.

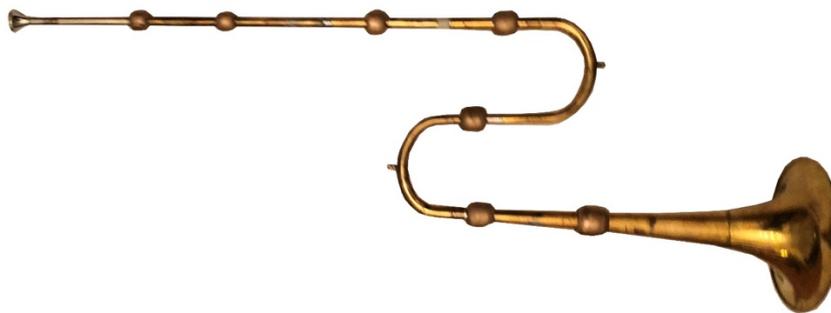


Figure 5. Spiral Horn (Gavdum)

Spiral Horn (Gavdum) – This instrument was first reconstructed in its medieval form on the basis of our project (Figure 5). Subsequently, master craftsman Teymur Huseynov, a staff member of the Azerbaijan National Conservatory, applied a pedal mechanism to the instrument, thereby enabling the production of a consecutive (chromatically organized) pitch sequence (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Spiral horn with pedal mechanism

This instrument, referred to in Persian as *gavdum* (also translated as “ox-tail trumpet”), became widespread in the Turkic world under the name *burmali boru* (spiral horn).



Figure 7. Daf

Daf – a single-headed percussion instrument. Although in contemporary performance practice and colloquial speech it is often equated with the *qaval*, the two instruments differ structurally. Unlike the *qaval*, the frame of the *daf* is fitted with four or five pairs of small (miniature) metal jingles in order to produce resonant metallic sounds (Figure 7). These jingles further enrich the instrument’s sonic palette and timbral qualities.

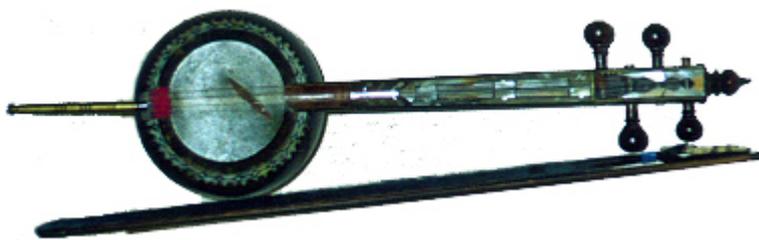


Figure 8. Kamancha

Kamancha – a bowed string instrument played with a bow (*qemchil* or *kaman*) (Figure 8). Approximately in the 4th–3rd centuries BCE, the earliest bowed string instrument—the *rebab*—was invented in Ancient Egypt. In subsequent periods, the bowed *rebab* spread to other regions.

In Azerbaijan, during the first centuries CE, the *kamancha* was developed on the basis of this instrument. The word *kamancha* is a hybrid term formed from elements of two languages: *kaman* (Persian) and *chal* (Turkic). In our language, *kaman* means bow (also used to denote the weapon for shooting arrows). The term *kaman-chal* underwent phonetic contraction, resulting in the pronunciation *kamancha*, meaning “an instrument played with a bow.”



Figure 9. Karanay (Straight Trumpet or Geranay)

Karanay – also referred to as the straight trumpet or *geranay* (Figure 9). Unlike other traditional wind instruments such as the *zurna*, *tutek*, *ney*, *sumsu* (*sipsi*), and *balaban*, the *karanay* has no finger holes along its tube and therefore does not produce a consecutive scale.

Only overtone pitches can be performed on this instrument.



Figure 10. Improved Kos

Kos (improved version) – Javanshir Gasimov (1955–2025), former staff member and junior research associate of the Azerbaijan National Conservatory, introduced a special tension-adjustment mechanism inside the body of the instrument, similar to that of the *timpani*, thereby enabling the tuning of the instrument (Figure 10).

As a result, the *kos* can now be tuned to any desired tonal center.



Figure 11. Qoshanaghara (Qoshadumbul)

Qoshanaghara (Qoshadumbul) – One of the instruments depicted on an archaeological artifact (a ceramic vessel) discovered during excavations in the city of Jigamish in Southern Azerbaijan is the qoshanaghara (Huseyni, 1976, p. 4). This vessel is dated to approximately 7,000–8,000 years ago.

In ancient times, the instrument was referred to as *qoshadumbul*. The first component of the word, *qosba*, means “pair” or “two” in our language. The second component, *dumb*, represents an onomatopoeic imitation of the sound produced by the instrument.

The qoshanaghara shown in Figure 11 is a modern reconstruction.



Figure 12. Musiqar (Chinchig, Shamama, Miskal)

Musiqar (Chinchig, Shamama, Miskal) – the name of a legendary bird regarded as a symbol of the art of music, described as having numerous holes in its beak and producing various sounds when the wind blows. The instrument derives its name from this mythical bird (Figure 12).

The instrument has been praised in the poetry of Nizami Ganjavi, Muhammad Fuzuli, Govsi Tabrizi, Mirza Ismayil Gasir, Seyid Azim Shirvani, and other poets.

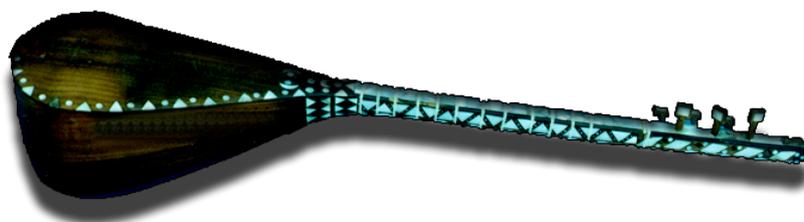


Figure 13. Saz

Saz – a stringed instrument played with a plectrum (*mizrab*). In ancient Turkic, the word *saz* meant reed or cane (Figure 13).

The instrument is also regarded as one of the principal symbols of the Turkic world and of Turkic spiritual culture.



Figure 14. Shakhshakh

Shakhshakh – an idiophone (self-sounding instrument) that produces sound through a combined technique, namely both shaking and striking (Figure 14).

When shaken, the instrument produces sounds such as “shaggashaq,” “shaqshaq,” “shaqhashaq,” and “shaqsharaq.” The name *shakhshakh* derives from the onomatopoeic imitation of the sound it produces.

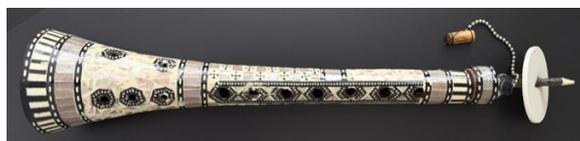


Figure 15. Mother-of-Pearl Zurna

Zurna – According to archaeological materials, the homeland of this instrument is considered to be the territory of Azerbaijan (Figure 15). In 1947, archaeologist Gardashkhan Aslanov (1912–1991) discovered a prototype of a zurna

made from deer antler in a burial site he excavated near the city of Mingachevir, on the banks of the Kura River (Aslanov, 1961, pp. 236–239). Specialists estimate that this instrument is approximately 3,500 years old.

Honored Artist Shirzad Fattaliyev expanded the range of the zurna from G in the small octave to B-flat in the third octave.

Conclusion

This study has, for the first time, examined the 16th-century miniature painting entitled “*The Ceremonial Display of the Wedding of Zuleykha and Aziz*” as an independent object of musicological and organological analysis. The research demonstrates that the figures of Zuleykha and Aziz depicted in the scene correspond to the protagonists of Abdurrahman Jami’s masnavi “*Yusuf and Zuleykha*”, and that the “Aziz of Egypt” represented in the miniature refers to the Prophet Yusuf in his role as the vizier of Egypt.

Beyond its literary identification, the miniature has been analyzed as a visual document of Azerbaijani wedding culture and musical practice. The depiction of twelve musical instruments performing collectively provides rare iconographic evidence of ensemble structure, spatial-acoustic arrangement, and performance hierarchy in Safavid-period ceremonial contexts. The differentiated placement of loud and soft instruments reflects a conscious acoustic organization, indicating an advanced understanding of sound projection in open-air environments.

The presence of the ashik–balaban pairing, the sazanda ensemble, percussion and wind groups (tabbaz), and dancing figures performing in a recognizable 6/8 rhythmic pattern reveals a multilayered performance structure that integrates ashik art, mugham practice, dance, and festive ceremonial music. This confirms the syncretic character of Azerbaijani musical culture, where poetic narrative, instrumental expression, and choreographic movement function as an organic whole.

Through comparative analysis with instruments preserved in the author’s personal collection, the study bridges iconographic evidence with practical performance knowledge, reinforcing the historical continuity of these instruments within Azerbaijani musical tradition.

Consequently, the miniature should not be viewed merely as an artistic illustration of a literary narrative, but as a valuable musicological source that documents ensemble practice, instrument typology, acoustic awareness, and the ceremonial-musical aesthetics of 16th-century Azerbaijan.

Biodata of Author



Prof. Dr. **Abbasgulu Necefzade** (b. 1957, Shamakhi) is an Azerbaijani musician, academic, and researcher. He completed his education at the Azerbaijan State Conservatory named after Uzeyir Hajibeyli, specializing in orchestral conducting and performance. Since 1976, he has worked as a performer and ensemble leader, achieving recognition in various national and international competitions. He has contributed significantly to Azerbaijani musical culture through television programs and international performances across Europe, Asia,

and the United States. Necefzade has held academic positions at the Azerbaijan National Conservatory and the Azerbaijan State University of Culture and Arts, leading research laboratories on national musical instruments and music studies. He earned the title of Doctor of Arts in 2007 and Doctor of Fine Arts in 2014. He is the author of over 250 scientific articles and more than 40 books and has composed over 60 musical works. His research focuses on organology, traditional instruments, and music theory. He has also contributed to the restoration of several historical instruments and has received multiple national awards, including the “Nizami Gencevi” commemorative badge (2021). He continues his academic work at the Baku Music Academy.

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