

# Music of Turkmenistan

Bordering Afghanistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and the Caspian Sea, the landscape of Turkmenistan mostly consists of the Karakum and the Kyzylkum deserts, and, as a result of this harsh terrain as well as to escape recurring invasions from, amongst others, the Persians, Greeks, Oghuz Turks, and Mongols, the Turkmen people have traditionally led a nomadic existence; apart from cities like Merv and Konjikala, which, due to their strategic locations on the Silk Road, gained fame and cultural prominence on par with Samarkhand and Bukhara, Turkmenistan did not really become urbanized until after it came under Soviet rule. The traditional music of this Central Asian country was shaped by the nomadic culture as well as the shamanic beliefs that were prevalent before the advent of Islam in the seventh century CE. Like the *akyns* of neighboring Kazakhstan and nearby Kyrgyzstan, the traveling shamans and minstrels of Turkmenistan, the *bakshys*, were culturally prominent and held in high esteem. In addition, the influence of the invaders played a role in the development of Turkmen music, as is evident by the occurrence of various Greek mythologies in Turkmen folklore, in the use of the Chagatai language—which evolved in the Mongol Chagatai Khanate—for lyrics and poems, and in the classical *mugham* music that has Persian roots. The term Turkmen too came from the Oghuz Turks; it was first used to refer to the Oghuz Turks that had converted to Islam, and later came to include the entire population of the region.

## Under the Soviets

In the 19th century, the expansionist policies of Imperial Russia brought Turkmenistan under their domain; it wasn't an easy conquest, given that the tribal Turkmens had a fearsome reputation as fighters and slave traders. The Russians introduced European culture in the country, and this practice was continued by the Soviets after they took over in 1917. They built theaters and opera houses for European classical music, opera, and ballet performances, and established music schools following Western teaching methods. The traditional Turkmen culture was severely undermined—many manuscripts of the great Turkmen poet Magtumguly Pyragy, for instance, were destroyed for being written in Arabic script; the Soviets considered everything in Arabic to have a religious connotation, and there was no place for outdated superstitions in the newly minted Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan became an independent nation on December 25, 1991, and Saparmurat Niyazov became President for Life, with a rather bizarre personality cult. Reviving traditional culture was high on his agenda, and, to this purpose, he banned European classical music, pop music, and all forms of recorded music; the first was “unnecessary”, the second against “Turkmen mentality”, and the third killed live talent. His successor, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, overturned many of his decrees, but Turkmen musicians are expected to follow a state-approved dress code and face many other challenges.

## Traditional Forms

### Bakshy Tradition

The *bakshy* tradition of Turkmenistan began with the shamanistic practices of pre-Islamic times, when the *bakshy* singers traveled around the region with their *dutars* (the *bakshys* generally built their own

instruments), singing *dastans* (epic songs), performing religious rituals, and working as healers. The treatment was a combination of herbal concoctions, magic spells, and exorcism, and music was a part of it as well as performed for pure entertainment. The *bakshy* trained for long years under an *Ostad* (master), perfecting *dutar* playing, the high vocal techniques, and the memorization of the various *dastans*—Turk Oghuz *dastans* like “Ker-ogly” and “Zokhra and Takhir”, and Persian *dastans* like “Leyli and Mejnun” and “Shabakhram”; the works of Magtumguly Pyragy were particularly popular with the *bakshys*. Eventually, the trained *bakshy* performed solo or accompanied by two other instrumentalists at public and private ceremonies, and at *ghahvekhanes* (coffee houses); the *bakshys* had to follow some strict rules about not eating or drinking anything apart from what they had brought with them from their homes. The music performances often began in the evening and lasted until dawn, and were usually divided into three sections, with the songs in each section planned to gradually lift the listener to a state of an emotional and spiritual high. After the advent of Islam, the shamanistic beliefs decreased, but the *bakshy* traditions of music and healing continued until discredited by the Soviets; the music was appropriated for the stage, and the “fraudulent medicine” was banned. Asqar Balliev and Tirkesh Asqarov are two well-known *bakshy* performers.

## Folk Songs

Turkmen folk songs mark all the important important life-cycle events—birth, circumcision, wedding, death—as well as the religious festivals and public holidays. *Yaryar* songs are performed at weddings, *Yaremezan* songs are sung by young people in choruses during *Novruz* (New Year), and during Ramzan Bairam (end of Ramazan) and Kurban Bairam (festival of sacrifice in honor of the Sufi saint Hizir), Sufi dances and Sufi *zikr* (remembrance of Allah and the Prophet) songs are performed. Sahy Jepbarow, Atabai Tsharykuliev, and Sarwar Pahalwan are notable Turkmen folk singers.

## Mukamlar

*Mukamlar* are instrumental pieces in classical Turkmen music that developed from the Persian *astgah* music, and are mainly performed on the *dutar*; they may also be performed in ensembles with the *gyjak* and *tuiduk*. Known singularly as *mukam* and performed mainly in Ashkhabad (also written as Ashgabat/City of Love), this type of music has melodic structures, microtonal scales, and unmeasured notes.

## European Classical Music

Ashkhabad became a cultural center under the Soviets, and European classical music was highly popular. Many Turkmen musicians trained in symphonic music and other classical genres. The Theater of Opera and Ballet was established in 1941 and Turkmen operas like *Sud'ba bakhshi* (The fate of the Bakhshi) and *Gyul' i bil' bil'* (The rose and the nightingale) were performed to great acclaim. Some leading Turkmen classical musicians include tenor Gurt Nazarov, composer Veli Mukhatov (he composed the State Anthem of the Turkmen SSR), composer Sergey Balasarian, composer Nury Halmammedov, and soprano singer Annagul Annakuliyeva.

## Instrumentation

### Stringed Instruments

#### Dutar

Closely related to the *setar* and *tanbur*, and made from a single block of mulberry wood, the Turkmen

*dutar* has a shorter neck than other Central Asian *dutars*, a pear-shaped resonator, 13 adjustable steel frets, and two strings that may be made of gut, twisted silk, or nylon. It is tuned in fourths, played by strumming and plucking, and is widely used in *dastans* by the *bakshy* singers and other folk music—in *mukamlar*, *saltiklar*, *kirkklar*, *navoir*, and other music styles. The sound is deep and melodious.

### **Gyjak**

Called *kobuz* by the Kazakhs, the *gyjak* has four strings and is held upright, resting on the floor on a spike, and played with a horsehair bow. It has a rather mournful sound, and it is generally played in an ensemble with the *dutar* and other instruments.

### **Gopuz**

This is a small jaw harp, consisting of an elliptical or triangular steel frame with two extended arms and a thin metal strip in between. The instrument makes a twanging sound when the player holds the narrow end of the frame against the lips and breaths into it, while simultaneously manipulating the thin strip by hand. The *gopuz* is particularly popular with children and women. It is similar to a ceramic wind instrument called *oskar*.

## **Percussion Instruments/Vurmalylar**

### **Daf**

The *daf* is a large, single-headed frame drum with an animal skin membrane. It is held at shoulder level or leaning against the knees, and drummed at various spots on the taut membrane with the palm and fingers. The frame may have jingles for creating additional sound effects.

### **Nagara**

The *nagara* is a medium-sized, barrel-like, double-headed drum that is played with a curved stick on one side and with the palm on the other. It is generally held under the arm with a strap around the neck.

## **Wind Instruments/Uflemeliler**

### **Tuiduk**

Made of apricot wood, the *tuiduk* (known as *zurna* or *surnay* in other parts of Central Asia) is a conical, double reed instrument, with eight finger-holes, and its high, piercing sound makes it ideal for out-door playing during ceremonies or as part of military ensembles. Traditionally, *tuiduks* are played in pairs, with the players standing opposite each other, pointing the instruments skywards, and moving them in circular movements as they are being played; this ritual is connected to the shamanic rituals that preceded Islam. There are different stories about how the *tuiduk* was invented—by Archangel Djibrail to give life to Adam, according to one legend, and by the Devil, according to another, which explains why the bell apertures are known as *seytan delikleri* (devil's hole).

### **Dili Tuiduk**

Traditionally, shepherds used this clarinet-like, single-reed, and six finger-holed instrument to play a variety of folk tunes. There are two types of *dili tuiduk*, one with a closed reed end and another with an open reed end.

## **Gagry Tuiduk**

Also known as *ney*, the *gagry tuiduk* is a long, end-blown, reed flute with seven playing holes. It is a very ancient instrument that, going by the samples found by archaeologists at Ur and in Egypt, has been around for 5000 years. The name probably comes from the similarity of its sound to the two-voiced guttural singing styles—*kargyra* and *kharkhira*—prevalent with the Tuva, Yakut, and Khakass groups. The *gagry tuiduk* is held in both hands, and is played to produce a main melody with an underlying drone; while it is possible to extract several different pitches from a single instrument, it is more common to use a number of instruments with a different pitch each.

## **Contemporary Currents**

### **Modern Music**

Turkmen pop and rock music is influenced by traditional music as well as by modern Turkish and Western music. The folk-contemporary fusions are very popular and dominate much of the modern music scene. The Ministry of Culture promotes TV music programs like “Star of the Year”, music competitions “Yanlan, Diyarım”, and international music festivals like Avaza (held at Avaza, a Turkmen seaside resort on the Caspian coast) in order to encourage new talent. Some of the leading pop singers include Jahan Tagiyeva, Begmyrat Annamyradov/DJ Begga, Aman Dali, Amangul Mammetyazova, Dinara Saparova, and Leyli Kakajanova, and some notable Turkmen rock musicians are Shahzoda, Raikhon, and Zindan.

### **Music and Politics**

The personality cult of President Niyazov (also known as *Turkmenbashi*/Leader of Turkmen) made patriotic songs and songs praising the leader pretty much mandatory; if such songs weren't part of the repertoire, a musician could very well forget about getting ahead. The situation hasn't changed to a great extent under President Berdymukhamedov. While different forms of music are now officially allowed, the government maintains a tight rein on creative expression, deciding what can be performed and who can be featured on the Turkmenistan's main TV music channel “Turkmen Owazy” (Turkmen Melody) and the main radio music channel “Owaz” (Melody); access to the Internet is also state-controlled.

Turkmen musicians who have performed abroad without official permission, given “inappropriate” media interviews, made bold romantic videos, or sported overtly Western hair styles and fashions have had to face plenty of flak. In 2010, the opera singer Gulyaram Baltaeva was summarily dismissed from her teaching position at the National Conservatory for participating in a concert in Singapore, and in 2011, the pop singers Maksat Karakbayev/Ma-Ro and Murad Ovezov were arrested and sentenced to two years imprisonment for either giving an interview on Turkish television or for not following the prescribed dress code; the government officials haven't given any exact explanation for their arrests. Given these kind of constraints and uncertainties at home, many talented Turkmen musicians have found it necessary to move to Russia, Turkey, Europe, or America.

### **Resources**

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Belger (Turkmenistan music) - [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjRdc\\_-avD0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjRdc_-avD0)  
State Anthem of the Turkmen SSR - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPEfz3DVhOE>