

## MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF THE TURKIC PEOPLES OF THE VOLGA REGION AND URALS

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**Abstract.** National musical instruments are part of the culture and history of the people. They reflect the characteristics, temperament and mentality of the people, the conditions for their formation as an ethnos. Variety, rich sound, unusual melody pattern – national musical instruments create all this. Every ancient musical culture has its origins in ancient rites. Folk music of the Turkic peoples of the Volga region and the Urals was no exception. Singing was accompanied by pagan and mystical sacraments, holidays, household and daily rituals such as hunting, harvesting and much more, including military campaigns.

The sound of folk instruments has a specific musical pattern and voice that distinguishes the musical instruments of the Turkic peoples from other ethnic groups that have settled since ancient times in the Urals and the Volga region. This is due to the fact that the Tatars and Bashkirs have always preferred melodic musical instruments that allow performing a branched, rich melody in a wide range. Although the list of musical instruments has about fifty varieties, this article analyses the most characteristic and ancient ones.

**Keywords:** the Turkic peoples of the Volga region, Musical instruments, music culture, ethnic group, kurai, Psaltery, kubyz, Dumbra, Zurna, Saz, taglian-accordion, ethnic music.

## VOLGOS REGIONO IR URALO TIURKŲ TAUTŲ MUZIKOS INSTRUMENTAI

**Santrauka.** Nacionaliniai muzikos instrumentai yra tautos kultūros ir istorijos dalis. Jie atspindi žmonių charakterius, temperamentą ir mentalitetą, jų, kaip etnoso, formavimosi sąlygas. Įvairovė, sodrus skambesys, neįprasta melodijos linija – visa tai sukuria liaudies muzikos instrumentai. Kiekvienos senovinės muzikos kultūros šaknys glūdi senovinėse apeigose. Volgos regiono ir Uralo tiurkų tautų liaudies muzika nebuvo išimtis. Dainavimas lydėjo pagoniškus ir mistinius sakramentus, šventes, buitines ir kasdienius ritualus, tokius kaip medžioklė, derliaus nuėmimas ir daug kitų, įskaitant ir karo žygius.

Liaudies instrumentų garsas yra ypatingas. Tiurkų tautų muzikos instrumentai išsiskiria savita muzikine melodija ir skambesiu iš kitų etninių grupių, nuo seno apsigyvenusių Urale ir Volgos regione, muzikos instrumentų. Taip yra dėl to, kad totoriai ir baškirai visada pirmenybę teikė melodingiems muzikos instrumentams, leidžiantiems atlikti šakotą, sodrią melodiją plačiu diapazonu. Nors

muzikos instrumentų sąrašą galėtų sudaryti net apie penkiasdešimt įvairių vietų, šiame straipsnyje analizuojami būdingiausi ir seniausi iš jų.

**Raktiniai žodžiai:** Volgos regiono tiurkų tautos, muzikos instrumentai, muzikos kultūra, etninė grupė, kurai, psalteris, kobyzas, dombra, zurna, sazas, taglianas-akordeonas, etninė muzika.

## Introduction

Any ancient musical culture has its origin in ancient rituals. This can also be said about the folk music of the Turkic peoples of the Volga region and the Urals. Pagan and mystical sacraments, holidays and solemn events, household and everyday rituals, military campaigns were accompanied by music. Musical traditions have many common features with the rhythmic peculiarities (angemitonic pentatonics) of the Turkic and Finno-Ugric peoples of the Volga region, going back to the era of the musical ethnos of paganism. Tatar and Bashkir folk music, consonant with the music of the peoples of the Far East, is based on the flavour of eastern traditions, and traditional Arab-Muslim musical instruments fit harmoniously into folk music. Nowadays accordion – talyanka, kurai, kubyz, surnai, dumbra, scimitar, Tatar gusli, saz, etc. are the most famous instruments of Tatar musical folklore (see Annexes No. XV–XVI). Such folk instruments as kurai, kubyz, dumbra, kyl-kubyz, sornai play a significant role in the spiritual culture of the Bashkirs. Historical information about them goes back centuries, which indicates a sufficiently developed spiritual culture of these peoples.

Researchers tend to say that the history of the **Bashkir kurai**, a distant and ancient relative of the flute, goes back to the depths of the Stone Age. No wonder how the Bashkirs are proud of their instrument. The image of the kurai decorates the emblem of Bashkiria, and its sound can be heard even in its national anthem. Since ancient times, kurai was made from the stem of a reed-type plant that grew in the Urals. There are many similar wind instruments in different cultures, but special voice of the kurai can be easily distinguished from others. The voice sounds better in an open space – its sound, which spreads over long distances, obtains a special depth. Thanks to this feature, the instrument became popular among the Bashkir people, who were engaged in cattle breeding and hunting. Today kurai is still the most frequent guest at any national holidays.

There are many versions about the origin of the kurai in the Bashkir epic. The most popular parable: beautiful melody attracted a hero when he was walking in the river valley. A young man began to search for the source of the melody, but he

only heard the sounds of the plant stems singing in the wind. Then he cut off this stalk and made the first kurai from it.

The tool is classified according to the material from which it is made:

**Ziz kurai** (copper) – a slit whistle flute is made of a brass tube with a diameter of 20–23 mm, the length of the tool is 260 mm and it has 7 finger holes. Sometimes other metals like silver, aluminium are used instead of brass. Silver kurai, partially or completely made of silver, is popular as an expensive souvenir and is often decorated with intricate ornaments.

**Agach kurai** (wooden) is made of maple, hazel or viburnum wood. The length of the tool is 250–300 mm and it has from 4 to 6 playing holes.

**Kamyl kurai** was made from cereal stalks for more than one hundred years ago. For its manufacture a longer stalk (120–180 mm) was taken and several holes were made in it for playing. The diameter was 3–3.5 mm. The tongue-squeaker had a length of 20–25 mm, a width of 2.5–3 mm. This was quite enough for simple melodies after the end of the working day in the field. A suitable stem of any steppe grass served as a material for the **sor-kurai**, which was used to give signals mainly during hunting or hiking.

The kurai also differs in length. The **classical kurai**, like the **Kazan kurai**, has a length from 600 to 800 mm, but the Kazan kurai is made of metal pipes. The diameter at the top of the tool is 20–30 mm, at the base it is 10–15 mm. The number of finger holes is from 5 to 7. The **nugai kurai** (Nogai), which is considered female, is slightly shorter, up to 700 mm, and has only two finger holes. The first hole on the front side is located at a distance of 5 fingers from the bottom edge. The second one is 4 fingers higher than the edge of the first hole.

There are musical instruments in the world that are identical to the kurai. For example, the Mongolian “tsuur”, the Kirgizian “choor”, the mountain Altaians “chogur”, “shore” in China. The Buryat Khongodorovs call such an instrument “suur”. The Kazakhs “sybyzgy” is a musical wind instrument similar to a pipe. The Turkish pipe or shepherd’s horn, which in different localities is known as koval or guval can be considered the ancestor of the kurai.

The Tatar stringed musical instrument **psaltery**, unlike its related analogues, has a wide variety of frets and is tuned in pentatonic, which reflects the fret structure of Tatar folk music. It differs from the Udmurt gusli by an odd number of resonator holes. If there are 3 holes in a gusli, one is at the top, and the others are at the sides of the upper deck; if there are 5 or 7 holes, then one hole is in the centre, and the others are symmetrically around it.

The first mention of psaltery among the Tatars dates back to the 1550s. The oldest tradition of their manufacture has been preserved to the present times. The shape and size of the case, the manufacturing technology depend on the local traditions and the individual experience of the master. The psaltery is mostly helmet-shaped, sometimes with a truncated top, the body is wooden. In the past strings (from 10 to 21) were made from animal intestines, tarred nettle or hemp fibre, nowadays they are made of metal.

Playing techniques such as “glissando” (strings that are not muffled by the fingers of the left hand give sound) and “arpeggiato” are widely used (various combinations of strokes are used, including legato, staccato). The system of the gusli is angemitonic, the two lower strings are tuned in a quart, the rest are tuned according to the steps of the major (sometimes minor) pentatonic. While playing, the psaltery is held horizontally on the knees, the top to yourself, sometimes horizontally or obliquely on the table. A well-made instrument has clear, beautiful sound and good acoustic properties. In the past, psaltery used to be widespread in the north-east of Tatarstan. People could perform solo on the psaltery, in an ensemble with other instruments, accompany by singing, dancing. The experience of playing music on the harp has been consistently passed down from generation to generation.

There are Wing-shaped (ringing), Helmet-shaped (psalter-psalter), Lyre-like, Stationary (including key-like, rectangular and table-like), Plucked, Keyboard psalteries. The harp, kifara, lyre, psalter, zhetygen are varieties of gusli in the world culture. In addition, the ancient Greek kithara, the Armenian canon and the Iranian santur have similarities with the gusli. Psaltery is widely used in the musical culture of the Chuvash, Mari (cheremis), Finns (Finnish kantele), the Baltic peoples (Latvian kokle and Lithuanian kanklės).

Despite its centuries-old history, **kubyz**, one of the oldest Bashkir musical instruments, remains very popular today. It refers to the tongue-plucked types of instruments – the performer makes the metal tongue of the instrument vibrate, which causes the sound. A unique sound of kubyz is born with the help of special pinching movements of the fingers. A lot depends on the skill of the performer. Due to special breathing techniques and the work of the articulatory apparatus the instrument also acquires fullness and richness of sound. The deep velvety sound of this instrument has truly magical properties: it calms the nervous system, immerses into a state of pleasant relaxation. It is believed that young children calm down faster and fall asleep from these sounds. Cows give more milk when they listen to kubyz<sup>1</sup>.

1 R. G. Rakhimov, 2010, p. 73–75.

**Dumbra** and similar stringed plucking instruments are widely distributed among peoples with Turkic roots: Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kirghizs and, of course, Tatars, Bashkirs. Each nation has its own variety with a unique name: dombra, dumbira, dutar. The dumbra most resembles the Kazakh dombra, but compared to the Kazakh one, it has a smaller number of strings – only 3, as well as a shortened neck. It is also compared to the Russian balalaika. The name of the instrument has Arabic roots and means “tormenting the heart”.

The Tatar dumbra is a two- or three-stringed chordophone, 80–100 cm long, the pear-shaped or shovel-shaped body was made by chiselling a wooden billet with subsequent stretching of the skin on it or gluing a thin pine plank that played the role of a resonator. Dumbra, one of the oldest plucked musical products, which is already about 4000 years old, is used quite rarely today, many copies are lost and samples from Europe are often used. However, it is difficult to imagine a traditional Tatar wedding without it. Currently, the interest in teaching students to play the Tatar folk instrument is reviving in the music schools of Tatarstan.

The **Zurna**, a wind instrument came to us from the East. Its name is similar in most countries, but it may differ. For example, some people call it “surnai”. “Zurna” means “festive flute”. It looks like a wooden tube with holes, one of which is located on the opposite side from the other. Zurna is similar to the oboe and is considered one of its initial versions. Zurna is made in different ways in various countries, diverse shapes and materials are used. Today it is popular in the Caucasus, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, India and the Balkans.

Traditionally, the zurna was made from the animals’ horns, mainly cattle (today it is made of solid wood), so it has a relatively small length – no more than 400 mm. There is also a mouthpiece zurna and tongue type zurna. They differ from each other by the presence of a squeaker and the number of holes. It is known that the mouthpiece-type zurna was widely used both for playing music and for signalling during hunting and wars. Civilians – shepherds and cattle breeders – preferred the tongue-like zurna more. The range of the instrument is up to one and a half octaves, which is compensated by a unique, rich and piercing sound.

Zurna is not used in symphony orchestras, but its music perfectly accompanies solemn ceremonies and folk holidays, the performance of traditional dances and songs. One of the zurnachis (a musician who plays the zurna) performs a melody, while the second reproduces long sounds. These low, prolonged sounds are also called bourbon sounds. A third musician often participates in the performance, who beats a complex unusual rhythm with blows. Zurna has a rich history. Its predecessor in ancient Greece, called aulos, was used in theatrical performances,

sacrifices and military campaigns. Later, it spread to the Asian countries, the Near and Middle East.

It is strange to hear that zurna was also popular in Russia where it was called surna. Anyone can find a mention of it in the literary sources of the 13th century. The lines of poems – monuments of ancient writing, paintings of Azerbaijan can serve as evidence of the use of zurna in the culture of Ancient Azerbaijan. The instrument was popularly called “gara zurna”, which was associated with the shade of the trunk and the sound volume. The sound of the zurna accompanied various events: Azerbaijanis sent their sons to the army, celebrated weddings, organized games and sports competitions. The zurna melody also accompanied the bride when she went to the house of her groom. The sounds of the instrument helped the participants to win in sports competitions. The same is true during haymaking and harvesting. Zurna was used together with gaval in traditional rituals.

**Saz** is a musical instrument of the lute type from the tambour family. It is widespread in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Afghanistan, Iran, Türkiye and other Eastern countries; among Kurds, Tatars and Bashkirs; a typical musical instrument of the Ashugs of Azerbaijan and Armenia. It consists of three parts: a pear-shaped body, a neck (vulture) and a head. The strings are tuned using pegs that are attached to the head. Saz pegs located at an angle of 90 degrees, not opposite each other, as in most stringed instruments. A pear-shaped body, a neck with obtrusive frets, a wooden resonator (without the use of a leather membrane), double or built strings (unlike setar, dombra) are common for sazes. But the size, shape, number of strings and the structure of saz may vary. A large saz usually has 8–11, an average 8–9, and a small one 4–7 strings. A gentle, sonorous, pleasant sound is extracted with the help of a plectrum, which is made, as a rule, from the bark of a cherry tree. The tremolo technique can be used by plucking the strings with a plectrum. The range of modern models is about 2 octaves. The production of saz is a very long and time-consuming process. Usually several types of trees are used for the manufacture of various parts of the saz. The body is made of selected varieties of mulberry wood, the neck is made of cherry wood, and the bridge, on which the tool is assembled with wooden nails, is made of solid walnut.

The homeland of the saz is considered to be Ancient Persia. The medieval musician Abdulgadir Maraghi in the 15th century described a similar instrument, called a tanbur. According to the research of the Azerbaijani art expert Medjun Kerimov, the modern form of the instrument appeared in the 16th century. Thus, the saz is one of the oldest instruments of the Turkic peoples. It was used everywhere: to raise the military spirit of the army before a battle; entertain guests

at weddings, celebrations, holidays; accompany poetry, legends of street musicians; it was an essential companion of shepherds, and entertained them while doing works.

The first saz models were small in size, had 2–3 strings made of silk threads, horse hair. Then the model size enlarged: the body, neck lengthened, the number of frets and strings increased. Any nationality tried to “fit” the design to the performance of their own musical works. Various parts were flattened, stretched, shortened, and provided with additional details. Today, there are many varieties of this tool. An irreplaceable element of orchestras, ensembles performing folk music – Azerbaijani, Armenian, Tatar – Saz perfectly combined with panpipes, wind instruments, is able to complement the main melody or solo. Its technical and artistic capabilities are able to express any range of feelings, so many eastern composers write music for a sweet-voiced saz.

The **Talyanka** (talyan-harmun), one of the most favourite musical instruments of the Tatar people, a kind of garmon (accordion), consists of two semi-corpuses – the right and the left, connected by a fur chamber. However, the talanka keyboards, compared to garmon, have a smaller number of buttons (12–15 on the left side and 3–6 on the right). Some of them make the sound of bells. While playing, the garmons of smaller size and weight, are held in the hands on the weight, the larger garmons are placed on the knees in the sitting position or suspended from the shoulder straps in the standing position. It can be played with two hands, moving the left hand or both semi-corpuses to unclench and compress the fur, which, when pressing the keys simultaneously, leads to air entering the garmon tabs and to their sound.

It is impossible to say for sure where the manual accordion was first invented. It is widely believed that the accordion appeared in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century. At the same time, it is considered to be a Russian invention. According to one of the versions, the first accordion appeared in St. Petersburg in 1783 thanks to Czech organ master František Kiršnik, who came up with a way to extract sound using a metal tongue that oscillates under the influence of air flow.

The accordion has several unique features:

1. As a rule, only sounds of the diatonic scale or with a certain number of chromatic sounds can be obtained on accordion.
2. Harmonies can have a certain key, more often – major, rarely – minor.
3. The accordion has a reduced range of sounds. As a rule – 2 octaves.
4. Smaller dimensions (size).

The following types of accordions have become widespread in the culture of the peoples of the Volga region in addition to the Tatar harmun:

*Marla-karmon* is Mari seven-key single-row accordion.

*Koga-karmon* (Mari name) or *kubos* (Chuvash name) is a two-row harmonica.

*Eastern (oriental) accordion* has 24 or 32 buttons on the bass-chord keyboard on the left side and a piano keyboard on the right side. It was manufactured in Kazan since 1936.

*Eastern elective harmonica* has a right piano keyboard and 30 elective buttons on the left keyboard. It was produced in Kazan since 1961.

## Conclusion

National musical instruments are an integral part of any nation's culture and history. They reflect its characteristics, temperament and mentality, the conditions of formation as an ethnic group. Musical instruments create a variety, rich sound, an unusual pattern of melody. Their sound has a specific musical pattern and timbre, which distinguishes the musical instruments of the Turkic peoples from the instruments of other ethnic groups that have settled in the Urals and the Volga region since ancient times. This is due to the fact that the Tatars and Bashkirs have always preferred melodic musical instruments that allowed them to perform an extensive rich melody in a wide range.

It is impossible to limit the culture of making music only to musical instruments. After all, the Turkic peoples know how to use the possibilities of the human voice in music. During the performance of traditional melodies, masters of various vocal techniques are able to so skilfully weave their voice into the pattern of the melody that the listener is literally hypnotized, not immediately realizing that this alien sound is created by a human voice. Tatar and Bashkir ethnic music is melodic, but at the same time difficult both to perform and to listen to. For a complete and deep acquaintance with it, one must be open to ancient knowledge and be wise enough to accept it.

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