

# The History of the Art of Kobyz in Kazakhstan

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**Abstract**—This article investigates and describes the history of development of the Kazakh folk bow-instrument kobyz, based on the works of scientists-ethnographers. A description of the main varieties of the instrument and its performance capabilities is given along with the information on technical capabilities of the instrument and methods of sound-producing. Considerable efforts are being made regarding its improvement by Kazakhstani masters. Kobyz is used in the orchestra, where it has a solo part.

**Keywords**—*history; people; music; kobyz; kylkobyz; string*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Kazakh people had a rich history in the past, unique culture, expressed in a various areas of spiritual heritage. Traditional art — oral-poetic, musical (song and instrumental) and prosaic passed down from generation to generation, persisting for centuries and developing, mainly in oral form (the so-called schools of oral tradition).

Some experts, who investigated the history of the East, pointed out that Central Asia and Kazakhstan were the birthplace of many musical instruments. A German music historian V. Bachmann suggested the above-mentioned fact as well as V. Vinogradov, a famous researcher of national cultures.

For many centuries the musical culture of Central Asia and Kazakhstan existed mainly in terms of oral tradition. Outstanding thinkers of Central Asia had done a great work on studying the art of music in the middle ages. According to T. Vyzgo [1] since the 9th and 10th centuries and for many centuries the science of music, developed by Central Asian, Iranian and Arab theorists, has been evolving in the Middle East.

Significant influence on the scientific and cultural life of the peoples of Central Asia and Kazakhstan have been made by medieval thinkers, such as Al-Farabi (870-950), Ibn Sina (980-1037), Al-Khorezmi (10th century) and others. There is no branch of knowledge in which they have not left a deep mark. Thus, Al-Farabi's musical-theoretical work "Great treatise on music" ("Kitab al-musiki al-Kabir") was one of the proofs of the long-time existence of bow instruments in Central Asia. According to B. Sarybayev [2], researcher of the Kazakh folk instruments, Al-Farabi in his treatise highlights the description and ways of improvement of many musical instruments and among them he mentions the "two-

stringed kylkobyz, drawing attention to the bulbous type of the instrument. It is noteworthy that for Farabi "Natural instruments are throat, uvula and all that in the throat, then the nose, artificial instruments are, for example, the flute, the lute and others [3].

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

Every nation has its own, to a greater or lesser extent, popular instrument. And a bowed instrument kylkobyz is one of such instruments among Kazakhs. One of the popular Kazakh legends tells the story of invention of this instrument by Korkyt, folk singer of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. It seems that this musician could only slightly improve the instrument, but kylkobyz in its origin is an older folk instrument, which probably arose even earlier.

N. Findeisen, V. Vinogradov classifies the term "kobyz" to the group of instruments, which breaks down into stringed, reed and plucked, that is, the term refers to a musical instrument, and its varieties were known under different names, such as kobyz, kobuz, komus, etc. And because the Kazakh kobyz strings are made of horse hair (horsehair — kyl in Kazakh language), this instrument became widely known as kylkobyz. The fact that sound made by the bow, for which the horse hair was also used, confirms that kylkobyz belongs to the group of bow instruments.

The traveler P. Pallas and academician A. Margulan noted that kobyz looks like a swan. Kobyz has been in Kazakhstan in its original form for a long time without any significant changes or improvements.

In pre-revolutionary times, the musical culture of the Kazakh people attracted the attention of scholars, ethnographers and Russian travelers of the 17<sup>th</sup> — 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. More often, we can find references to kylkobyz in their works. This can be seen in the writings of those musicologists who specifically studied and recorded musical folklore of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. At the same time, they helped to draw attention to the merits of Kazakh music and their studies provide evidence of what impact they could have on the development of both folk and professional music in Kazakhstan.

Description of Kazakh folk instruments is also found in works of oral poetry. From these sources, we can approximately determine the time of their greatest distribution or disappearance, since they contain the names

of those instruments that gained the greatest popularity in a given period. So, increased references in oral poetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries made to *kylkobyz*, *sybyzgy* and others.

The interest of Russian scientists in studying the history and way of life of the people increases markedly, especially after the accession of Kazakhs to Russia, in connection with which the Russian Geographical Society and the Academy of Sciences undertake a number of scientific expeditions. So, A. Eichhorn is one of the first specialists who left a scientific description of folk instruments, including *kylkobyz*. This work (collecting instruments, recording melodies) fascinated him during his stay in Central Asia (1870–1883). He wrote that *Kylkobyz* is "an ordinary instrument of wandering Kyrgyz rhapsods, which they used to accompany themselves, performing ballads, legends, epic songs about folk heroes" [4].

While traveling, some researchers had a chance to see an interesting copy of the folding *kylkobyz* design. References to three-stringed *kylkobyz* with a different original device can be found in the works of A. Divaev, I. Zavalishin, A. Eichhorn.

There are many scientists who investigated and wrote about the greatest distribution of *kylkobyz* among the Kazakh people in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as A. Levshin, who had been among the Kazakhs in the 1820s and Sh. Ualikhanov (1835–1865) the first Kazakh scientist, an outstanding educator-democrat, the greatest representative of social thinkers in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His articles "On the forms of Kazakh folk poetry", "Traces of shamanism among the kyrgyz" and others contain valuable information about *dombyra*, *sybyzgy* and other instruments.

In the works of Sh. Ualikhanov we can find a number of answers from the history of folk music of Kazakhs of the past. Among the phenomena that have almost disappeared from the memory of the people we can mention about healing ceremonies of the *bakshy* (shamans) associated with music. In this regard, the work of Sh. Ualikhanov, "Rituals of Shamanism among the Kyrgyz," is of great value, which has important information regarding the art of *bakshy*, is of great value. In connection with the penetration of Islam into the Kazakh steppes, the persecution of shamans began everywhere. Therefore, shamans, due to the decline of their role in the people, persecuted by the religion, have almost completely disappeared. *Bakshy* could talk to the spirits, he was a kind of medicine man, a magician, and at the same time a talented actor and musician.

Sh. Ualikhanov vividly and colorfully describes the art of shamans: "They were revered as people protected by heaven and spirits. Shaman is a man gifted with magic and knowledge, better than others, he is a poet, musician, soothsayer and at the same time a doctor" [5]. Among the *bakshy* shamans, the *Kylkobyz* remained a cult instrument, which they used during ritual spells and healing from diseases. The word *bakshy* means a doctor, a shaman, a sorcerer, etc. Shamans could be found at the patient's bed (treatment usually took place at night), and at wedding feasts.

The shaman, singing his melody, which was accompanied by playing the instrument, wailed and called upon the gins:

"What happened to you, my voice,  
Why do not you sing along my *kobyz*?  
I picked up a pine *kobyz*  
And like a water snake I meander.  
After all, my *kobyz* does not break,  
It does not put my soul at peace" [6].

At the same time, he screamed in a loud and wild voice, grimacing, this lasted until he lost the ability to make at least one sound: the convulsions became so strong that he could hardly control himself.

Songs and spells of Kazakh shamans were accompanied by the sounds of trinkets, rattles and rings hung on the *kylkobyz*. Various metal plates, mirrors, pebbles were attached to the *kylkobyz* case. "As soon as you take it in your hands, the bells start ringing, the iron starts tinkling and make such a noise that even a healthy person will get hurt" [7].

The instrument was made in the handicraft way from a various kind of wood, different shapes and sizes. The head of the instrument was hung with small iron trinkets, rings, or patterns to enhance the effect during performance. Sometimes, instead of trinkets, forty pebbles were placed in the resonant shell of a *kobyz*. The performer explained this by the fact that the sound would begin to "wheeze", which means that he achieved a beautiful sound. Apparently, this was due to the approach to the guttural sounds of the voice. Some *kobyz* players have achieved the best timbre of the instrument, thinning the walls of the body.

In some cases, *bakshy* used *kobyz* instead of a percussion instrument. At the same time, the bridge was removed and the leather part of the *kylkobyz* was tapped. Shamans, using the nasal timbre of the instrument in combination with the sounds of various trinkets would instill fear and terror with their bowing. As Sh. Ualikhanov wrote "A shaman is a person gifted with magic and knowledge, who is better than other people, he is a poet, musician, soothsayer and at the same time a doctor" [5]. According to him *kobyz* remained the property of the *bakshy*, and B. Sarybaev pointed out that the *kylkobyz* in the earlier period mainly belonged to *Zhyrshi* and *Kyushi*, that is, folk tales and musicians. Later A. Zataevich wrote that *bakshy* and all rituals, including musical ones associated with them, are remnants of the past and condemned to extinction.

In the second half of the 19th century the struggle against various religious remnants intensified, which in general had a positive impact on the development of *kobyz* instrumental music and thus opened up new opportunities for the spread of *kobyz* among folk musicians. A.V. Zataevich, a collector of Kazakh musical heritage was very sorry that such sorcerous music remained uncommitted. He managed to record only a small part of shamanistic chants.

Sh. Ualikhanov considered *kylkobyz* to be among the "difficult" for the performer (here we mean the flageolet and nail bowing) and at the same time "nice" instruments. The sound of *kylkobyz*, its structure, timbre resembled the sound of the viola to some extent, and therefore it was no coincidence that he compared it with the viola, and not with other stringed instruments. It was this instrument that was an inseparable companion of the *zhyrshy* storytellers, who composed epic tales (*zhyr*) under its accompaniment, singing the heroic life and exploits of the *batyrs* (warriors). But there have been cases when some *zhyrshy* would sing without instrumental accompaniment, while others accompanied their tales with accompaniment of *dombra* or harmonica. However, Sh. Ualikhanov wrote that all steppe songs are usually sung as a recitative to the accompaniment of a *kobyz*, emphasizing the genetic connection of the genre with this bow instrument.

If at the beginning of the 19th century the form of *zhyrs* still remained the major among the *Kylkobyz* artists, then much later, as Ualikhanov noted in his article on "The Forms of Kazakh Folk Poetry" various causes contributed to the gradual displacement and extinction of both *kylkobyz* and *zhyr* from musical life.

This is expressed by the fact that, firstly, by the middle of the 19th century *zhyrs* were considered an outdated form of poetry, and therefore "the form of *zhyrs*, like the *kobyz* itself, now remains only the property of the *bakshy*" [5].

Secondly, the instrumental music of the Kazakhs at this time has been developing quite intensively and such a phenomenon is not accidental. There is a whole galaxy of talented *dombra* players, thanks to which *dombra* *kui* begin to improve, and this is directly reflected in the fact that the *kylkobyz* playing is gradually replaced by *dombra* playing. *Dombra* is gaining more and more attention from listeners and becoming the most popular instrument.

### III. CORRELATION STUDY ON PRINCIPLES OF *KOBYZ* PLAYING

In the so-called Soviet period, there was an opportunity for a deeper and wider study of the cultural heritage of Kazakhstan. Many musicologists and composers, such as A. Zataevich, V. Belyaev, A. Zhubanov, B. Erzakovic, G. Bisenova, A. Temirbekova, S. Kuzembaeva, A. Mukhambetova and others worked hard in this respect, made a significant contribution to collecting and study of original creations of the past.

Among folk performers *kylkobyz* differed from the instrument of shamans. Folk musicians decorated the head of *kylkobyz* with various ornaments, patterns and extra items such as rings, a mirror, pebbles were already absent here.

Only at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the names of major folk artists appeared. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the work of Yhlas Dukenov (1843-1916) played a huge role in the development of folk instrumental art. Before, the two-stringed folk instrument *kylkobyz* was considered to belong only to *bakshy* and shamans. According to I. Kogan [8] due to the fact that *kobyz* was an object of worship, it

was regarded as amulet. Most of the people would hang it at the entrance of the yurt to protect the home from evil spirits. The prevalence of the instrument was bound to lead to its secular use. And so it happened. In the figurative definition of A. K. Zhubanov Yhlas Dukenov, a great folk composer and performer tore this instrument from the hands of a *bakshy* and handed it to the people.

Thanks to Yhlas, this instrument sounded completely different. He introduced new positions, expanded the range, embellished the melodic line, brought variety into the metro rhythm, enhanced the sound of the instrument. *Bakshy* used mostly low instrument registers during his session, trying to bring his listeners into a state of fear. Folk performers, on the contrary, played mainly in the upper registers, which led to a brighter sound. The instrument in the hands of folk musicians was characterized by a soft and pleasant timbre. Improvement and modification of the design of the *kylkobyz* had a positive impact on the purity and richness of the sound.

For one group of people, as already noted, the form of *kylkobyz* was like a swan, for others it was like a Kyrgyz *kiyak* (Kyrgyz string instrument). Sh. Ualikhanov gives the following definition: "*Kobyz* is a kind of two-stringed viola, strings are made of horsehair and played with a bow. *Kobyz* is different from our string instruments in that it does not have a top deck, the body has a round shape, the handle is so bent that you can't press the string against it, and different tones are taken with a flageolet. In general, this is a very difficult and enjoyable instrument, although it is not very sonorous" [5].

So, *kobyz* is a bow instrument, its nasal sound is associated with the timbre of the bassoon or viola. For strings and a bow horse hair was used, which had a bow-shaped shape, and the hair for the bow was used twice as much as for strings. The hair of the bow, which was captured using the little finger, was roasted with wood resin (*sagyzy*). The size of the bow was about 50 to 65 cm. Instead of the pads, the performers used a rag wrapper and a bundle of hair was tied to the ends of the bow. The bow was taken from below by turning the palm. Now modern *kobyz* players use the violin bow, which was reflected in the setting of the right hand.

The body and neck of the *kobyz* are made from one solid piece of wood in the form of a huge bucket. A deck is a piece of camel leather covering only the bottom of the body. The lower part is used to attach the ends of two or three strings. The other end of the string is pulled over the pegs. The tuning of strings is in fourth or fifth.

The sound of the strings was close in timbre and emotionally expressive qualities to the human voice. Until recently, the *kylkobyz* player would sit taking cross-legged position on the floor, and for convenience put the instrument on his left bent leg, slightly tilting it to the left or pressing it to the left temple.

Modern musicians perform compositions sitting on a chair, and the lower edge of the instrument is clamped between his knees. The fingers of the left hand are placed by the base of the nail on the left side of the string. Voice

leading in parallel fourth and fifth is typical for Kazakh instrumental music. (Quite rare technique in European performing practice). To do this, one note is hit with a nail and the other finger pad.

Easily retrievable whistling flageolet-tone or double flageolet can be played in different places of the fingerboard. As Sarybayev wrote "If the flageolet is hit with a fourth finger, then dividing it in a rhythmic pattern is performed by softly hitting the same string with first and second finger. This technique is relevant for the kobyz instrumental music" [9].

Previously, folk performers mainly used two positions, that is, the first and fourth. *Kylkobyz* had a limited sound range. Now it has expanded almost twice and enriched with chromatic scale.

While playing the kobyz, such techniques as tremolo, glissando (especially at the end of phrases), *pizzicato*, performed on open strings with the "index finger of the left hand and trillos hit with wrist movement are used for artistic expressiveness."

According to B. Sarybayev folk musicians, playing the lower or upper positions (long-drawn melody), sometimes increase the sound by a semitone, without moving to another position, and pulling the string to the right side with the finger of the left hand, thus forming glissando movement by a semitone [9].

Performers often use expressive fermata. Due to the lack of a fretboard and frets, such spectacular tricks as portamento up and down are used. Thus, for example, the effect of a shot from a bow or howling wolves can be achieved, in this regard, you can refer to the *kyui "Kaskyrdyn Ulygany"* ("Howl of wolves"). Sometimes musicians sought to imitate the singing of various birds in their works. The sounds and tricks of the playing by their nature are not always amenable to accurate recording (this applies to a variety of sound-imaginative means).

Folk performers also use ornamental passages, trillos with a flicker of overtones at the moment of a hit with a finger pad and grace notes to decorate the melody. A. Zataevich wrote that in Kazakh music they use "mordentes that split a note into a fast triol, and grace notes performed on a strong part of the rhythm, that is using the following note, not the previous one. Grace notes are characteristic of wide-spreading, super-long melodies" [10].

An interesting fact, in our opinion, is that "in the pre-revolutionary time, only men played the kobyz, now women play it too" [11].

Kazakhs did not know ensemble combinations for different musical instruments at all, only solo sound dominated. Nowadays, it has become possible to use this instrument in an orchestra, where kobyz is often assigned a solo part, due to the fact that the sound of modern kobyz is cast with a soft, expressive, noble timbre.

#### IV. VARIETIES OF THE STRING-BOW GROUP OF KAZAKH INSTRUMENTS

Masters of Kazakhstan have been doing a great work to improve *kylkobyz*. A whole group of kobyz players has been created, that reflect the strong influence of the violin family. New instruments such as kobyz-prima, kobyz-violin and kobyz-bass were developed. These tools differ from their predecessor *kylkobyz* in that they have a fingerboard, the number of strings that are played with violin and double bass bows has increased, and the strings are made of gut and metal.

Kobyz-prima, both three-stringed and four-stringed, is notated in a treble clef. Kobyz-violin is notated in viola. The tuning of this kobyz is in fifth. Kobyz-bass mainly performs harmonic support. The same applies to kobyz double bass. Performers play it standing up, as well as double bass players. The tuning of this instrument, unlike others, is in fourth, similar to double bass. Provided the specific nature of the instrument, its national characteristics are maintained, it would seem appropriate to achieve the improvement of kobyz, as the quality of their sound and timbre improves and the techniques of playing develop.

The sketches O. Khaimuldin restored four-stringed bowed instrument *sazgen* with bulbous bow. It was made of hard wood, without frets and has a top deck. There are two types of *sazgen* — two and three-complex. According to some reports, *sazgen* existed in the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, Abushakir Abuseit Zhamaluly performed his *kyuis* playing the *sazgen*.

There had also been a four-stringed bowed instrument among the Kazakh people (according to folk legends) which was called *bozanshy*. The length of the reconstructed instrument is one meter twenty cm, the lower part of its body is similar to a rounded scoop with a thin tetrahedral neck and a movable fret. The head of the instrument is made in the form of a horse's head. In comparison with other bowed instrument the *azanshy*, which was used to inform about the joyful days of the Kazakh people, the *bozanshy* in ancient times was a messenger of misfortunes hanging over the people's fate.

According to the assumptions of O. Khaimuldin, the first types of musical instruments in the era of B.C. were single-stringed, then they were perfected into double-stringed ones. The names of some instruments occurred depending on the use of strings different in material and quality.

As has already been mentioned, horse hair strings were used on *kylkobyz*; an instrument with leather strings was called *narkobys*, those with metal strings were called *zhezkobyz*. Each of them was different in its weight. If the weight of *kylkobyz* could reach 3 kg, the *narkobys* weighed 4 kg, and the *zhezkobyz* weighed 6 kg. The abovementioned instruments were made of the core of black oak, without a top deck. The bridge was carved from the horns of wild goats, the hitch-pin of the instrument was made from the shrub "*mespilus*". The entire body of the instrument was rubbed with the milk of a white camel. The tool was stored



in leather cases that did not let in the rays of the sun and moisture.

## V. CONCLUSION

Traditions of the art of playing bowed instruments in Kazakhstan are closely connected with folk origins. Folk music has influenced the development of forms and genres of professional music, many techniques of playing the kobyz were used and implemented by Kazakh composers in their works. Playing the kylkobyz, in particular, is interconnected with the ancient improvisational art, embodied in song, lyric, epic kyui with free ornamentation. These features, combined with the intonation structure of the Kazakh folklore, undoubtedly, to a certain extent reflected in the development of all the string-bow music of composers of Kazakhstan.

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