

**Arzu ABBASOVA**

## **POLITICS EXERCISED THROUGH MUSIC: COMPARING AZERBAIJAN BEFORE AND AFTER INDEPENDENCE**

### **Abstract**

*Politics and music have grabbed the attention of many scholars and it is a topic rarely referred. This study aimed to close the existing gap and contribute to the politics and music sphere in the local area. The research intended to investigate the extent politics exercised through music in Azerbaijan before and after the independence. The information was collected through individual and group interviews, focus groups and source analysis. The conclusion came into was that politics was more exercised in the Soviet period, however, this pattern also continued after the independence. Azerbaijani music was broadly analyzed and special attention was given to musical genres such as mugham, meykhana, ashig music and rap. The conducted research targets to reach the audience of musical specialist, particularly theorists and benefit the politicians.*

**Keywords:** *anthem, ashig music, meykhana, mugham, politics in music, Soviet period in Azerbaijan*

Politics is a concept known to everyone. However, people's understanding of politics differs in many ways. Mainly referred as "dirty business", politics have diffused to people's life. On the other hand, like politics, music also captures the attention of individuals. Though at first glance, it seems that these two topics are non-related, a clear analysis reveals the opposite. Furthermore, questioning the relationship between music and politics can be plausible. This is because these topics are easy to be connected but are difficult to be realized by others. Indeed, music, as an area capturing a big part of culture has been historically used for political purposes. It is not a secret that most of the revolutions and important events were followed by new mainstreams in music, which reflected the ongoing situation. Scholars like Frith (2002) and Johnson et al (2008) focused on music's emotional, psychological and biological influence and did

not pay attention to its relation to political sciences. However, Maultsby (1983) and Street (2003) agreed on the relationship between music and politics, while each author explained the existing connection from different perspectives by focusing on various nations and genres of music. Realizing this significant gap made this research essential to be conducted. Azerbaijan as a country with rich culture and art is also famous for its unique musical elements and motives. As an example the national music of Azerbaijan- mugham, was added to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2003 (Intangible cultural heritage, n. d). This fact supports the idea that Azerbaijan is a particularly interesting case to be researched. Though, Baghirova (2004) and Huseynova (2016) studied some aspects of Azerbaijani music mainly focusing on mugham's importance, a fundamental research on connecting politics to music was not made. In addition, studies conducted in Azerbaijan mainly concentrated on theoretical explanation and analysis of music, which is another gap. Taking these facts into consideration an interesting research question was formulated: To what extent politics through music was exercised in Azerbaijan before and after independence?

### **Literature Review**

In today's world politics undeniably shape all aspects of people's life. Most of these effects are seen and felt by people, however, the area like music is mostly skipped in this regard. To what extent music is political? An answer to this question arises an interesting topic which is not commonly discussed. This literature review considers the word "politics" as power used by the authorities such as government, which can control people and make decisions instead of them. It will illustrate how and why music and politics have become a notion, and report scholarly articles' position on this matter. The review will not include psychological and biological influence of music, but concerns to provide essential information on the given topic with examples from the historical facts. Although this research aims to examine the given issue in Azerbaijan, the scarce resources made it challenging to access to information and the reviewed literature mostly discusses music and politics in other countries.

The majority of people consider music as a way to relax, entertain and set themselves free from all the problems they face. The nuance they do not take into consideration is that music tends to rule them. A number of scholars in their works have discussed the correlation between music and emotions. Emery Schubert (n. d), who closely examined such relationship revealed the fact that the most effective way to express emotions is through music (as cited in Johnson, Bruce, and Cloonan, 2008, para.20). By influencing emotions of people, music starts to control them. "With music is born power and its opposite: subversion" (Revill, 2000, p.599). The power it has makes it suitable for political purposes.

In different periods of time, politics through music was exercised. The genres that had popularity and could gather the crowd of people with the same musical taste together were the ones used to persuade listeners. Maultsby (1983) advocates that soul music functions as a tool for self-consciousness, protest, social change and “emerges from social, political and economic liberation” (p.54). In addition, pop music joined the cultural and political capital (Street, 2003, p.117). Folk music is viewed as democratic because of reflecting people’s wishes and desires (Revill, 2000, p.602). In discussions of why music is political, a controversy arises. While some argue that melodies have an impact on people, others contend that power lies in the words. Street (2003), in his work “The politics of music, and music of politics” gives various examples to political music. For instance, “God Save the King”-spreading monarchic ideologies, “Rock the Vote”- aiming to trigger participation in elections, “People get ready”- for protesting Vietnam war all gave a ground for protest through their words (Steve, 2003). This argument is supported by Maultsby (1983) with the introduction of the fact that soul music was used to raise political problems and offer solutions to them (p.55). On the other hand, Johnson et al. (2008) contradict by claiming a new idea that “the attention is less on music as text than on subjective experience” (para.4). In sum, a number of scholars have realized the political motives in different music genres, but the source of the power of music is still controversial.

As it is mentioned above music is a tool for gathering hundreds of people but sometimes it goes beyond that, music brings together nations. “Music, that is to say, has become a defensive as well as an offensive weapon” (Frith, 2002, p.40). In addressing the issue of nationalism, experts have admitted that music is interrelated with nationalism. The essence of Revill’s (2000) study is mostly based on this issue. He reminds the importance of folk music and asserts that folk music elements are the basis of national roots. Furthermore, in his book Maultsby (1983) defines “soul” music as nationalism (p.54). In other words, authors mostly agree that music and nationalism are connected.

However, sometimes governments fear the power of music on nationalism. Such incidences mostly occurred during the Second World War. Banning music meant restricting people’s freedom, so politically it had a great impact on the nation. During Soviet Period Azerbaijan also faced this issue. “‘Enemies’ in the Tadzhik, Azerbaijani and Uzbek republics were also accused of seeking to hold back the development of music in their republics by attempting to block the introduction of the Western system of musical notation” (Brooke, C. 2002, p. 405). Such patterns were followed in Germany as well as the USSR- where jazz music was banned (Street,2003, p. 117). However, nowadays political use of music is spread with the help of

technologies and globalized world. As in Johnson et al., (2008) music has become a “tool of global imperialism” (para. 11).

The facts that are mentioned above prove that there is a connection between music and politics and most of the countries in different time periods have benefited from this relationship. However, to what extent it is used and the impacts of it differs from country to country. Music is a tool for an unrestricted control and the favor or danger it can bring is in the hands of politicians rather than musicians. This literature review enriched my background and theoretical knowledge in both music and politics. In the next step of my research I applied my learnt knowledge to the local community and specified in what ways politics have affected music in Azerbaijan.

### **Methodology**

For conducting the research three techniques were applied: focus groups, interviews, and source analysis.

Two different focus groups consisting of four people were conducted at ADA university. The main aim of focus groups was to create a group discussion and share ideas, which helped to get interesting results. Also to learn subjective views and make face-to-face conversations, interviews were held. The interviews were categorized into two groups: individuals and groups interviews. Group interviews were based on a random selection of participants, and the asked questions were semi-structured, which let the interviewer follow the ideas of respondents. Group interviews were held with the students of Baku Musical Academy, while individual interviews were conducted with experts in both fields. The questions aimed to gather information on how music and politics are related in Azerbaijan, and how this has changed through years. Source analysis as one of the essential part of this research aimed to analyze some music pieces and identify their importance and political meaning.

### **Results**

Results are based on interviews, focus group, and source analysis.

#### **Category 1: Music as a Tool to Pass Political Ideas**

##### **i. Understanding the general ideas and knowledge on the topic.**

All of the respondents were asked that why music is one of the best ways to influence people. Though the answers were diverse, all of them were backed up with examples. The agreed answers were that music is sincere, it is mentionable and hardly forgotten, and it has an influence on people's emotions. “People listen to music daily, so it is easier to promote ideas on a daily basis and change the perceptions” (Participant of focus group, April 4). On the other hand, some

respondents connected this notion to the listeners and stated that people who listen to music frequently are flexible to new ideas and are more fragile, emotional and sensitive. Indeed, all of the respondents were conscious about the music's ability to influence.

#### **ii. Narrowing the research to Azerbaijan.**

Participants were asked to relate the idea of music and politics to our country and share their experience with music examples. Some comments were general indicating music genres such as musical comedies of Uzeyir Hacıbəyli which gave subliminal sarcastic messages, or "Cengi" which reflects the spirit of war. In addition, Azer Rzayev's symphony 'Baku 1990' dedicated to January 20 events was also mentioned.

#### **iii. Nationalism ideas reflected in mugham, meyxana and ashig music.**

Furthermore, for analyzing the genres especially the ones that are inherent to Azerbaijani nation, mugham and meyxana's nationalism ideas and political meanings were discussed. Almost all of the participants agreed on mugham's importance. Mugham is viewed as Azerbaijan's symbol and it is representing the whole nation. "Even in Soviet period Shovkat Alakbarova or other singers were always accompanied with either tar or kamancha. This is an important factor as it shows that no matter what our historical roots were not forgotten" (Participant of the focus group, April 4). Thus, when it comes to the topic of meyxana the answers varied. While some people agreed on meyxana's importance by stating that it is also a representation of nation and is a historical Azerbaijani motive, others contended that meyxana is made spontaneously and cannot have a deep political meaning. In addition, respondents added that rather than meyxana, ashig music has more national elements in it.

#### **iv. Source analysis of mugham.**

All seven mughams were clearly analyzed and the meaning behind them was put a light. Though different literature sources were reviewed, mugham's etymology was still considered controversial. While many scholars link mugham's emergence to shumer tribe Aida Huseynova (2016), claims in her work that mugham was created in the period of Arab Khalafate and has the Muslim ideologies in it. Furthermore, she adds that sufism elements are also seen in mugham (Huseynova, 2016, p. 274). Thus, Aida Huseynova (2016) compared mugham to baroque music and states that both are related to monarchic ideas (p.113). However, it is a fact that mugham was restricted in Soviet period especially during 1930-1960. As Suleyman Rustam said, "Oxuma, tar səni sevmir proletar" (Do not sing tar, proletariat does not love you). No matter what as Azerbaijan improved and Azerbaijani music developed, subsequently new music genres were created on the base of mugham like symphonic mugham, jazz mugham, and mugham opera.

#### **Category 2: Azerbaijani Music in Soviet Period.**

**i. Soviet ideologies in music**

To learn retrospective views, the Soviet period and music written at that time was questioned. Almost all of the respondents celebrated the fact that the communist ideology together with the Stalinism, Leninism ideas were reflected in all kinds of music. Songs praising proletariat, dedicated to Soviet leaders and friendship of 15 countries were frequently played, and this served to create a loyal atmosphere to rulers. Moreover, one of the interviewee stated that at that time introducing singers also turned to be political. ‘The national singer of Azerbaijan and Armenia Soviet Socialist Republic Zeynab Xanlarova can be a good example (Participant of focus group 2, April 6). In addition, because of strict censor newly written songs contained subliminal messages. A good example to it can be “Şuşanın dağları” (Susha’s mountains), which was written and played at the Soviet period. The words claim “Şuşanın dağları deyil dumanlı, qırmızı koftalı, yaşıl tumanlı” (Susha’s mountain are not in fog, red jacket, and green skirt) here the words depicted Azerbaijani flag and confirmed that Susha is Azerbaijani land (Interviewee, April 4).

**ii. Banning elements**

While talking about Soviet period, banning western elements and restrictions were also examined. As the Soviet period is known with its strict rules this issue was worth to be questioned. The attitude towards banning music was negative and some respondents claimed that it is restricting the freedom of people. On the other hand, others said that sometimes restricting people results in the unification of them and this is what happened in Azerbaijan. Also banning music gave a ground to find new music genres and as an example, jazz-mugham genre emerged.

**iii. The importance of musicians as well as the music.**

None of the interviewed people denied the fact that musicians are directly or indirectly related to politics. However, the answer why had various explanations. Some advocated that it is because they have popularity and millions of people are listening to them, while others looked at the issue from a different perspective. They claimed that giving a political role to musicians is a praiseful act, as representation in government and politics can help to develop the culture and art.

**Category 3: Azerbaijani Music after Independence.****i. New music and its political importance.**

To continue the investigation, the new Azerbaijani songs were asked to each of the respondents. Respondents all said that the only musical genre that has political meaning in Azerbaijan is rap. However, in the discussion of the raps importance, a controversy aroused. A group of interviewed people stated that rap is influential for the non-educated people and is a threat for Azerbaijani people. They pointed out that rap mostly contains opposition ideas which

trigger youngsters against the government. Thus, other group argued that it sometimes can increase the nationalism and depends on the rapper himself. An example of “Ya Qarabağ, ya ölüm (Either Karabakh or death)” was given.

### **ii. Reasons of less influence of music after independence.**

Respondents were asked to explain the declining pattern in political usage of music. The most popular answer was that, for expecting meaningful music, culture and art should be developed. “Without contemplative youth and educated people, these areas cannot be improved” (Interviewee, April 7). Also, the youth’s music preferences in today are so dull because of undeveloped art, culture. “For proving this claim it is enough to look at the number of views on YouTube to classical and new Azerbaijani music. The difference is millions of views” (Interviewee, April 2).

### **iii. Music as a political representation of a country.**

Music’s political representation of the country was linked to international competition by the respondents. A contest like Eurovision in this regard has always grabbed the attention of the audiences. Respondents admitted that such political representation is needed but it has to be planned carefully. The pieces in Eurovision that achieved success were the ones that had national elements such as tar, kamancha, and mugham in it. “This is indeed the purpose of such contests to make all nations represent themselves through their cultures” (Participant of focus the group, April 2).

## **Category 4: Compare and Contrast Ideas**

### **i. Comparing Azerbaijani music before and after independence to find the answer to the research question.**

The result of the study revealed that politics was more exercised before the independence. However, an interviewee complicated the matter by stating “The main point here is that no matter what the political aim that music had, or which ideology it reflected at least it had a meaning to be written and played” (Participant of the focus group, April 7).

### **ii. Source analysis of Azerbaijani anthem: comparison of anthems before and after independence**

The anthem of Azerbaijan written Azerbaijan during Soviet Period from 1978-1992 aimed to remind people the revolution and afterward how great the Soviet is. The idea of creating the socialist country and having the communism ideas to be achieved is felt in every lyric of the song. Therefore, the authors of both the music and the words are Azerbaijan’s greatest contributors. However, the ideas that they have written is obviously under the pressure of the ongoing regime.

Interestingly, in this song, the obedience to Lenin and loyalty to Russians is more of a matter than nationalism. Indeed, showing Azerbaijanis as the citizens of great Soviet is injecting the idea that it is everyone's country. Such propaganda aimed to protect the potential protest in the future. An important fact about anthem is that in Soviet period the anthem was rewritten in 1978 authors were forced to change it and remove the name of Stalin. In contrast to anthem in the Soviet period, the new anthem has more nationalism elements and aims to gather people together and remind that they are Azerbaijanis. The anthem refers to historical facts, wars, controversies that Azerbaijan has overcome. The anthem shows the importance of our national flag and calls everyone to be loyal to Azerbaijan.

### **Discussion**

To summarize, the respondents commonly agreed on politics' influence through music and gave a clear analysis of Azerbaijan before and after independence. At the end, almost all believed that music was more political before the independence, but whether being political is good or bad varied from people to people. In general, two historical periods of Azerbaijani music were separately discussed, challenges and difficulties were examined. Various music genres, especially mugham, meykhana, rap and cengi constructed the main headings of the interviews. Furthermore, comparing and contrasting anthems in different periods of time made the bigger picture visible.

As the majority of respondents had musical background and knowledge in politics, most of them were not surprised to connect these two topics and the explanations they provided were plausible. Mugham as a political representation of Azerbaijani nation, played a significant role in the culture of our people. Mugham's magnificence was an undeniable fact for the respondents but the question they were not sure about was, whether it is used politically. As source analysis revealed, mugham is unique because of its interval scale that is not found in any music type (Baghirova, 2004, p.158). Therefore, the pitches are not the only factor which differs mughams. 'Sushtar' and 'Humayun' mostly reflect sorrowful music, while 'Rast' calls for action and encourages listeners to fight for lands. In addition, the religious and spiritual ideas are also parts of the mugham. The fact that mugham is improvised with the words of world famous poets of Azerbaijan, such as Nizami and Fuzuli, strengthens the argument that it is an apparent symbol of Azerbaijan. Furthermore, mugham's political importance is interrelated to its cultural importance, and apparently, it is a representation of Azerbaijani nation in abroad.

Thus, the question arises that why meykhana- another music genre which is inherent to Azerbaijan is not accepted to have that much political influence and nationalist elements. As the interviews revealed meykhana is a spontaneous act and it is not thought into the depth to contain political meaning. However, on the other side then naming meykhana as Azerbaijani rap becomes



intriguing. To be more precise the definition of meyxhana in dictionaries are ‘folk rap tradition’ which is not surprising (Meaning of meyxhana, n. d.). Indeed, rap and meyxhana as music genres have many elements in common. Being accompanied by the beat and pronouncing words quickly can be an example for both. The matter got complicated when all of the respondents agreed that raps are politically influential, but they stated that same cannot be said for meyxhana. Thus, why meyxhana is not considered political enough by respondents remains an unanswered question. Meyxhana’s lack of political usage can be agreed, but this is not to say that it does not have a potential. For instance, meyxhana named ‘Ты кто такой давай досвидания’ (Who are you, goodbye) was the inspiration point of the opposition campaign against Putin who was reelected. Also, it is the most viewed meyxhana and brought success to the performers. So a conclusion can be drawn that meyxhana also has a potential to be used for political purposes.

The Soviet period was the only time when music step by step followed the politics and was written according to the tendencies and ongoing events. The dominant ideology model was also reflected in the national music. However, the respondents pointed out that besides ideologies, the musicians were turned into political subjects. The words of the songs praising Stalin or Lenin strengthened the obedience of local people. So, musicians gradually became influencing role-models in music, which in turn lead to their diplomatic careers. Therefore, the Soviet system benefited from the musicians by giving them the status of “People’s Artist of Soviet Republic” and making them the deputy of Supreme Soviet. Reaction to this action today is ambiguous. On the one hand, respondents claimed that it is a stimulating attitude towards culture, while on the other hand, others saw this as a strategy where politicians were kicked out of the parliament and replaced by musicians. Furthermore, prohibiting Western musical elements, besides restricting national music like mugham was a topic worth to discuss. The severity of this issue was underestimated because of respondents’ unilateral approach. They conceived it as a normal fact and believed that it is nothing more than Soviet’s harsh “iron curtain” policy. As Baghirova (2004) states until independence Azerbaijani music was not considered as a representative of Middle East culture because of this policy (p.155). The fact neglected by respondents was that banning and restricting culture intends to kill the nation. This view is agreed by Street (2003), who gives the example from Afghan people who slowly turned to the dead nation after banning music (p. 120). Thus, giving the example of the proverb that “challenges make you stronger”, interviewees stated that banning and prohibiting musical elements encouraged Azerbaijani musicians to find new musical genres by adjusting to the current regime.

As the research question is about comparing music in different periods, an interesting case was the anthem analysis. All of the respondents agreed on the musical significance of current

anthem, but adolescent's lack of knowledge about the previous anthems limited further research. A notable fact was that Soviet period anthem was rewritten two times. The authors were forced to change the words and remove the name of Stalin. This is in itself ridiculous because it shows how the leaders could not bear their formers. From the other perspective, it is a proof of how music was important to the leaders. Therefore, why music was threatening the leaders can be another question to be analyzed. Brooke (2002) also mentions this fact while talking about Shostakovich's fourth symphony. She states "it would have been extremely risky for [Russians] to allow a high-profile premiere of a new large-scale work by a discredited composer" (Brooke, 2002, p. 407). However, further explanation was not given and she leaves a gap in her research.

Analyzing modern Azerbaijani music was not much beneficial as the topic was out of interest to many of the respondents. To be specific, either than rap music, other types and genres were neither listened nor known by the interviewees. This made the topic intriguing. The tastes and preferences differed while analyzing rap music. Known as the music of freedom and liberty in the world, as the data revealed rap was not acknowledged in the same way in Azerbaijan. Though the political meaning of rap was agreed the usage of it was questioned. "Azerbaijani rap mainly consisting of opposing ideas have started to pose a threat" was a dominant answer among respondents. Unfortunately, none of the today's music was accepted seriously and because of that, this kind of music is not regarded as a way to transmit ideas.

Indeed, unexpected results were faced through the research period, which led to the change in research design. Though research proposal intended to choose focus groups participants from BAIS or BAPA students, during the data collection lack of their musical knowledge was reflected in their answers. As a result, the research design was reformulated and focus groups were not restricted to student's major faculty rather attention was paid to their musical background. Also, the interviewees from Baku Musical Academy either partially answered, or could not find a relation between music and politic which limited the ability to preserve balanced opinions. Therefore, the question why only students having background knowledge in music could see the relationship while others could not remain unanswered. Though, this can be a further research area for future researchers.

### **Conclusion**

Connecting culture and politics was studied by the scholars, however, different branches of culture got various attention in this regard. Music as a concept is not accepted to have a direct connection to politics but studies conducted in this sphere proved the otherwise. This research aimed to correlate these two concepts, apply it to Azerbaijan and find an existing relationship. All

of the above-mentioned facts and results concluded that the politics were exercised more before the independence.

This research is a seed for future researchers and can be developed in many ways. The research can contribute to the sphere of music as well as politics, and can further benefit theorists of Azerbaijani national music. Moreover, for improving knowledge on music, similar investigations can be made and included in the study curriculum of musical colleges.

The study design of the method can be reshaped to develop the research. Besides qualitative analysis, quantitative methods should be used to learn people's attitude towards music genres. Also, test and retest notion can increase the reliability of the study. Furthermore, to prevent the individualistic fallacy the research can engage more people and the sampling should be broader. In addition, face and concurrent validity can be taken into consideration and the measurement tools' appropriateness should be proved.

## References

- Baghirova, S. (2004). [Review of *Anthology of world music: The music of Azerbaijan by international institute for traditional music, Habib H. Touma*]. *The World of Music*, 46(1), 154-159. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41699552>
- Brooke, C. (2002). Soviet musicians and the great terror. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54(3), 397- 413. doi:10. 1080/09668130220129533
- Frith, S. (2002). Music and everyday life. *Critical Quarterly*, 44(1), 35-48. doi:10. 1111/1467-8705. 00399
- Huseynova, A. (2016). *Music of Azerbaijan: From mugham to opera*. Indiana University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt19zbzs5>
- Intangible cultural heritage. (n. d.). Retrieved May 06, 2017, from <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/azerbaijani-mugham-00039>
- Johnson, Bruce, and Martin Cloonan. (2008). Dark side of the tune: popular music and violence. Aldershot: Ashgate. ISBN 978-0-7546-5872-6 (hbk). 254p. *Perfect Beat*, 11(2). doi:10. 1558/prbt. v11i2. 165
- Maultsby, P. K. (1983). Soul music: its sociological and political significance in American popular culture. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 17(2), 51-60. doi:10. 1111/j. 0022-3840. 1983. 1702\_51.

Revill, G. (2000). Music and the politics of sound: nationalism, citizenship, and auditory space. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 18(5), 597-613.

doi:10.1068/d224t

Soul music. (n. d.). Retrieved April 10, 2017, from

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/soul%20music>

Street, J. (2003). 'Fight the power': The politics of music and the music of politics.

*Government and Opposition*, 38(1), 113-130. doi:10. 1111/1477-7053. 00007