

THE EL DAROVA ARCHIVE PROJECT: OPENING NEW SOURCES IN AZERBAIJANI MUSICOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper discusses the life and work of Azerbaijani ethnomusicologist Emina Eldarova [Əminə Əldarova] in the context of a new project to open her previously unexamined professional archives. Mentored by composer Uzeyir Hajibeyli in the 1930s, Eldarova was Soviet Azerbaijan's first ashîq musicologist and spent her career researching the bardic *ashîq* [aşîq] genre. Starting from her student days, she conducted decades of fieldwork with the last generation of ashîqs trained by 19th-century masters. She led the active life of a public scholar, contributing general interest articles, radio, and television appearances, along with her academic articles and presentations. Her 1984 book, *The Art of the Azerbaijani Ashiq* [Искусство азербайджанского ашугов] is considered the foundational work on the genre. Eldarova passed away in 2008, leaving a professional archive of field notebooks, photographs, correspondence, recordings, and collections of published and unpublished writings. In 2024, Anna Oldfield and Kamila Dadash-zadeh began a Collaborative Heritage Preservation Project, the Eldarova Archives. This project is to catalog and preserve archive materials with the goal of bringing Eldarova's scholarship into global conversations in fields such as Ethnomusicology, Folklore, Oral Narrative Studies, Caucasus Studies, and Post/Soviet Nationalities Studies. This paper is based on the presentation "Exploring the Archives: Emina Eldarova's Contribution to Azerbaijani Ashiq Studies" given by Kamila Dadash-zadeh and Anna Oldfield at the Joint Symposium of the International Council of Music and Dance Study Groups for Global History and Music and Music and Dance of the Turkic World held in Baku in 2024. Drawing from personal interviews and archives as well as research, this paper will overview Eldarova's life and work while giving a preview of archive highlights.

Keywords

Biographical methods, Emina Eldarova, audiovisual preservation, genre description, global conversations

INTRODUCTION

Emina Eldarova was born in 1921 at the dawn of the Soviet era in Azerbaijan and grew up in the capital city of Baku. Baku of the early 20th century was a cosmopolitan center that had seen a century of European cultural influences due to the draw of the oil industry, which had brought in wealthy oil entrepreneurs such as the Nobels and the Rockefellers, who were also art patrons and philanthropists. This class influenced Azerbaijan's educated intelligentsia, who had already been developing an interest in western classical music through Russian colonization since 1835. Major musical venues such as the Baku Philharmonic and the Opera and Ballet Theater were built in 1910–11 and were enthusiastically received. In 1920, the Hajibeyli Azerbaijan State Conservatory (today the Baku Music Academy) was established to train young Azerbaijanis to study western classical music as well as mugham in their own country. The powerful figure behind these developments was the composer Uzeyir Hajibeyli himself, who developed a system for theorizing the Azerbaijani modal mugham system and so opened pathways to combine Azerbaijani mugham art music with western scales. He published his work *Foundations of Azerbaijani Folk Music* [Azərbaycan xalq musiqisinin əsasları] in 1945. He used this methodology with exceptional success to compose his own works, such as his 1908 opera *Leyla and*

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Majnun, which integrated mugham singing with traditional instruments into an orchestral composition. Hajibeyli went on to compose a series of works that integrated Azerbaijani art and composers to gracefully combine these two musical legacies across all genres of music. A young pianist named Emina Eldarova would be among those first generations to be taught directly by Hajibeyli, who himself worked at the Conservatory as an instructor and mentor. When she entered the Conservatory postgraduate program in the 1930s, Eldarova hoped to join the composition program and follow in Hajibeyli's footsteps. Hajibeyli was her instructor and mentor, and in an interview, she recalled the day when he handed the graduate students their dissertation topics. As she related in a 2004 interview, there were only two girls in the class, and the other girl was called first for a theme in classical music. Eldarova expected the same, but it happened quite differently.

STUDYING ASHIQS

'And you, Hajibeyli told me, you will study the ashiqs. I almost broke down in tears! Ashiqs? Out in the rural regions? I was a Baku girl. I had always lived in the city. I knew only classical music. I knew nothing about ashiqs. I was in complete shock. I couldn't imagine why he had chosen me, of all people, and a girl too'.

Hajibeyli's choice showed exceptional trust in the young Eldarova. In his quest to understand Azerbaijani music from the inside out, he considered ashiq music to be a foundational genre. At the first Congress of Ashiqs in 1928, he gave a talk about the great importance of the ashiq genre to Azerbaijani music (Eldarova, 1984:24) and wrote his 1936 opera *Koroghlu* based on an ashiq epic. He sent Eldarova to the rural regions where ashiqs were performed to observe, document, and unravel the system, as he had done with mugham. But unlike mugham, ashiq was not art music and was not a Baku tradition—it was performed in rural regions by professional bards called by the title Ashiq. Passed from master to apprentice, it was a bardic tradition that wove oral narrative with music. Performed mostly by men, it was indeed a curious choice to hand it to a young woman from Baku. Nonetheless, it turned out that Hajibeyli's choice showed remarkable foresight. Eldarova would bring not just a dissertation's worth but a lifetime's worth of study to documenting and understanding the ashiq genre. In addition, she befriended ashiq families and became part of their communities, working further as a public intellectual to arouse public understanding of what was perceived by many in Baku as an unsophisticated genre practiced by illiterate rural people.

To the communities where the Ashiq genre was practiced, however, they were already respected figures and were central to community life, as the genre had been practiced by Turkic Azerbaijanis for hundreds of years. The oldest known dastan, *Ashiq Qurbani*, dates to the 16th century and describes a culture in Tabriz where Azerbaijani ashiqs were already part of the social fabric (Arasli, 1957: 6). Judging from these early "dastan," the genre combined Turkic epic traditions with Islamic mysticism expressed in Azerbaijani musical poetics (Baghirova, 125). In the next centuries, ashiq bards spread into the Caucasus, establishing distinct regional schools centered around different masters. These local schools blended the original tradition with regional music

and folklore, creating new dastan and poetry based on their own legends and heroes. The genre was passed from master to apprentice with the demand that the apprentice must learn the master's entire repertoire, which kept older dastan alive into the 20th century. The genre is still practiced, albeit mostly in a changed and changing form, in Azerbaijan and in Azerbaijani communities in Iran, and is closely related to the Turkish *ashik* genre and other Turkic epic singing traditions (Nikaeen & Oldfield, 2020: 1).

Ashiqs perform oral literature both in story and song while accompanying themselves on a long-necked wooden lute called the *saz*. In the tradition that Eldarova (1964) found still practiced by older masters, Ashiqs' performances included dastan epics, sung poetry, and verbal dueling contests (Eldarova, 1984: 34). Performances were embedded in contexts that included opening and closing prayers and invocations to past masters. Dastan were heroic, romantic, and spiritual epics performed as one-man theater by ashiqs who would tell, sing, and act out the story. In some regions, ashiqs were accompanied by percussion and/or a *balaban* (double-reed woodwind), but in many regions the ashik performed solo. In rural regions, Ashiqs were central figures at weddings and life cycle ceremonies and were important in village communities. They also traveled from village to village to perform at gatherings called *majlis*, where they could compete with other ashiqs in verbal dueling contests to show their improvisational skills. Ashiq arts were taught from master to apprentice through oral transmission. In her writing, Eldarova described the master–apprentice method as it was practiced in the early 20th century, where an apprentice would live with their master and spend several years learning the art (Eldarova, 1984: 34). The ashiqs she interviewed would be the last to learn in that tradition, as social change and Soviet policies completely changed the cultural landscape, promoting group lessons, ensemble playing, and fully scripted stage concerts.

During her lifetime, Eldarova would see the ashik genre change dramatically as the incorporation of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (AzSSR) into the Soviet Union brought significant cultural changes. Ashiqs navigated complex roles during the Soviet period; the genre, which was already popular with its core audience, was celebrated as authentic people's culture compatible with Soviet ideals. Ashiqs were required to register in order to perform publicly, and state-sponsored Congresses for all the ashiqs in the country were organized to guide them align with state ideals.

As Aida Huseynova writes, the USSR both encouraged and censored arts: “the Soviet system resembled the figure of Janus, simultaneously showing its two sides, one supportive, the other restrictive” (Huseynova, 2016: 40–41). An Ashiq Union was established to register all performers. By supporting and modifying the genre, Soviet cultural policy attempted to use them to sing about the Bolshevik Revolution in an Azerbaijani voice. This aligned with the official program of being “National in Form, Socialist in Content,” which sought to localize Soviet ideologies through national languages and cultures (Frolova-Walker & Zuk, 2017: 331). Officially, many older dastan and poetic traditions were discouraged or banned due to their spiritual content. Ashiqs were encouraged to write new works for this new world. Although they were still called for weddings, ashiqs were increasingly invited to play on stage at state-sponsored concerts and holidays, where they often performed lyric songs, many of which were newly written in a Soviet context (Oldfield, 2018: 142).

In the 1930s, however, when Eldarova began her work, there were still many ashiqs trained in the older methods. Heading out to the country with her notebooks, she threw herself into her work, becoming a part of ashik communities as a friend and ally as well as a researcher. As she described in an interview, her entire view of this rural art form transformed from estrangement to a profound sense of respect as she realized the intensive training, knowledge, and personal qualities the genre demanded. As she writes,

“Ustad [Master] ashigs composed their poetry extemporaneously—in fact, many of them did not know how to write. But despite that, they had great knowledge of life and knew history, classical literature, and theological issues to an impressive degree. Standing out by their high morals, they called others to “behave in a worthy manner.” Molla Juma, Mirze Belgar, and others knew several languages” (Eldarova, 1984: 18).

These and other observations challenge the definition of “illiterate,” putting Azerbaijani traditional knowledge, passed through oral transmission, on par with knowledge based in literacy. Eldarova wasn’t the only one to recognize the value of documenting the genre, and a number of folklorists worked hard to write down dastan variants to preserve them before they were lost. But Eldarova went further to document the contexts in which these dastans were told, including venues, clothing, gestures, and audience interaction (Eldarova, 1964). Eldarova published scholarship based on her fieldwork from the 1940s to the 1990s, but much more information on what she observed is contained in the notebooks in her archive.

Eldarova’s notebooks reveal a careful, detailed, observation-based scholar who wrote on all aspects of the art, from musical to literary to social. She collected regional variations, recorded methods of training apprentices, and compiled more than 20 verse structures used to build lengthy epic *dastan* with examples, many of which are not used in written Azerbaijani poetry. She also recorded examples of special types of challenge verse forms that were used for improvised verbal dueling. But she was first and foremost a musicologist, and it is in this field that she made her most enduring contributions. She did not try to force ashig music into a western musical category, but rather worked through careful observation of what was already there. She took a genre that was, in the current scholarship of her time, seen as unsophisticated, and searched for its native structure. During her fieldwork, she spoke with ashigs about their terminology and observed musical specifics, documenting and comparing her results from region to region. She collected and transcribed ashig *saz hava* (musical structures that are the basis for singing and improvisation), and recorded the frets and intervals used by individual ashigs before the instrument was standardized. Eldarova recorded and worked out scales, tunings, and musical qualities and learned the terminology that ashigs themselves used. As she worked, Eldarova realized that ashigs had an orally transmitted musical theory and worked with ashigs to understand and document it. In an interview she related how “tears came to my eyes when I realized that there was an entire oral system of musical theory based on the names and relationships of the frets. I understood that this was how they were able to pass on the music for hundreds of years with no notation” (February 2005, interview). Eldarova’s writings on the complexity of the ashig arts brought a new dignity to the genre, making it one that the urban musical world could admire and respect.

Historically, Eldarova’s work is embedded in her lived experience in Soviet Azerbaijan, and reveals much about it. Her book gives detailed descriptions of three state-sponsored Ashiq Congresses held in 1928, 1938, and 1961, providing valuable insight into her historical context. During the first 1928 meeting, as the State sought to consolidate its cultural policies, ashigs were instructed in their mission and given artistic guidelines. This first Qurultay featured a markedly paternal speech by the AzSSR’s People’s Commissar Ruhullah Axundov, who sought to activate the ashig’s role as a communication vehicle from the state to the rural regions, saying

“They [ashigs] have traveled here from those far regions where the people cannot even imagine the existence of nails and the iron plow. The revolutionary songs that they will sing will prove that the revolution is in the very blood of the Azerbaijani people” (Eldarova, 1984: 22).

In describing these Congresses, Eldarova documents some of the methods through which power was enacted in the cultural realm, and how this changed through different eras of the 20th century. The 1961 Congress, during the Khrushchev Thaw, in contrast, showed ashigs and the folklorists who worked with them showing interest in rediscovering their past, valuing the knowledge of the older masters, and in recovering pre-Soviet knowledge. The 1984 Congress,

held in the last decade of the Soviet Union, was especially thick with meaning as constituent Republics were moving toward independence. Eldarova herself was asked to give a plenary speech at that Congress. The text of that speech, photographs, and official programs of all of the Congresses, and her detailed notes from the events in her archive document these transitional times in Azerbaijan.

Writing in an era of censorship where a scholar should not doubt Soviet cultural policies, Eldarova found subtle ways to express her own views. She was very much a traditionalist—having witnessed and documented the genre as it had been passed down from the 19th century to ashiks still living in the 20th, she was distraught at changes and “innovations” that took place over the 20th century (Personal Interview, 9/15/2004). In her book, although she mentions that saz tunings became standardized, she carefully records the unique, individual tunings of older masters, who tuned to their voice. Or after stressing that an ashik traditionally performs solo, she writes in a neutral way about the Soviet push toward ensembles:

“In the Soviet period a new form of ashik performance was developed, the chorale ensemble. This form has an important place in the activity of Soviet ashiks. The first choral ensemble with ashiks singing in unison was the Kirovabad ashiks. It was organized on the eve of the 20-year anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution by the Honored Artist of the AzSSR Islam Yusuf and consisted of 25 ashiks and several balabanists” (Eldarova, 1984: 13).

Yet a page later, she describes how the new styles were changing the genre, speaking of ashiks who:

“...break the rules of the classical, traditional canon of ashik music by including episodes of mugham singing that do not belong... Further, the limited musical repertoire and the lack of professional feeling of measure in accompaniment (two balabans, a qosha dumbek drum, and a baraban drum, usually played *forte*), causes the saz to lose its place as the leading instrument, as it should be in ashik arts; instead, the saz is drowned out by the uncharacteristically (for ashik music) loud sound of the percussion instruments. This performance style ...” is alien to the classical traditions of ashik arts” (Eldarova, 1984: 14).

Eldarova was clearly invested in the older forms of the traditional genre, lamenting “mistaken tendencies which have become common in recent times among some ashiks under the name of ‘innovation’” (20). Of course, many of these “innovations” had been implemented by Soviet cultural policies. Eldarova’s evasion of direct criticism of state influence reminds us that Soviet scholarship, much like literature, developed subtle ways to weave in alternative viewpoints. Devices such as simple omission, deflecting criticism to a different venue, or discussing impossible subjects by setting them in the “feudal” past (such as the religious content of many ashik verses) were used by writers in their published works (Kamovnikova, 2025: 64-79). Eldarova’s notebooks, where she worked out her thoughts before refining them for publication, are a valuable source for further understanding the mechanisms of scholarship under censorship.

As a recognized expert, Eldarova was often asked to give radio interviews and write articles for newspapers and magazines for the general public. Apart from her scholarly work, this gave her an opportunity to reach a large public. In these general interest works, she talked not only about ashiks, sometimes celebrating individual ashiks, sometimes about the genre, but also about Azerbaijani composers and classical music. Her public facing work highlights the role she took on as a bridge between ashik communities in the regions and the greater Azerbaijani population. Her drafts and notes for these events are also in her archive, along with transcripts of the radio shows.

In her scholarly life, she presented at academic events and conferences, which she documented with programs, abstracts, and photographs, as well as her presentation texts and notes. In 1964, she was invited to speak at the *International Scientific Congress of Anthropology and Ethnography* in Moscow, where there were several foreign guests, including an American folklorist named Alan Lomax. Lomax was impressed with her presentation, which included a

performance by Ashiq Akbar Jaffarov and balabanist Musayiv Abbasov, and asked to record an interview with them. Lomax's recording of this meeting with Eldarova and the two artists remained unmarked in the Lomax archives until 2004, when Eldarova identified the recording. This recording is now digitized and available on the Association for Cultural Equity ("Emina Eldarova"). Eldarova's archives include the program from that Conference and her detailed notes on the presentations as well as the text of her own talk. Her collections from this and other conferences and events offer an inside view of the academic world of her era and how it was experienced by an individual scholar.

ELDAROVA'S PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Eldarova's professional life was rich and varied, stretching across the 20th century from the rural regions of Azerbaijan and from ashig communities to the academic world of urban Baku. She worked fluidly across these boundaries, not only going to rural Azerbaijan but also bringing ashigs to Baku for professional-level sound recordings. Among the many recordings made on magnetic tape and preserved in national archives, the recordings of the 72 hava of Ashiq Shamshir stand out as especially valuable. Ashiq Shamshir was born at the end of the 19th century and trained in the pre-Soviet traditions. His repertoire was exceptionally rich, and while by 1950 few ashigs knew more than 40 saz hava, he had mastered 72. Eldarova's recording of Shamshir on magnetic tapes is the only collection of 72 hava by one ashig, and is completely unique, as each ashig improvises within the hava structure. By the 1990s a number of those that Eldarova recorded were no longer played. While these sound recordings are held in national archives, her work with Ashiq Shamshir takes up several of her field notebooks. She has notebooks dedicated to other exceptional master ashigs, including Ashiq Talib, who was the grandson of the 19th-century master Ashiq Alasgar and trained in his legacy. One of the most revered ashigs of the 19th century, the blind Ashiq Alasgar here and in subsequent occurrences not only had a vast knowledge of traditional dastan and poetry, but also composed a great deal of original poetry that is still read and admired today. Eldarova's close work with Ashiq Talib, written in several notebooks and documented in photographs, documents a side of Alasgar's legacy that had been preserved only in oral tradition.

Many folklorists and musicologists in Azerbaijan joined Eldarova in documenting and studying the ashig genre as the 20th century progressed. However, her work stands out as the first comprehensive research based on fieldwork and observation. She attained the status of elder expert in her field, and went on to mentor new generations of students. One of those mentees was Kamila Dadash-zadeh, who went on to have a distinguished career researching, writing, and teaching on ashig arts and is currently the Rector of the Azerbaijan National Conservatory. Another was Anna Oldfield (2018), who studied with and recorded a series of interviews with Eldarova in the early 2000s. When Eldarova passed away, her family bequeathed the archive to Dadash-zadeh, and in 2024 Dadash-Zade and Oldfield ~~were awarded~~ began the Collaborative Heritage Preservation Project for the Eldarova Archives, which is currently in progress.

Eldarova had collected her materials in seven folders, which are partly chronological and partly thematic, with certain groups of items clipped together. The archive also contains many photographs, preserving the visual history of the ashigs across the 20th century. Folder 1 primarily contains Eldarova's academic and public presentations, covering topics such as the saz as an instrument and the legacies of specific ashigs, demonstrating her work as a scholar and public speaker on Azerbaijani musical traditions. Folder 2 is a visual record, filled with photographs of the 2nd and 3rd Ashiq Congresses, master Ashigs, and related cultural events, offering a window into the social and artistic world of these performers. Folder 3 focuses on research into the technical aspects of ashig music, with notebooks of transcribed saz hava, interviews, and notes on musical theory and practice, giving insight into Eldarova's detailed study of the music

itself. Folder 4 documents her academic trajectory and professional interactions, including her thesis written for Hajibeyli, her correspondence with notable figures including Viktor Beliaev, and detailed notes on recorded performances. Folder 5 contains notebooks of saz tunings collected under Uzeyir Hajibeyli's direction, providing valuable historical information on the instrument's technical aspects. Folder 6 expands beyond the *ashiq* genre, containing texts of presentations on various composers and broader musical topics, demonstrating her diverse expertise in Soviet and Azerbaijani music. Finally, Folder 7 holds Eldarova's research notes on oral traditions including the Dede Qorgud epic, *Ashiq* poetry, and the 'Koroglu' epic, highlighting her engagement with the cultural context of *Ashiq* music. Many of these documents have never been researched before.

While the archive has been indexed for its contents, it remains to be studied and explored. Because of the fragile nature of the originals, they must be digitized in order to be safely used. The task of the Collaborative Heritage Project will be to catalogue, digitize, and then store the original contents in archival conditions, retaining Eldarova's organization. The project will culminate in a public-facing website with a trilingual (Azerbaijani, English, Russian) annotated catalogue, which should be available by late summer 2025. The project intends that new research using the contents of the archive will be productive for many years. This paper has sought to highlight Eldarova's contribution to scholarship in multiple fields and contextualize the importance of the archive project, which will open a new window into the life and work of a remarkable scholar.

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