

# THE PRACTICES AND NARRATIVES ON DOMBRA MUSIC TRADITIONS OF KAZAKH PEOPLE IN THE ALTAI REGION, NORTHERN XINJIANG

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## Abstract

Kazakhs are to be found primarily in three regions of northern Xinjiang: Altai, Ili, and Tacheng. I chose Altai as my research area because it is still at the end of an era, passing from nomadic to sedentary societies, and most of the places are still in transition. Compared with musicians engaged in artistic work, Altai has more ordinary musical activities. At the same time, the purpose of music is still related to the customs of a nomadic society, and cultural traditions are more well preserved. I chose to use dombra performance as a starting point because this representative instrument of the Kazakh people is used up to now in a variety of musical events. The dombra can be an overarching red thread that connects various playing methods and thus sees the unity of music and regional musical habits.

## Keywords

Kazakhs, Altai, dombra, repertoires, artistic work

## INTRODUCTION



**Figure 1: The environment in the Altai Region. Picture by the author in the public domain. (Christl, 2008: 29, reprinted with permission by the editor and the author).**

Since 2017, my fieldwork has involved three regions in northern Xinjiang, including almost all counties and cities in the Altai region. Through my own recordings and previous folk music collections, I own more than 1,600 songs and instrumental recordings. In terms of musical practice, I learned to play three instruments: dombra, *sıbzıǵı*, and *kobyz*. Compared to the study of staves during school times, I can experience more rules of instrument performances as expected nowadays and participate in folk music activities, which led to the recognition of a person who plays instrumental music [*küysı*<sup>2</sup>] by insiders. All of this has provided important information for my research. Next, I will analyze the tradition of dombra performances in the Altai region through two case studies.

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<sup>2</sup> *Küysı* [Kuysi] refers to a person who plays instrumental music.

## CASE 1: ADAPTATION OF DOMBRA REPERTOIRE BASED ON THE REGIONAL FINGERING HABITUS

In gatherings of artists, it is common to exchange and use each other's instruments. Artists can see the scenes where the instrument is often used from the wear and tear marks of an old dombra, whether it is played as instrumental music or used for singing accompaniment, whether it is in Altai or in Tarbagatai, and they even deduce the age of an instrument. I also realized that even though there are not many differences in the shape of a dombra, there are still many ways to use them, and the difference in wear marks is the most obvious evidence. This inspired me to pay attention to and study the fingering habitus in dombra playing.

The usage marks on the dombra, akin to practical fingerprints, not only demonstrate the instrument's regional characteristics and the owner's musical needs, but also serve as material evidence for demarcating boundaries between different musical applications. Behind these usage traces lie diverse performance practices that are directly related to the instrument's playing techniques. This insight has inspired the author to approach research on the dombra performance system from the perspective of the fingering habitus.



Figure 2: The wear marks on Ohzhat's dombra.

Figure 3: The wear marks on Karpbai's dombra. Both pictures (Figures 2 and 3).

In the field of organology, John Blacking pioneered the recognition of fingering techniques' formative role in shaping musical expressions through his study related to the Butembo flute in Zambia. He interpreted the melodic structure and repetitive patterns through indigenous performers' embodied experience, analyzing conventional fingering combinations and taboos in Butembo flute performance. This led him to propose that "a 'physical' analysis of the instrumental music of Africa may often prove more enlightening than a purely musical analysis ... It seems likely that we should find this even more frequently in African music, which is not written down and where muscular memory must surely play an important part" (Blacking, 1955: N.p.). Blacking emerged as a trailblazer in applying corporeal practice perspectives to African music research within ethnomusicology, personally engaging in instrumental performance to experience the embodied patterns.

John Blacking's work inspired John Baily's approach to studying Afghan music. Drawing from his background in experimental psychology, Baily (1985) incorporated perspectives on human sensorimotor systems into his research. Additionally, his experience as a multi-style guitarist cultivated an acute perception of lute-family instruments. Baily posited that the ergonomic relationship between a performer and their instrument is inherently manifested in performance practice (Baily, 1992), arguing that instrumental morphology structurally channels performance movements, which crystallize into distinct musical styles. Through comparative analysis, he distinguished left-hand motion patterns between the dutar ("linear array") and rubab ("tiered array"). These configurations can be further subdivided into combinatorial patterns created by discrete movements of the first, second, and third fingers. These left-hand techniques ultimately manifest the raga system, while Baily identified six fundamental right-hand motion principles involving upward and downward strokes.

Both scholars' investigations converged on the instrument-body relationship, explicitly articulating how instrument morphology shapes corporeal engagement and consequently the melodic

formation. Baily's research not only theoretically demonstrates the performance study's importance in revealing emic musical cognition, but also provides analytical frameworks applicable to dombra performance systems.

Within the shared musical repertoire of Kazakh music, recurring melodic patterns permeate performances of the dombra, *sıbizgi*, and songs. Although debates continue among musicians regarding the chronological precedence of different versions, this study posits that analyzing cross-genre transposition and adaptation processes can illuminate the embedded local logic. Focusing on the adaptation rules applied to transposing the *sıbizgi* piece *The Waves of the Irtysh River* to be applied on the dombra, this case study seeks to unravel the foundational principles governing such musical transformations. Both Kazakh *sıbizgi* and dombra feature numerous wave-themed compositions. Musically, the piece employs free rhythm that maintains fixed temporal organization—while metrically flexible, its overall temporal structure follows a consistent pattern across performances. Furthermore, the melody unfolds through *sıbizgi*'s breath-centered musical syntax, with approximately 23-s phrases demarcated by performers' respiration cycles. This contrasts sharply with the dombra's typical modular melodic construction and repetition-based development, posing significant challenges for instrumental transposition. For dombra performers, the primary adaptation difficulty lies in devising appropriate left/right-hand fingering habitus that preserves the original melodic framework while incorporating idiomatic dombra expressions.

During my fieldwork, the author observed two distinct approaches. The first way to do this is to always use finger-tremolo of the right hand. The term “tremolo,” derived from the Latin via Italian linguistic evolution and later assimilated into dombra performance terminology, originally connoted “shaking” or “quivering.” In dombra playing, it specifically refers to the finger-tremolo technique. Finger-tremolo can connect the dotted notes in plucked music into a line. The left hand can follow the melodic line of free rhythms. Judging by the identity of performers, they are mostly players in orchestras. Although this method of processing the melody based on finger-tremolo has strong applicability and is basically not restricted by the logic of the musical language, the music played by this processing method won't be regarded as qualified work by artists because of a lack of the dombra's performance logic.



Figure 4: The author (left) and Shayilaxi (right). Photo courtesy of Liang Ziqi.

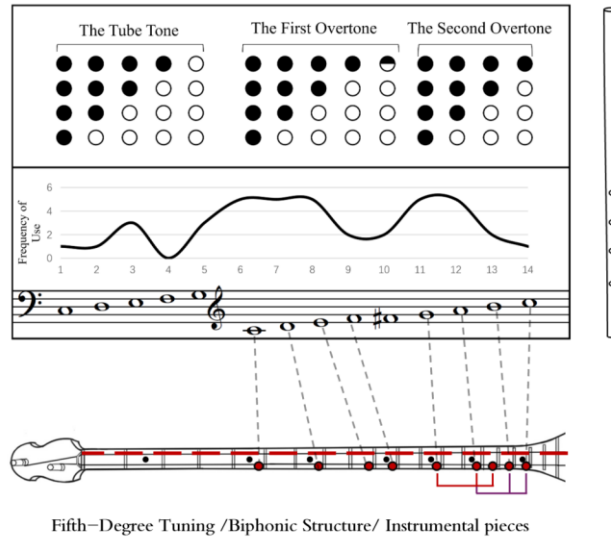
The second treatment is Sayrax's plan. Sayrax is a folk artist from Altai, and most of the repertoire he plays is fifth-degree tuning, with a biphonic structure. The biphonic structure stands as the most fundamental musical conceptual framework in the Altai region, embodying both the Kazakh shamanic cosmology's representation of heaven–earth dynamics and serving as a living heritage of their ancient musical DNA. The region's three core instruments—the dombra, *sıbizgi*, and *kobyz*—each cultivate distinct performance techniques, yet collectively adhere to this biphonic structural logic. Such cross-genre commonality not only reaffirms the foundational role of biphonic thinking within nomadic musical traditions, but also reveals its profound integration as a cultural gene within the Altai's musical ecosystem.



Figure 5: *The Waves of the Irtysh River* (sıbizgi application).

Sayrax's musical adaptations fundamentally adhere to the biphonic structural framework inherent to Altai regional music. Through rigorous study of Sayrax's pedagogical methods and performance observations, the author has systematized the characteristic fingering logics employed by this master musician, particularly the synergistic correlations between dombra and sıbizgi techniques (Figure 6). Comparative analysis reveals that these instruments not only share conceptual musical frameworks but also demonstrate isomorphic applications of tonal positioning. This technical–conceptual congruence establishes the essential foundation enabling cross-instrumental adaptation.

In the diagrams, I use dots to mark the center of gravity and focus of the gesture, and then connect them with straight lines. In this way, it is easier to think about the rationale of melody generation from the perspective of the body. In addition, there are some specific patterns of fingering connections that I have also marked. For each fingering habitus, I describe the way of tuning, the sound structure, and the applications, all of which together connect the regional attributes, the user group, and the genre of fingering habitus. To enhance Western staff notation's capacity for documenting Altai instrumental practices, I implement a bistave notation system with specialized symbols prioritizing fingering logics and combinatorial techniques. The upper stave codifies left-hand stopping positions on the fretboard, while the lower stave maps right-hand articulation patterns. Distinct notational markers showing plucking downward and flicking upward formally differentiate right-hand attack modalities in the score.



**Figure 6: Comparative diagram of fingering habitus for dombra and sıbızgı.**



**Figure 7: *The Waves of the Irtysh River* (dombra application).**

Additionally, Sayrax adapts the melody of *The Waves of the Irtysh River* to the dombra's fingering logic. In the sıbızgı version, the melodic division “C<sup>4</sup>–D<sup>4</sup>–E<sup>4</sup> | D<sup>4</sup>–E<sup>4</sup>–G<sup>4</sup>–A<sup>4</sup>” is constrained by the instrument's physical–acoustic properties. In the dombra version, Sayrax employs the melodic segmentation “C<sup>4</sup>–D<sup>4</sup>–E<sup>4</sup>–D<sup>4</sup>–E<sup>4</sup>–G<sup>4</sup>” and “E<sup>4</sup>–G<sup>4</sup>–A<sup>4</sup>–G<sup>4</sup>–A<sup>4</sup>–C<sup>5</sup>”, demonstrating the ascending stepwise pattern of fingering habits shown in Figure 6. By splitting the original sıbızgı melody into two dombra phrases, Sayrax preserves the overall melodic contour of *The Waves of the Ertis River* while adhering to local fingering conventions and the musical thinking of the biphonic structure. This adaptation thus embodies locality through corporeal habits. The specific conversion method is shown in the following score example.

Serial no.	Sıbızgı edition	Dombra edition
1		
2		





**Figure 8:** A comparative analysis of the melodic transformation in “*The Waves of the Irtysh River*” between *sibizgi* and *dombra*.

Finally, Sayrax must follow the localized semantic expression habits shaped by the local natural environment. He configures corresponding fingering combinations and selects appropriate string contact points based on the thematic content of the musical pieces to achieve the most



**Figure 9:** Beret Igbäi in his house. (Beret Igbäi & Zhang Shan, 2022).

cohesive timbre for his fingerings. This reflects a common practice in Altai region folk music. The Altai area boasts numerous river wave-themed compositions, such as *The Waves of White Haba River*, *The Waves of Qinghe River*, and *The Waves of Kanas Lake* in Xinjiang, China, as well as *The Waves of the Bukhtarma River* and *The Waves of the Ob River* in Kazakhstan. Most of these wave-themed pieces relate to imagery of the Irtysh River and its tributaries. As the mother river of the Altai region, the Irtysh originates in Fuyun County, flows through Haba River County into Kazakhstan, and eventually merges into the Arctic Ocean via Russia. Variations in elevation gradients and channel widths across different river segments significantly affect flow speed, a characteristic mirrored in the locally distinctive wave-themed musical expressions.

In Qinghe County and the mountainous Koktokay area of Fuyun County, where rivers flow swiftly, the local composition *The Waves of Qinghe River* predominantly employs the *tokpe* technique—striking strings with fingernails using a “down-up-down-up” fingering sequence. Conversely, in Buerjin and Habahe counties, where river channels widen and currents slow, the tempo and fingering combinations of *The Waves of White Haba River* sonically mimic this gentler natural topography. *The Waves of the Irtysh River*, primarily circulated in Buerjin County, features *sibizgi* melodies and rhythms deeply aligned with local landforms. When adapting this piece to the *dombra*, Sayrax preserves its regional sonic identity by utilizing the *shertpe* technique system and adopting the Altai-specific “down-up-up-up” fingering pattern designed to evoke calm river flows. Here, downward plucks engage fingernails near the bridge for a more explosive *asti* timbre, mimicking water crashing against rocks, while three upward strums use the fleshier finger pad near the neck–body junction to maximize resonance, producing the *qoner* timbre that embodies the river’s tranquility. This interplay of technique systems and timbral cognition fundamentally reflects performers’ understanding of the relationship between sound and nature. If not for Sayrax’s personal explanation of the adaptation process, many folk musicians would never have discerned the connection between the *dombra* version and the *sibizgi* version of *The Waves of the Irtysh River*, mistaking the *dombra* arrangement for a traditional piece rather than a newly created work. This highlights the success of the adaptation—the composition seamlessly integrates into the traditional social fabric, retaining an “authentic” aura that conceals its innovative origins.

The adaptation of *The Waves of the Irtysh River* demonstrates that reworking a piece not only requires melodic material from the original but also demands careful alignment with localized instrumental styles. This stylistic rootedness stems from two dimensions: fingering logic and musical expression *conventions* ingrained in folk performers’ practices. Crucially, adaptation must also be grounded in the local ecological environment. Only by remaining tethered to the natural and cultural context can a work gain acceptance within the community, allowing it to re-enter folk musicians’ repertoires and perpetuate itself through ongoing musical practice.



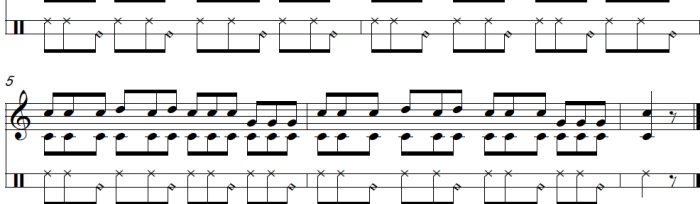


## CASE 2: THE NARRATION OF THE DOMBRA REPERTOIRE

In Kazakh, the term “Küy” translates to instrumental music. However, we should reconsider this translation, as it is challenging to find suitable words in English that fully capture the inherent concept of “Küy”. In the concept of *Kazakh* music, particularly as found in northern Xinjiang. “Küy” carries a broader meaning. It not only expresses spirit and emotional states, but also conveys historical stories and life experiences through the changing rhythms and complex melodic patterns. However, in contemporary stage performances, there is a tendency to emphasize the musical attributes of “Küy,” which gradually diminishes its narrative tradition.

Behind every dombra piece lies a story. What I want to share today is a special kind of küy. Since I haven’t found a common term for Kazakh music, I will temporarily refer to it as “Cyclic Form” repertoire. It *has* the following characteristics. First, the pieces are coherent in plot and interspersed with storytelling, several pieces and stories that together form a single work. Second, each piece is a part of the story. The listener can understand the semantics of music from the performance. Third, due to the development of the storyline, pieces have a fixed performance order, which is reflected in the naming of each piece.

I want to show the importance of Küy’s narrative through a case. This “Cyclic Form” repertoire was narrated by Beret. The damage to his fingers has made his dombra technique less than superb, but he has memorized more than 100 traditional dombra pieces and more than 20 “Cyclic Form” repertoires. He doesn’t like to create new Küy because he thinks it might affect his *memory* of traditional music. From his experiences, it is evident that the dombra repertoire he performs remains deeply intertwined with nomadic customs and lifeways. Taking the dombra cyclic form *Mañğabı’s Dark Horse (Mañğabıldıñ Qaraqasqa Atı)* as a case study, this analysis demonstrates how the convergence of cultural, historical, and pastoral contexts is essential for interpreting the narrative layers of such compositions. Despite the wide circulation of this piece across the Altai region and the abundance of performers capable of playing it, most musicians only master fragmented sections. Among the numerous versions documented during fieldwork, the rendition by Beleti stands out for its structural completeness. The discussion will also incorporate supplementary cultural data from the field to reconstruct the interpretative framework for decrypting this cyclic form.

Factual information	Main text content of cyclic form	Associated musical pieces and techniques
<p><b>Irı mal</b></p> <p>“Irı mal” refers to large livestock such as horses and camels in nomadic culture. 80 ırı mals equate to nearly \$280,000 in modern terms, a stark contrast to contemporary horse racing prizes (typically awarded per animal). This contrast underscores the historical grandeur of such events, amplifying the repertoire’s role in memorializing pivotal historical moments.</p>	<p>A man named Mañğabıl owned a legendary horse called Qaraqasqa, a black stallion marked by distinctive white stripes on its forehead. Even at just one year old, the horse displayed remarkable agility, leaping effortlessly over mares’ backs and winning every race it entered.</p> <p>The Qara Qasqa hailed from the Altai region, where its fame grew after competing in a high-stakes race offering a prize of 80 <i>ırı mals</i>. Two <i>synsy</i> (expert horse appraisers) clashed over predicting the outcome. The first vowed, “<i>If Qara Qasqa fails to win, I will stake my life!</i>” The second countered, “<i>If Kilat [another contender] loses, I’ll double the prize!</i>”</p> <p>On the eve of the race, all horses were taken to a distant starting point. When the race began among 700 competitors, Qara Qasqa surged ahead immediately. At first, the Qara qasqa’s gait was like this.</p>	<p>Performance technique</p> <p>When a horse is at a trot, the characteristic rhythmic pattern of its gait can be musically represented as a dotted eighth note followed by two sixteenth notes (♩♩), which is commonly used in music to mimic its gait.</p>

<p><b>Sınşı</b> are expert horse appraisers within Kazakh communities, tasked with predicting which horse will win first place—a critical pre-competition ritual.</p>		
<p><b>Kilat</b> denotes a now-extinct horse breed once native to the Altai region. Based on Beret's recollections, Kilat horses were characterized by their <b>ash-blue coat</b>. This detail within the composition reflects the ecological and cultural shifts in local equine populations.</p>	<p><i>Mañgabi's Dark Horse (Part 1)</i> Determined to sabotage it, the second synşy intercepted the horse, tying it to a post in a remote village. A local woman, recognizing the famed Qaraqasqa by its attire, freed it—though by then, half the horses had already passed. Shortly after being released, the little black horse once again sprinted to the front, taking the lead. However, the second Sınşı guide once again framed the Qaraqasqa, leading it onto an even more rugged and bumpy path. At this moment, the Qaraqasqa's gait was as follows.</p> 	
<p><b>[Attire]</b> In Altai horse racing traditions, <b>riders are children aged 7–8 years old</b>. They ride bareback, <b>lying prone on a single blanket</b>. Before the race, the horses' manes are <b>braided into plaits</b>, a custom believed to signal the animal's readiness and vitality.</p>	 <p><i>Mañgabi's Dark Horse (Part 2)</i> Later, the Qaraqasqa was driven onto an even more distant route, and at this point, its running posture was as follows.</p> 	<p><b>[Forcibly equisitioned]</b> <i>The Black Stallion</i> Beret During the Great Leap Forward in the 1950s, a black stallion was brought to Shandong. After arriving in Shandong, the black stallion missed his hometown too much, so he ran all the way back to Xinjiang.</p>
<p><b>[Question]</b> If there was a child on the back of the horse, why couldn't the child take the reins off himself after the Qaraqasqa was tied down? This pertains to the changes in horse breeds in Altai region during the last century.</p>	 <p><i>Mañgabi's Dark Horse (Part 3)</i> Even though he was constantly framed like this, the little dark horse finally won the first place. Someone asked the first synşy later why he had dared to bet his life and say that the little dark horse could win the first place. The Moriche said that when he had looked at the size of Qaraqasqa, he had known that it must have come from a very</p>	<p>This narrative mirrors pastoral histories of the 1950s Altai region, as recounted by Janat, highlighting the socioeconomic transformations of nomadic herding.</p>
<p><b>[Horse breeds]</b></p>		



Janat noted, “During the Great Leap Forward, horses from the Altai region were forcibly requisitioned to the regions of Beijing and Shandong. As many were stallions, the breeding population in Altai collapsed, leading to a severe decline in both the size and numbers of the local horse herds.”	sacred place. “No one can compare to this Qaraqasqa except the birds in the sky,” he had remarked. After a few years, Mañğabil fell ill, and Qaraqasqa became thinner and thinner. One day, he lay down in the woods. Mañğabil’s son asked his father if there was anything he could do to get the horse to stand up. Mañğabil told him to prepare a few horses and let the child ride beside Qaraqasqa as if in a race. When they did so, Qaraqasqa jumped up. Later, Mañğabil died, and his son continued to keep the horse. One day, a thief rode Qaraqasqa from Fuhai to Qinghe, but the horse fell and couldn’t get up. The thief marked the running position of the horse along the way with a dombra. According to Kazakh custom, when a horse dies, its head is cut off and hung on a tall tree, and people recognize the horse and sigh.	<b>The Brown Horse with Tethered Legs</b> Karpbai A poor young man secretly meets his lover, the daughter of a wealthy landowner. Discovered during a rendezvous, he flees on a hobbled brown horse.  The technique employed in “The Brown Horse with Bound Legs” echoes the fingering combinations in Track Two, vividly depicting the horse’s gallop on a rugged path.
<b>[Analysis]</b> The historical period told by the repertoire shows that the children of the horses in the Altai region are tied to the back of the horse, which is more than 2 m high, and the child cannot get off the horse, but can only cry. In contrast to the current Altai horses, which are only about 1.5 m, children can get on and off the horses freely.		
Some variants describe the Sınşı setting eight obstacles overcome by the legendary black horse Qaraqasqa.	A specific fingering motif mirrors the weary stride of a horse after enduring repeated sabotage.	
<b>[Chop off the horse's head]</b> The Kazakh <b>cranial veneration ritual</b> dictates that upon a horse’s death, its head is severed, cleansed, sun-dried, and enshrined atop trees or high rocks—a gesture of reverence for the animal’s spirit.		

**Figure 10: (with incorporated transcriptions by the author): Narrative analysis of the cyclic form *Mañğabi’s Dark Horse*.**

The narrative expression of *Mañğabi’s Dark Horse*, which addresses the transformation of pastoral livelihoods, forms an intertextual dialogue with the narrative of *The Black Stallion* and Janat’s historical memory. The theme of nostalgic longing and homecoming in *The Black Stallion*—embodied in the horse’s return to its homeland—further resonates with the homesick symbolism of camels in *Male Camels in Beijing*. This illustrates that deciphering dombra repertoire narratives is an iterative process of piecing together fragmented information, rather than relying on a singular “interpretive key” to unlock the full meaning of a piece. Crucially, decoding the storytelling within these musical works relies on cultural customs and unspoken agreements rooted in traditional society. Such contextual knowledge is never explicitly articulated in the music itself but exists as a shared cultural consensus. Thus, the core of interpreting the narrative depth of these compositions lies in tracing intertextuality—the interconnected threads weaving through diverse musical stories, historical events, and cultural traditions.

Cross-analyzing dombra melodies through multiple sources reveals that the three fingering combinations within the suite gain narrative clarity when tied to stories, yet remain polysemous without cultural context. Performers now widely adopt compressed frameworks, typically summarizing suite themes with general statements such as “this piece depicts a horse’s galloping posture,” while selecting single melodic segments to represent complete storylines during performances. However, such fragments can only convey fragmented story elements. Consequently, equating these with complete narratives risks generating discrepancies between melodic structures and intended semantic meanings. Furthermore, essential narrative components—including why a horse gallops and how—become obscured during the simplification process. This not only weakens the correspondence between music and textual narratives but also contributes to the disintegration of traditional narrative structures. As musical pieces lose

their original narrative frameworks, the organizational logic of melodic fragments undergoes alteration, thereby accelerating morphological transformations of the tunes.

## CONCLUSION

The traditional performance practices of the *dombra* in the Altai region can be observed from two perspectives. The rich traces of use preserved on the instruments themselves demonstrate the diversity of performance practices in the region. This also validates the rationale for this study's focus on fingering-based habits as an analytical framework. Analysis of specific musical works reveals that whether through adaptations of folk songs, or cross-genre transplantation of instrumental pieces, folk musicians consistently reinterpret melodies from different ethnicities and genres using their habitual fingering logic. The differentiation of musical practices further illustrates that the application of fingering-based conceptualization in musical creation must strictly adhere to localized semantic conventions. Variations in livestock populations, topography, cultural customs, and narrative archetypes across regions have collectively shaped distinct "sound-semantic" associative systems in different locales.

The narrativity inherent in *dombra* music requires performers to integrate story logic with melodic structures. When conflicts arise between exogenous musical materials and local traditions, musicians systematically reconfigure melodic content according to indigenous aural cognition patterns. This ongoing bidirectional accommodation generates an intertextual network connecting repertoire with traditional narratives. Through multidimensional interactions with cultural customs, regional histories, and material relics, fragmented musical phrases coalesce into coherent historical storytelling, weaving individual musicians' personal histories into the collective memory of the ethnic group. In the continuous performance and singing, individual memories permeate collective experiences, sustaining the vitality of oral traditions across spatiotemporal dimensions. Compared to the writing traditions of Han Chinese society, this perhaps constitutes the essential distinction of nomadic oral transmission systems.

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