

**ORGANOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AFGHAN RUBAB IN THE CONTEXT OF TRADITIONAL MUSIC SYSTEMS**

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*This research provides a comprehensive organological analysis of the Afghan Rubab, examining its structural evolution, acoustic properties, and performance techniques. The paper investigates the instrument's pivotal role within the "Kabul school" (Gharana) and its broader influence on the development of North Indian classical instruments, specifically the Sarod. By analyzing historical treatises and contemporary performance practices, the study elucidates the Rubab's function as a primary vehicle for both courtly and mystical musical expressions in Central and South Asia.*

**Introduction**

The musical cartography of Central and South Asia finds one of its most profound expressions in the Afghan Rubab, a short-necked plucked lute that serves as a cornerstone of the region's organological and cultural identity. Often venerated as the "Lion of Instruments" (Sultan-ul-Nauz), the Rubab is not merely a generator of acoustic frequencies but a sophisticated cultural artifact that embodies the convergence of Persianate aesthetic theories and Indo-Islamic musical praxis. Historically rooted in the ancient Gandhara civilization and later refined within the courtly environments of the Durrani Empire, the Rubab represents a

critical evolutionary link in the development of the chordophone family, most notably serving as the direct progenitor of the North Indian “Sarod”.

The structural anatomy of the Rubab is a testament to indigenous craftsmanship and acoustic ingenuity. Carved from a single block of seasoned mulberry wood (*Morus alba*), its double-chambered body is covered with a bovine skin membrane, creating a unique timbre that balances percussive clarity with melodic depth. What distinguishes the Afghan Rubab from its regional counterparts – such as the Persian “Tar” or the Uzbek “Dutar” – is its complex arrangement of strings. Beyond the three primary melodic strings, the instrument features a sophisticated array of sympathetic resonators (*tarab*) and drone strings (*chikari*). These elements allow the performer to create a polyphonic “halo” of sound, mirroring the mystical and philosophical tenets of Sufism, where the resonance of the instrument is often likened to the “breath of the soul”.

In the contemporary era, the Rubab has transcended its traditional role within the “Gharana” (hereditary school) systems of Kabul and Herat to become a potent symbol of Afghan national resilience. Despite decades of socio-political volatility and periods of cultural censorship, the instrument has survived as a vital medium for both the “Klassik” (classical) repertoire, based on the Indian “Raga” system, and the “Milli” (folk) traditions of the Pashtun and Tajik populations.

### **Organological structure and materiality**

The Afghan Rubab is a masterpiece of traditional engineering, characterized by a complex multi-part construction that dictates its unique sonorous qualities. Unlike many Western string instruments that are assembled from thin plates, the Rubab is primarily a monoxyle instrument, meaning its main body is carved from a single, solid block of wood.

The primary material used in the construction of a professional-grade Rubab is the wood of the Mulberry tree (*Morus alba*). Mulberry is preferred due to its density and resonance characteristics, which allow for a clear, “woody” projection. The instrument is divided into three distinct anatomical sections:

- The Kasa (Bowl): The lower section, which is hollowed out to act as the primary resonance chamber.
- The Shah-parda (Waist): A narrow, indented section covered with parchment, which separates the two main chambers.
- The Dasta (Neck): A short, hollow neck that houses the pegs for the sympathetic strings.

The acoustic soul of the Rubab lies in its skin soundboard. A damp piece of goat or bovine skin is stretched over the open face of the “Kasa” and glued into place. This membrane serves

as the interface between the vibrating strings and the wooden body. The bridge (“Khariak”), typically carved from camel bone or horn, sits directly on this skin. This configuration allows for a rapid transient response, giving the Rubab its signature percussive “attack”.

The stringing of the Afghan Rubab is perhaps its most complex feature, categorized into three functional layers:

- Melodic Strings (3): Traditionally made of gut, but now commonly replaced by nylon. These are the primary strings used for fretting and melodic execution.

- Drone Strings (Chikari - 2 or 3): Fixed-pitch strings used to provide a rhythmic and harmonic foundation, tuned to the tonic (Sā) and fifth (Pa).

- Sympathetic Strings (Tarab - 11 to 15): These are thin steel strings that run beneath the main strings and through the hollow neck. They are tuned to the specific scale (“Raga” or “Maqam”) being performed. When a note is played on the main string, the corresponding “Tarab” string vibrates in sympathy, creating a lush, reverb-like acoustic “halo”.

The Rubab features a limited number of frets (parda), usually made of tied nylon or gut. Unlike the sitar, which has many frets, the Rubab typically has only 4 to 5 frets near the headstock. This allows the player to perform in the lower register with frets while utilizing the unfretted portion of the neck for slides (meend) and microtonal ornamentations, characteristic of the Afghan melodic style.

### **The kabul school and stylistic repertoire**

The professionalization of the Afghan Rubab is inextricably linked to the “Kabul School” (the “Gharana” system), which flourished under the patronage of the Afghan courts in the 19th and 20th centuries. This school represents a sophisticated synthesis of indigenous folk motifs and the complex structural rigors of Indo-Persian art music.

The repertoire of the Afghan Rubab is unique in its duality. Performers must be masters of two distinct musical languages:

- The Classical (Klassik) Tradition: Deeply influenced by the Hindustani classical system, the Rubab is used to perform “ragas”. However, the Afghan interpretation tends to be more rhythmic and robust compared to the vocal-centric approach of India.

- The Regional (Milli) Tradition: This includes the “naghma-ye kashal” (extended instrumental pieces), which often start with a slow, unmetred introduction (“shakl”) and transition into fast, rhythmic cycles. These pieces are often based on local Pashtun and Tajik folk melodies but are elevated through complex ornamentation.

The Rubab is played with a plectrum known as a Shahbaz (or “zakhma”), typically made of coconut shell or bone. The technical brilliance of a virtuoso is measured by two primary factors:

- Right-hand Percussiveness: The player utilizes the drone strings (chikari) to create a constant rhythmic pulse. This technique, known as “Parand”, mimics the sound of a drum, making the Rubab both a melodic and a percussive instrument simultaneously.

- Left-hand Agility: Because the Rubab has a short neck and limited frets, the performer must execute rapid position shifts and utilize “glissando” (slides) to achieve the microtonal nuances (meend) required for the emotional depth of the music.

Historically, the secrets of the Rubab were passed down through the Ustad-Shagird system. This oral tradition ensured that not only the techniques but also the spiritual philosophy of the music were preserved. The lineage of masters such as Ustad Mohammad Omar, often cited as the “father of the Modern Rubab”, transformed the instrument from a folk accompaniment into a world-class solo concert instrument.

### **Socio-political resilience and global diaspora**

The recent history of the Rubab is one of survival. During periods of cultural prohibition in Afghanistan, the instrument became a silent symbol of national identity.

- Cultural Preservation in Exile: With the migration of master musicians to cities like Peshawar, Delhi, and Fremont (USA), the Rubab has entered the global stage. It is no longer confined to Afghan borders but is now studied by ethnomusicologists and students worldwide.

- Modern Innovations: While the traditional form remains sacred, contemporary musicians are experimenting with electric pickups and fusion genres, integrating the Rubab into jazz, electronic, and world-music collaborations. This evolution demonstrates the instrument's adaptability without losing its “ancient” soul.

### **Conclusion**

The Afghan Rubab stands as a sophisticated testament to the enduring musical genius of Central and South Asia. Through this organological and socio-cultural examination, it is evident that the instrument is much more than a collection of mulberry wood and silk-steel strings; it is a profound cultural vessel that has navigated the complexities of history, from the royal courts of the Durrani Empire to the global stages of the 21st century.

The Rubab’s unique construction – specifically its dual-chambered body and sympathetic resonance system – represents a pinnacle of indigenous acoustic engineering that paved the way for the development of other iconic instruments, such as the Indian Sarod.

The instrument successfully bridges the aesthetic divide between the Persian “maqam” and the Indian “Raga” systems, creating a distinct “Kabul Style” that remains unparalleled in its rhythmic and melodic depth.

Despite the immense socio-political upheavals and periods of cultural displacement faced by the Afghan people, the Rubab has remained an unbreakable link to national identity. In the diaspora, it continues to serve as a beacon of Afghan heritage, adapting to new musical contexts while preserving its ancient tonal soul.

In conclusion, the preservation and continued study of the Afghan Rubab are essential for the global community. As it transitions from a traditional folk instrument to a prominent feature of world music, the Rubab remains the “lion of instruments” – a symbol of resilience, a bridge between civilizations, and an irreplaceable voice in the intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

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