



## **A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF LIBRETTO, VOCAL TECHNIQUES, AND ORCHESTRATION IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK OPERA**

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### **Abstract**

Opera as a composite art form integrates music, drama, and staging to create a cohesive aesthetic experience. English opera, rooted in European classical traditions, evolved through the works of Henry Purcell, Benjamin Britten, and later modern innovators. Uzbek opera, on the other hand, emerged as a synthesis of Western operatic forms and the indigenous maqom tradition, particularly during the early Soviet cultural reforms. This article provides a contrastive analysis of English and Uzbek opera in terms of libretto construction, vocal techniques, and orchestration, highlighting their artistic, structural, and cultural distinctions.

### **Introduction**

Opera as a composite art form integrates music, drama, and staging to create a cohesive aesthetic experience. English opera, rooted in European classical traditions, evolved through the works of Henry Purcell, Benjamin Britten, and later modern innovators. Uzbek opera, on the other hand, emerged as a synthesis of Western operatic forms and the indigenous maqom tradition, particularly during the early Soviet cultural reforms<sup>1</sup>. This article provides a contrastive analysis of English and Uzbek opera in terms of libretto construction, vocal techniques, and orchestration, highlighting their artistic, structural, and cultural distinctions.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre*, University of Toronto Press, 1998.



## Libretto in English Opera

English opera librettos are shaped by a long-standing literary tradition in which dramatic structure, poetic expression, and psychological depth play central roles. One of the defining features of English opera is its commitment to **dramatic narrative clarity**. Libretti typically follow a logically organized storyline with a clear exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution. This reflects the influence of English Renaissance drama, especially the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, where narrative coherence and dramatic progression are essential components of the theatrical experience. Thus, English opera tends to avoid overly abstract or purely symbolic plots, instead prioritizing intelligible storytelling that guides the audience through a well-articulated dramatic arc.

Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (1689) demonstrates concise dramatic progression and expressive lyrical writing<sup>2</sup>.

## Libretto in Uzbek Opera

Uzbek opera librettos represent a unique synthesis of Western dramatic conventions and the rich poetic-musical heritage of Central Asia. While they adopt the structural framework of European opera—such as acts, scenes, character dialogues, and thematic development—they simultaneously preserve national aesthetics through the extensive use of **maqom poetry, classical Eastern literary forms, folk narratives, and epic storytelling traditions**. In many Uzbek operas, the libretto draws on the **lyrical and philosophical depth** of classical poets such as Alisher Navoiy, Fuzuliy, and Ogahiy, whose works contribute metaphorical imagery, symbolic motifs, and emotional subtlety. This gives Uzbek operatic texts a distinctively poetic and elevated tone. Moreover, the rhythmic patterns found in maqom—such as **tahrir, savt, and nasr**—influence the structural flow of dialogue and monologue within the libretto, allowing for extended lyrical passages, reflective arias, and heightened emotional expression. Examples: *Buran*, 1938 - blending tragic national themes and lyrical folk elements<sup>3</sup>. *Layli va Majnun* - based on classical Eastern poetry, incorporating lyrical monologues and poetic dialogues.

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<sup>2</sup> Curtis Price, *Henry Purcell and the London Stage*, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> B. Qosimov (ed.), *O'zbek Operasi Tarixi*, Tashkent: Fan, 1980.



### Uzbek librettos often feature:

Uzbek opera librettos frequently exhibit a set of literary and stylistic features deeply rooted in Eastern poetic and narrative traditions. One of the most prominent elements is poetic parallelism, a device widely used in classical Uzbek and Persian poetry. Poetic parallelism involves the repetition of syntactic structures or rhythmic patterns to reinforce thematic unity, emphasize emotional intensity, and create a lyrical flow within the libretto. This stylistic approach allows the text to resonate closely with the melodic contours of maqom music, which often relies on symmetrical or complementary musical phrases.

### Key Contrast

English Opera	Uzbek Opera
Psychological realism	Poetic-symbolic storytelling
Tight dramatic structure	Epic, lyrical flow
Individual conflicts	Collective or national themes

### Vocal Style in English Opera

English operatic singing is fundamentally rooted in **Italianate bel canto traditions**, which have shaped European vocal aesthetics since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This influence is clearly reflected in several defining vocal characteristics. First, English opera emphasizes **sustained legato**, a smooth and continuous vocal line in which notes flow seamlessly from one to another without noticeable breaks. This technique allows the singer to maintain lyrical expressiveness and emotional coherence, particularly in long melodic phrases typical of both Purcell's arias and the later works of Benjamin Britten. Legato singing also facilitates clarity of text setting, which is crucial in English opera where intelligibility of diction holds significant importance. Britten introduced a naturalistic English diction-focused vocal approach<sup>4</sup>.

### Vocal Style in Uzbek Opera

Uzbek opera is distinguished by its incorporation of **maqom-based vocalism**, which forms the aesthetic and technical core of national operatic singing. Unlike the bel canto-influenced vocal approach of Western opera, Uzbek operatic vocal style

<sup>4</sup> Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, Oxford University Press, 1979.



draws heavily from traditional maqom performance practices, especially in early national operas created during the 1930–1950s cultural synthesis period. This unique fusion gives Uzbek opera a hybrid musical identity that merges Western harmonic structures with Eastern modal and ornamental systems. One of the most defining characteristics is the extensive use of **melismatic ornamentations**, known locally as **ko‘k-sado**, **ziro**, and **nola**. These vocal ornaments involve singing multiple notes on a single syllable with subtle fluctuations in pitch and timbre. Melisma serves not only as a decorative device but also as a means of conveying emotional intensity, spiritual longing, and lyrical expressiveness—features deeply embedded in classical Eastern singing traditions. Such ornamentations mirror the structure of maqom melodic lines, where gradual ascent, micro-inflections, and ornamental turns shape the expressive contour. Singers such as **Yunus Rajabiy** and **Shorahimjon** preserved these techniques<sup>5</sup>.

### Key Contrast

English Vocalism	Uzbek Vocalism
Bel canto technique	Maqom vocal ornaments
European intonation system	Microtonal Eastern modal system
Controlled vibrato	Ornamented, improvisational style

### Orchestration in English Opera

Orchestration in English opera is firmly grounded in the **Western symphonic tradition**, reflecting the influence of European classical music practices from the Baroque through the Romantic and modern periods. English opera composers utilize a **full symphonic orchestra**, consisting of **string, woodwind, brass, and percussion** sections, each contributing distinct timbral and expressive functions. The string section typically provides a lyrical foundation and emotional continuity, while woodwinds introduce coloristic nuances and character-specific motifs. Brass instruments add intensity and structural emphasis, particularly during climactic moments, and the percussion section enhances rhythmic vitality and dramatic tension. Purcell employed continuo-based orchestration; Britten expanded timbral palettes with modernist textures<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Yunus Rajabiy, *Maqomlar*, Tashkent: G‘afur G‘ulom Publishing, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Grout, *A Short History of Opera*, Columbia University Press, 2003.



## Orchestration in Uzbek Opera

Orchestration in Uzbek opera represents a distinctive **hybrid musical system** that merges Western compositional techniques with the rich instrumental and modal heritage of Uzbek traditional music. This synthesis results in a unique national-symphonic sound world that differs substantially from European operatic orchestration while still maintaining compatibility with the operatic form. A key component of Uzbek operatic orchestration is the incorporation of the **Western symphony orchestra**, which provides structural foundation, harmonic support, and dramatic contour. Composers utilize standard orchestral sections—strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion—to create the broad dynamic range and expressive capacity required by the operatic genre. However, in contrast to pure Western symphonic practice, these elements often serve as a framework within which national musical language is embedded. Composers like **Mutal Burhonov** and **Tolib Sodiqov** developed distinctive national-symphonic styles<sup>7</sup>.

### Key Contrast

English Orchestration	Uzbek Orchestration
Symphonic harmonic system	Modal maqom system
Western classical instruments	Combination with national instruments
Dramatic underscoring	Ornamented melodic accompaniment

### Conclusion

English and Uzbek opera traditions differ fundamentally in their **libretto construction, vocal technique, and orchestration**, reflecting their distinct cultural histories. English opera is anchored in Western dramatic realism, bel canto vocalism, and symphonic orchestration, while Uzbek opera integrates Eastern poetic structure, maqom-based singing, and national-instrument orchestration. Despite these differences, both traditions demonstrate the universal power of opera as a synthesis of music, drama, and cultural identity.

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2. B. Qosimov (ed.), *O‘zbek Operasi Tarixi*, Tashkent: Fan, 1980.

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<sup>7</sup> A. Ikromov, *O‘zbekiston Musiqa Merosi*, Tashkent: San’at, 2012.



## **EduVision: Journal of Innovations in Pedagogy and Educational Advancements**

**Volume 01, Issue 11, November 2025**

brightmindpublishing.com

**ISSN (E): 3061-6972**

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