

## Safeguarding Uzbek oral traditions in the age of digital audio archives

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**Abstract:** *The digital preservation of Uzbek oral musical traditions, encompassing the epic narratives of the bakhshi and the modal complexities of the Shashmaqom, presents challenges that extend far beyond technical audio engineering into the epistemological, ethical, and cultural domains. This article argues that digitisation is not a neutral act but a transformative intervention that reshapes how oral traditions are understood and transmitted. It examines the ontological tension between preserving fixed performances and honouring the living, improvisatory nature of oral culture, alongside the technical demands of high-fidelity capture, long-term sustainability, and culturally sensitive metadata. The discussion explores the delicate relationship between digital archives and living practice, acknowledging both the risk of suppressing creative variation and the potential for revitalisation through intentional pedagogical use. Central to the argument is the role of the archivist as a cultural mediator who must balance technical proficiency with ethnographic sensitivity and community trust. The article further addresses the nuanced question of access, distinguishing between the democratising potential of open dissemination and the necessity of respecting community protocols for sacred or sensitive materials. Ultimately, digital preservation is conceived as an ongoing process of care rather than a finite project, with the ultimate purpose of sustaining the living vitality of Uzbek oral traditions as expressions of cultural sovereignty and collective memory in an era of rapid global change.*

**Keywords:** *Uzbek oral traditions, digital audio preservation, bakhshi epics, Shashmaqom, ethnomusicological archiving, intangible cultural heritage*

The oral musical traditions of Uzbekistan represent one of the most sophisticated and spiritually resonant cultural heritage systems in Central Asia, yet they exist in a state of profound vulnerability that is paradoxically both illuminated and exacerbated by the very digital technologies that promise their preservation. For centuries, the transmission of Uzbek traditional music, from the epic cycles of the bakhshi storytellers to the modal intricacies of the Shashmaqom, has depended upon an intimate pedagogical relationship between master and disciple, a relationship built upon years of attentive listening, corporeal imitation, and the gradual internalisation of melodic contours, rhythmic cycles, and poetic texts that cannot be fully captured in any notational system. This oral tradition is not merely a collection of songs or instrumental pieces; it is a living epistemology, a way of knowing and being in the world that encodes historical memory, spiritual devotion, social values, and aesthetic sensibilities within the very fabric of its musical structures. The advent of digital audio archives has created unprecedented opportunities to document, disseminate, and analyse these traditions with a fidelity and reach that earlier generations of ethnomusicologists could scarcely have imagined, but it has also introduced a host of ethical, epistemological, and practical dilemmas that demand the most careful consideration from those who would undertake this sacred responsibility. To safeguard Uzbek oral traditions in the age of digital audio archives is to navigate a complex terrain where technical proficiency must be balanced against cultural sensitivity, where the desire for preservation must not overshadow the imperative of living practice, and where the global accessibility of digitised materials

must be reconciled with the rights and wishes of the communities from whom these traditions emanate.

The first and most fundamental challenge confronting any digital preservation initiative for Uzbek oral traditions is the question of what, precisely, is being preserved. A digital audio file of a bakhshi performing the epic poem *Alpomish* captures the acoustic waveform of that particular performance on that particular day, in that particular setting, before that particular audience. It is a document, a trace, a frozen instant in a continuum of living variation. But the tradition of bakhshi performance is not reducible to any single rendition; it is the cumulative, evolving practice of improvisation, recomposition, and contextual adaptation that has sustained the epic for centuries. Each performance is both a reiteration of the inherited narrative and a unique creative act that responds to the immediate circumstances of its delivery. When we digitise and archive such a performance, we risk reifying a single version as the definitive text, thereby flattening the polyphonic richness of the oral tradition and potentially diminishing the authority of living practitioners who continue to shape the repertoire in their own distinctive ways. This is not an argument against digitisation, for the fragility of oral transmission in the face of urbanisation, migration, and the erosion of traditional patronage structures is undeniable; rather, it is an argument for a preservation philosophy that embraces multiplicity, contextual documentation, and ongoing community engagement as essential complements to the audio recording itself.

The technical dimensions of digital audio preservation for Uzbek traditional music are themselves far from straightforward, despite the apparent maturity of contemporary recording and storage technologies. The acoustic characteristics of traditional instruments, such as the long-necked *dutar*, the plaintive *qobuz*, the resonant *tanbur*, and the percussive *doira*, present distinct challenges for microphone placement, gain staging, and equalisation that differ markedly from the studio conventions developed for Western classical or popular music. The modal subtleties of the *Shashmaqom*, with its microtonal inflections and nuanced ornamentation, demand high-resolution sampling rates and bit depths that exceed the specifications commonly employed for speech or general audio archiving. The spatial acoustics of traditional performance venues, whether the tiled courtyards of Bukhara, the caravanserais of Samarkand, or the domestic interiors of rural Fergana, contribute significantly to the aesthetic experience and must be captured with appropriate microphone techniques that preserve a sense of spatial presence rather than producing the dry, anechoic isolation favoured by commercial recording studios. Furthermore, the long-term viability of digital audio files depends upon rigorous attention to file formats, metadata standards, and storage redundancy that many cultural heritage institutions in Uzbekistan, despite their dedication and expertise, lack the infrastructure to sustain without substantial international collaboration and investment. The choice of lossless compression formats, the adherence to open standards that resist vendor lock-in, the implementation of checksum verification and periodic migration strategies, and the documentation of all technical parameters within comprehensive metadata schemas are not mere technical formalities but are foundational to the ethical obligation of ensuring that future generations can access these recordings with the same fidelity as present listeners.

Beyond the technical and epistemological considerations, there exists a complex and often politically charged legal and ethical framework governing the digital preservation of Uzbek oral traditions. The notion of individual authorship, which underpins Western copyright law, sits uneasily with the collective, intergenerational nature of oral transmission, where melodies, poetic formulas, and narrative structures circulate freely within a community and are continuously reshaped by countless contributors over centuries. To attribute copyright to a single performer or to a state institution risks alienating the very communities whose cultural labour has produced these traditions and whose

continued practice is essential to their vitality. Conversely, to leave these traditions entirely unregulated in the digital domain exposes them to commercial exploitation, cultural appropriation, and misrepresentation by external actors who have no connection to or understanding of their original contexts. The most ethically sound approaches to this dilemma are those that privilege community consent and benefit-sharing, ensuring that the practitioners, elders, and local cultural institutions who are the true custodians of these oral traditions have a meaningful voice in decisions about digitisation, access, and reuse. This may involve the negotiation of access protocols that distinguish between open public access for educational purposes and restricted access for ceremonial or sacred materials; it may involve the creation of community-controlled archives that are managed locally but supported technically by international partners; and it may involve the integration of traditional knowledge labels and provenance statements within the digital metadata that signal the cultural status and permitted uses of each recording. These are not obstacles to be overcome but essential features of a preservation paradigm that respects the dignity and agency of the communities it purports to serve.

The relationship between digital audio archives and the living practice of Uzbek oral traditions is perhaps the most delicate and consequential aspect of this entire endeavour. There is a genuine danger, widely observed in ethnomusicological literature, that the availability of high-quality archival recordings can inadvertently suppress the living creativity of oral traditions by establishing canonical versions that performers feel compelled to imitate rather than to reinvent. Young musicians, eager to learn their heritage, may turn to digital archives as convenient substitutes for the demanding apprenticeship that once required years of direct engagement with a master, and in doing so, they may absorb a fixed, decontextualised repertoire that lacks the spontaneous vitality and situational responsiveness that defines authentic oral performance. Yet this danger is not inherent in the technology itself but in the pedagogical and cultural frameworks within which it is deployed. Digital archives can be, and in some exemplary cases already are, used to revitalise and diversify oral traditions by providing access to regional variants, historical recordings, and master performances that might otherwise be inaccessible to younger generations. They can serve as resources for comparative study that deepen performers' understanding of their own tradition's range and flexibility. They can facilitate dialogue between geographically dispersed communities who share a common musical heritage but have developed distinctive local styles. The key, once again, is intentionality and contextualisation, ensuring that digital archives are presented not as authoritative replacements for living practice but as supplements and catalysts that enrich the oral tradition without supplanting it.

The role of the archivist and preservationist in this context is therefore not that of a passive technician but of an active cultural mediator, one who must possess not only technical competence in audio engineering and data management but also deep ethnographic sensitivity, linguistic proficiency, and historical knowledge of the traditions being documented. The ideal digital archivist of Uzbek oral traditions would be fluent in Uzbek, Tajik, and perhaps Karakalpak, familiar with the poetic metres of Alisher Navoi, conversant with the modal theory of the Shashmaqom, and trusted by the communities whose music they record. Such individuals are rare, and their formation requires a deliberate investment in interdisciplinary training that combines musicology, anthropology, information science, and digital humanities. International collaborations between Uzbek institutions and foreign universities or cultural organisations can play a vital role in this capacity-building effort, provided that these partnerships are genuinely collaborative rather than extractive, that they respect local expertise and decision-making authority, and that they contribute to the long-term institutional sustainability of Uzbek archives rather than simply exporting recordings to foreign repositories. The most successful models of digital preservation in similar contexts around the world are those that have prioritised local ownership, that have trained local practitioners to manage and sustain their own

digital infrastructure, and that have fostered a new generation of scholar-archivists who are equally at home in the field, the archive, and the digital studio.

The question of access, which is central to the very concept of a digital archive, takes on particular complexity in the context of Uzbek oral traditions. On one hand, the digital medium offers the promise of unprecedented accessibility, allowing a student in Tashkent, a researcher in Istanbul, and a diaspora community member in New York to listen to the same recording of a Khorezmian epic with equal ease. This democratising potential is enormously valuable for the dissemination and appreciation of Uzbek cultural heritage on a global scale. On the other hand, unrestricted open access may not always be appropriate or desirable from the perspective of the source communities. Some recordings may contain sacred content that is not intended for public consumption outside of specific ceremonial contexts. Some performances may include personal or familial narratives that performers would not wish to be broadcast without their consent. Some communities may have customary protocols governing who may listen to certain types of music and under what circumstances. These considerations do not negate the value of digital preservation but rather demand a nuanced, tiered approach to access that respects community protocols while maximising appropriate dissemination. Technical solutions such as embargo periods, authenticated user logins, and streaming-only access that prevents downloading are available, but they are only as effective as the social and legal agreements that underpin them. The most important work, in this regard, is not technological but relational, building trust between archivists and communities over time so that mutually acceptable access policies can be negotiated in good faith.

Looking toward the future, the digital preservation of Uzbek oral traditions must be conceived not as a project with a finite endpoint but as an ongoing process of care, maintenance, and renewal that will stretch across generations. Digital files are notoriously fragile over the long term, dependent upon constantly evolving hardware and software that require active management to remain accessible. Format migrations, storage media refreshes, and metadata updates are not one-time tasks but recurring responsibilities that demand sustained institutional commitment and funding. Moreover, the interpretive frameworks through which these recordings are understood will evolve alongside the scholarly and communal contexts in which they are engaged. What a recording means to a listener in 2026 may differ markedly from what it will mean to a listener in 2076, and the archive must be designed to accommodate multiple, even contradictory, interpretations without imposing a single authoritative reading. This suggests the importance of building archives that are not static repositories but dynamic platforms, capable of incorporating new metadata, user annotations, scholarly commentary, and even new recordings that extend the tradition into the future. The digital archive of Uzbek oral traditions should be a living archive, one that grows and transforms in dialogue with the living tradition it documents, reflecting the continuity and change that are the very essence of oral culture.

The stakes of this work extend far beyond the boundaries of musicology or cultural heritage management. In a world where globalisation, mass media, and political upheaval continually threaten the distinctiveness of local cultural expressions, the digital preservation of Uzbek oral traditions is an act of cultural sovereignty, a declaration that the voices of the bakhshi, the virtuosity of the dutar player, and the spiritual depth of the maqom singer matter, not merely as artefacts of the past but as resources for the future. These traditions embody ways of knowing that are irreducible to the logics of the market, the state, or the algorithm. They carry within them the accumulated wisdom of generations, the aesthetic sensibilities of entire civilisations, and the resilience of communities that have endured conquest, colonisation, and transformation. To safeguard them in digital audio archives

is to honour that resilience and to extend it into an uncertain future, trusting that the music will continue to speak to new audiences in new ways, and that the oral tradition, even when captured in bits and bytes, will never lose its power to move the human heart. That is the ultimate purpose of this endeavour, and it is a purpose worthy of the highest dedication.

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