

Musical Theatre

Original article

UDC 782.1(574)

<https://doi.org/10.56620/2587-9731-2026-3-170-199>

EDN [RJLTHZ](#)



**Contemporary opera theatre in Kazakhstan:
Origins and trends**



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Abstract. This article examines the current state of opera theatre in Kazakhstan and identifies the main developmental trends reflecting the movement from national musical and theatrical tradition to opera. The article highlights the major milestones in the history of this complex genre of academic music, which began to take shape in the 1930s–1940s, when the first operas were consecutively staged in the republic (*Kyz Zhibek* by Yevgeny G. Brusilovsky, *Birzhan and Sara* by Moukan T. Tulebayev, *Abay* by Akhmet K. Zhubanov and Latif A. Khamidi). It was in opera that a remarkable and organic “alchemy” occurred, fusing together the power of word and music, elements highly characteristic of Kazakh culture. Unique intonational expressiveness and dialogic structure were inherently embedded in the creative work of *zhyrau*, *akyns*, and the art of *aitys*. This ancestral tradition transformed opera from a merely borrowed form into a phenomenon of musical culture that resonates deeply with contemporaneity. The article examines the further development of the operatic genre as a path of flexible integration of folk musical tradition and academic music. It is noted that contemporary opera theatre exists in a situation of searching for new theatrical forms while paying heightened attention to the authenticity of Kazakhs’ historical-cultural and musical heritage, interpreted through modern artistic language. Several distinctive features of contemporary Kazakh opera’s stage life have been identified: repertory productions, participation of invited directors and scenographers in the production process, the use of video projection technology combined with visualization of nomadic lifestyle settings, and the strengthening of the instrumental ethnic component. A new narrative line in the interpretation of female characters has been revealed: from the romantic heroine’s love conflict with patriarchal tradition to a spiritually strong and active personality. A number of new operatic works presented in concert performances by philharmonic or student ensembles are noted. The significance of international festival and competition movements, as well as touring activities, is emphasized as key instruments for popularizing domestic opera art in the international space. The article concludes that the predominant orientation of opera theatre toward the worldview, aesthetics, and artistic ideals of Kazakh culture represents the leading trend.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, Kazakh musical tradition, aitys, zhyrau, kuy, opera theatre, repertoire, performance

Acknowledgments: We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Tatyana Yuryevna Maslovskaya, PhD in Art History and Professor, for her advice and support, as well as to the editors for their valuable comments on improving the content of this article.

For citation: Mossiyenko, D. M., & Povalyashko, G. N. (2026). Contemporary Opera Theatre in Kazakhstan: Origins and Trends. *Contemporary Musicology*, 10(3), 170–199. <https://doi.org/10.56620/2587-9731-2026-3-170-199>

Музыкальный театр

Научная статья

**Современный оперный театр в Казахстане:
истоки и тенденции**

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается современное состояние оперного театра в Казахстане и выявляются основные тенденции развития, отражающие движение от национальной музыкально-сценической традиции к опере. Отмечаются основные вехи истории сложнейшего жанра академический музыки, который начинает формироваться в 30–40-е годы XX века, когда в республике последовательно осуществлены театральные постановки первых опер («Кыз Жибек» Евгения Григорьевича Брусиловского, «Биржан и Сара» Мукана Тулебаевича Тулебаева, «Абай» Ахмета Куановича Жубанова и Латыфа Абдулхаевича Хамиди). Именно в опере произошла удивительная и органичная

«алхимия», сплавившая воедино силу слова и музыки, в высшей степени характерных для культуры казахского народа. Уникальная интонационная выразительность и диалоговая структура изначально заложена в творчестве *жырау*, *акынов* и искусстве *айтыса*. Унаследованная от предков традиция сделала оперу не просто заимствованной формой, а глубоко резонирующим с современностью явлением музыкальной культуры. Рассматривается дальнейшее развитие оперного жанра как путь пластичного совмещения народной музыкальной традиции и академической музыки. Отмечается, что в настоящее время оперный театр существует в ситуации поиска новых сценических форм при повышенном внимании к аутентичности историко-культурного и музыкального наследия казахов, осмысленного современным художественным языком. Установлены некоторые особенности сценической жизни современной казахской оперы: репертуарные спектакли, участие в постановочном процессе приглашенных режиссеров и сценографов, использование видеопроекционной техники, совмещенной с визуализацией антуража кочевого быта, усиление инструментальной этнической составляющей. Выявлена новая сюжетная линия в трактовке женских образов: от любовного конфликта романтизированной героини с патриархальной традицией к духовно сильной и деятельной личности. Отмечен ряд новых оперных произведений, представленных в концертном исполнении филармоническими или студенческими коллективами. Подчеркивается значимость международного фестивального и конкурсного движения, а также гастрольной деятельности как ключевых инструментов популяризации отечественного оперного искусства в международном пространстве. Делается вывод о преобладающей ориентации оперного театра на мировоззрение, эстетику и художественные идеалы казахской культуры как ведущей тенденции.

Ключевые слова: Казахстан, казахская музыкальная традиция, айтыс, жырау, күй, оперный театр, репертуар, спектакль

Благодарности: Выражаем искреннюю благодарность кандидату искусствоведения, профессору Татьяне Юрьевне Масловской за советы и поддержку, а также редакторам за ценные замечания по улучшению содержания статьи.

Для цитирования: Мосиенко Д. М., Поваляшко Г. Н. Современный оперный театр в Казахстане: истоки и тенденции // Современные проблемы музыкознания. 2026. Т. 10, № 3. С. 170–199.

<https://doi.org/10.56620/2587-9731-2026-3-170-199>

Introduction

The formation and development of opera in Kazakhstan present an example of mastering a highly complex academic genre in a remarkably short timeframe, alongside its integration with the traditional musical heritage of the Kazakh people. Among the first successful achievements in this process were the creation and staging of musical-theatrical works in the 1930s and 1940s by young composers, librettists, and performers. This period was marked by an active quest for new forms and expressive means, leading to the emergence of works reflecting the spirit of the era. From the earliest decades, opera premieres in Kazakhstan became notable events in cultural life and were reflected in the periodical press—most notably in the journal *Sovetskaya Muzyka* [*Soviet Music*], where most publications were primarily review and informational in nature.¹

The scholarly study of Kazakh opera developed within the broader context of research dedicated to the musical culture of Kazakhstan as a whole. The establishment of a corpus of specialized studies focused on analyzing genre, dramaturgical, and stylistic features dates to the final decade of the twentieth century. During this period, Kazakh opera became an object of sustained academic interest in musicology, as reflected in doctoral dissertations, monographs, and articles primarily in Russian, but also in Kazakh and English.²

¹ Vinogradov, V. (1959). Pod vpechatleniem ot proshedshei dekady [Under the impression of the past decade]. *Sovetskaya Muzyka*, (2), 58–61; Golubov, V. (1936). Iskusstvo kazakhskogo naroda [Art of the Kazakh people]. *Sovetskiy Teatr*, (7), 11–15; Dekada kazakhskogo iskusstva v Moskve [Decade of Kazakh art in Moscow]. (1951). *Sovetskaya Muzyka*, (5), 135–136; Kelberg, A. (1958). Pered dekadoi kazakhskogo iskusstva [Before the decade of Kazakh art]. *Sovetskaya Muzyka*, (11), 115–116; Kuznetsov, K. (1936). Kazakhskii muzykalnyi teatr v Moskve [Kazakh musical theatre in Moscow]. *Sovetskaya Muzyka*, (7), 52–55.

² The number of studies on national opera in the Kazakh language is significantly smaller than those in Russian. This situation is explained by the relatively late establishment of opera theatre in Kazakhstan and the predominance of the Russian language in musicological research during the Soviet period.

The development of Kazakh musical art from 1980 to 2015, including musical theatre, is the focus of Valeria Ye. Nedlina's dissertation.³ The work of Dina M. Mossiyenko analyzes the key stages and specific characteristics of the formation of Kazakh musical theatre.⁴ Aklima K. Omarova's dissertation examines the specifics of operatic works by Kazakhstani composers of the 1930s–1960s from historical, gnoseological, and axiological perspectives.⁵ Gulnara K. Abulgazina's research focuses on the operas of Gaziza A. Zhubanova, Yerkegali R. Rakhmadiyev, and Sydyk M. Mukhamedzhanov.⁶ Zhanat S. Ordaliyeva's publication investigates the role of the libretto as a source for an opera production.⁷

In the twenty-first century, new studies have emerged. Gulmira Zh. Musagulova addresses the problem of recitative in opera.⁸ Irina A. Bakayeva's study examines the dramaturgical and compositional functions of ballet scenes.⁹ Saule K. Musakhodzhaeva explores the issue of composers' co-creation in the national opera genre.¹⁰ Significant work in systematizing the operas created in Kazakhstan

³ Nedlina, V. Ye. (2017). *Puti razvitiya muzykalnoi kul'tury Kazakhstana na rubezhe XX–XXI stoletii* [Ways of development of the musical culture of Kazakhstan at the turn of the 21st century]. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory.

⁴ Mossiyenko, D. M. (2016). *Kazakhskii muzykalnyi teatr: istoriya stanovleniya* [Kazakh musical theatre: History of formation]. [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. State Institute for Art Studies.

⁵ Omarova, A. K. (1994). *Opernoe tvorchestvo kompozitorov Kazakhstana v kontekste muzykalno-istoricheskogo protsessa (30–60-e gody)* [Operatic works of Kazakhstan composers in the context of the musical-historical process (1930s–1960s)] [Abstract of unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory.

⁶ Abulgazina, G. K. (1990). *Kazakhskaya epicheskaya opera semidesyatykh godov* [Kazakh epic opera of the seventies] [Abstract of unpublished doctoral dissertation]. All-Union Scientific Research Institute of Art Studies.

⁷ Ordaliyeva, Zh. S. (1996). *P'sa kak istochnik opernogo spektaklya (dramaturgiya G. Musrepova v kazakhskoi opere)* [The play as a source of opera performance (Dramaturgy of G. Musrepov in Kazakh opera)] [Abstract of unpublished doctoral dissertation]. State Institute for Art Studies.

⁸ Musagulova, G. Zh. (2007). *Rechitativ v kazakhskoi opere* [Recitative in Kazakh opera] [Abstract of unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory.

⁹ Bakayeva, I. A. (2009). *Baletnye stseny v kazakhskoi opere: k probleme zhanrovyykh vzaimodeystvii* [Ballet scenes in Kazakh opera: On the problem of genre interactions] [Abstract of unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Glinka Novosibirsk State Conservatory.

¹⁰ Musakhodzhaeva, S. K. (2020). *Kollektivnoe avtorstvo v kazakhskoi opere* [Collective authorship in Kazakh opera] [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Kazakh National University of Arts.

was carried out by the authors of the encyclopedia *Qazaq operalary* [Kazakh Operas], which presents brief biographical information on composers, as well as data regarding the history of creation and stage productions of the operas.¹¹

A number of research articles are also devoted to Kazakh opera. Mossiyenko and Alibi K. Abdinurov, in their study *Kazakh Opera: History and Future*, offer a historical overview of the genre's development [1]. Musagulova, in her research *Some Aspects of the Kazakh Opera Art at the Present Stage*, analyzes the development of the Kazakh operatic genre at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries [2]. Among recent publications devoted to individual works, we note an article by Musakhodzhayeva, *Opera 'Kyz-Zhibek' by E. Brusilovsky: Evolution of musical text in the history of performances* [3], in which the author examines modifications in the work's musical text throughout its staging history. A study by Almat K. Izbambetov and Toizhan Zh. Yeginbayeva, which analyzes the development of the central image of Birzhan in the opera *Birzhan and Sara*, is also of significant interest [4].

Several authors address specific aspects of national operatic art. For example, one of Omarova's works is dedicated to folklore within opera [5]. The dialogue between the European academic tradition and ethnic heritage in opera theatre is studied by Galiya Z. Begembetova, Izbambetov, Yeginbayeva, Musagulova, Aeron O'Connor, Diana B. Rakisheva, Manifa S. Sarkulova, Nilyufar Sh. Agzamova, and Mikhail P. Popandopulo [6; 7; 8; 9; 10; 11]. The staging process and analysis of directorial decisions have been examined in articles by Botagoz M. Kazken, R. Baibetova, N. Nabiyeva, Aidana A. Zhylkamanova, Meruert Ye. Zhanguzhinova, Asel N. Imayo, and Begembetova [12; 13; 14; 15; 16].

The aforementioned works are devoted to the analysis of Kazakh opera, and collectively they demonstrate that research is being conducted in various directions. However, the relationship between the contemporary state of Kazakh musical theatre and the tradition of its development in the country remains insufficiently explored, making it difficult to assess its future prospects. This article represents an attempt to address this question.

¹¹ Kuzembai, S. A., Musagulova, G. Zh., & Kasimova, Z. M. (2010). *Qazaq operalary* [Kazakh operas]. Zhibek Zholy.

From the Folk “Stage” to the Theatrical Stage

The establishment of opera in Kazakhstan is linked to favorable historical and cultural prerequisites. Chief among these is the musical-poetic art of *akyns*—improvisational poets. No less significant in the spiritual culture of the Kazakhs is the art of *zhyrau*—bards and performers of epic works. These genres of oral folk art contain inherent elements of theatricality.

In the Kazakh tradition, *zhyrau* functioned not merely as poets and singers, but also as custodians of ancestral memory. Their performances were frequently accompanied by the *dombra* and were distinguished by a high degree of emotional impact on the audience. *Zhyrau* performed epic texts and philosophical reflections on fate, justice, and duty, acting almost as directors of their own theatrical discourse, as noted by Academician Seit Askarovich Kaskabasov, a leading authority on oral literature [17, p. 26].

An equally significant genre of traditional Kazakh art is *aitys*—an improvisational, competitive art form. In this public musical-poetic duel between two *akyns*, high value was placed on the artistic merits of the text, sharpness of wit, speed of reaction, and the ability to develop a theme while holding the audience’s attention. In this sense, *aitys* can be regarded as a vivid example of folk stage performance [17, p. 58].

Aitys demanded a high level of artistry: *akyns* had to master intonation, gesture, and the ability to improvise within a live dialogue. The theatrical nature of the genre manifests in at least three aspects. First, in its spatial organization: *akyns* sat in the center of an improvised “stage” (either inside a yurt or beside it), while fellow countrymen watched the action as spectators in a modern theatre. Second, the participants exchanged musical-poetic turns, creating a conflict-driven dialogue. Third, the performance of each *aitysker* was structured as a dramaturgically developed monologue [18, pp. 88–89].

Thus, the successful development of the operatic genre in Kazakhstan was made possible by a specific historical and cultural tradition that brought together the unity of word and music in Kazakh culture with the theatrical elements found in the creative art of *zhyrau* and *akyns* [18, p. 89].

The first work in the national opera genre—*Kyz Zhibek* (1934)—was authored by Yevgeny G. Brusilovsky, then a young composer and graduate of the Leningrad Conservatory. This opera proved immensely successful: to this day, *Kyz Zhibek* remains one of the most frequently performed works in the repertoire [13; 19]. The composer considered his primary task to be selecting songs popular at the time that could characterize the main protagonists in various dramatic situations while being within the capabilities of the first performers—folk singers. The opera’s dramaturgy was based on the song-citation principle interspersed with spoken dialogue. Recitatives and vocal ensembles were absent in *Kyz Zhibek* [18, p. 92]. Brusilovsky quoted the folk songs incorporated into the score without modifications, following the direct instruction of Temirbek K. Zhurgenev, the People’s Commissar of Enlightenment of the Kazakh SSR, who contributed significantly to the creation and staging of the first Kazakh opera. Vocal numbers were performed in unison with the orchestra to help inexperienced singers avoid errors. For the same reason, recognizing the impossibility of including polyphonic vocal ensembles in the opera, the composer constructed the musical dramaturgy on an alternation of songs and spoken dialogue.

The emergence of this first opera became a turning point in the history of Kazakh art. *Kyz Zhibek*, which initiated the development of musical theatre in the republic, opened a new chapter in the conceptualization and stage embodiment of national themes through the medium of academic music. The production acquired special significance during the Decade of Kazakh Art in Moscow in 1936, where it was presented on the All-Union stage on a grand and impressive scale [16; 20].

As part of this major cultural showcase, the performers successfully demonstrated their artistry, among them the legendary Kulyash Zh. Bayseyitova, who performed the title role of Zhibek. The musical characterization of the heroine was built upon the song “Gak-ku” (Kazakh for “swan”) by the Kazakh folk composer Ukili Ibray, which came to symbolize the recognition of the artistic value of the Kazakh musical tradition and its organic integration into Soviet professional art. For example, the call signs of Kazakh Radio were based on motifs from “Gak-ku” for a long period. The Decade marked a crucial stage in the institutionalization of Kazakh opera and the consolidation of its status within the cultural hierarchy

of the multinational state. For her performance as Zhibek, Bayseyitova was awarded the title of People's Artist of the USSR at the age of just 24.¹²

Created in the 1940s, *Abay* by Akhmet K. Zhubanov and Latif A. Khamidi and *Birzhan and Sara* by Mukan T. Tulebayev, together with *Kyz Zhibek*, constitute the triumvirate of Kazakh operatic classics. During this decade, Kazakh musical theatre progressed along a path of symphonization, manifested in the heightened dramaturgical role of the orchestra, in which recurring leitmotifs were foregrounded against a background of structurally complex musical development of the scenes and tense dramatic action. Vocal ensembles—duets, trios, and quartets—began to convey psychological depth and the subtly nuanced movements of the soul [18, p. 188]. All these developments were enthusiastically received by both the public and the professional community.

Zhubanov and Khamidi's *Abay* belongs to the classics of Kazakh musical theatre because the image of Abay, as a symbol of the national spirit and moral perfection, is deeply explored through the means of musical dramaturgy.

Tulebayev's opera *Birzhan and Sara* was successfully staged in 1958 during the second Decade of Kazakh Art in Moscow. Half a century later, the new Astana Opera House was ceremonially opened with this opera. According to Zhubanova, both operas—*Abay* and *Birzhan and Sara*—are artistically accomplished works and exceptional phenomena of Kazakh culture.¹³ They are recognized as comparable in significance.

Under the Canopy of a Great Heritage: History as Inspiration

In the twenty-first century, composers continue to turn to the operatic genre. A whole series of works has emerged that draw upon epics, historical chronicles, and folklore and tell of renowned figures and the collective memory of the nation. For instance, the opera *Otyrar shaikasy* (Kazakh for *The Battle of Otr*)

¹² О присвоении звания Народного Артиста Союзов СССР. 6 сентября 1936 г. [On the conferral of the title of People's Artist of the USSR. September 6, 1936]. (1936, September 8). *Izvestiya Tsentral'nogo Ispolnitel'nogo Komiteta Soyuzov SSR i VTsIK*, (209). <https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/386505-o-prisvoenii-zvaniy-narodnogo-artista-soyuzov-ssr-6-sentyabrya-1936-g>

¹³ Zhubanova, G. (1999). Ob opere M. Tulebaeva "Birzhan i Sara" [On M. Tulebayev's opera *Birzhan and Sara*]. In N. S. Ketegenova & D. G. Tulebaeva (Eds.), *Slavnyi syn pesennogo kraya. Kompozitor Mukan Tulebayev* [Glorious son of the land of song: Composer Mukan Tulebayev] (pp. 207–209). Union of Composers of Kazakhstan, p. 209.

by Mynzhasar Mangitayev¹⁴ relates the tragic events associated with the fall of the ancient cultural and trading center—the city of Otrar—where inhabitants fought for their independence and freedom against external threats [2, p. 11]. Alkuat D. Kazakbayev’s opera *Zhambyl Zhyrau* is dedicated to the life of the legendary musician, while Abdinurov’s Saken portrays the life drama of the Soviet era writer and public figure Saken Seifullin. Rakhat-Bi Tulegenuly Abdysagin, in turn, addressed Kazakhstan’s recent history: the plot of his opera *Kún shashqan jol* [The Path Illuminated by the Sun] is based on events surrounding the establishment of independent Kazakhstan and its first president, Nursultan A. Nazarbayev (*Table 1*).

Table 1. Kazakh Operas Created in the 21st Century

№	Opera Title	Composer	Librettist	Year of Composition	Year of Premiere
1	<i>Domalak Ana</i>	D. Botbayev	M. Isakbay, N. Orazalin	2005	—
2	<i>Otyrar shaikasy</i> [The Battle of Otrar]	M. Mangitayev	K. Myrzaliyev	2007	—
3	<i>Tomiris</i>	A. Serkebayev	L. Imangazina	2007	2007
4	<i>Beybarys</i>	A. Zhaiymov, A. Zhaiym	U. Yesdaulet	2007	2013 ¹⁵
5	<i>Appak—doch’ kypschakskaya</i> [Appak—Daughter of the Kipchaks]	S. & A. Abdinurov	T. Beisembek	2018	2026
6	<i>Kún shashqan jol</i> [The Path Illuminated by the Sun]	R.-B. Abdysagin	R.-B. Abdysagin	2019	—
7	<i>Aqbóbek</i> (Kazakh for “white baby” or “innocent child”)	A. Zhaiym	A. Zhaiymov	2020	—
8	<i>Zhambyl Zhyrau</i>	A. Kazakbayev	D. Kydyrali, A. Toishanuly	2021	2021

¹⁴ The librettist, Kadyr G. Myrzaliyev, drew in turn upon Khasen A. Adibayev’s novel *Gybel’ Otrara* [The Fall of Otrar].

¹⁵ The opera was presented in a concert performance by the ensemble of the Ye. Rakhmadiyev State Academic Philharmonia.

9	<i>Domalak Ana</i>	T. Zharmukhamet	A. Mayemirov	2021	2021
10	<i>Saken</i>	A. Abdinurov	K. Zhunusov	2022	2022 ¹⁶
11	<i>Tolyq adam. Oi tolǵaý. Hákim Abai</i> [The Complete Human. Reflection. Sage Abai]	Sh. Abilov	Sh. Abilov	2022	2022 ¹⁷
12	<i>Khan Sultan. Altyn Orda</i> [Khan Sultan. The Golden Horde]	Kh. Shangaliyev	M. Ybyrayev	2024	2024
13	<i>The Bruce</i>	R.-B. Abdysagin	R.-B. Abdysagin	2024	2024 ¹⁸

The revival of interest in opera was accompanied by an active search for artistic solutions. At the same time, a dialogue with tradition is clearly evident: the imagery, musical language, and dramaturgy of new works build upon the achievements of national composers of previous generations. Contemporary composers increasingly turn to familiar themes, drawing inspiration from the core repertoire of Kazakh operatic theatre. They creatively reinterpret this legacy in light of new cultural realities and aesthetic objectives. Such continuity makes it possible to trace connections between operatic works across different generations.

An intriguing feature emerges when comparing Brusilovsky's *Kyz Zhibek* with Abdinurov's *Saken* (2022). In the latter, a central position is occupied by the scene "On kùndik" (Kazakh for "The Decade"), dedicated to the aforementioned historical event in Moscow. The composer incorporated into the opera Bayseyitova's legendary performance on the stage of the Bolshoi Theatre, where the famous song "Gak-ku" is heard once again, albeit in a different context—as an artistically conceived historical reconstruction.

¹⁶ The opera was performed in concert by the student ensemble of the Kazakh National University of Arts.

¹⁷ Performed by the faculty and student ensemble of the Kazakh National University of Arts.

¹⁸ The premiere took place at Glasgow Cathedral. Ruzmatova, M. (2024). Opera "The Bruce" ot kazakhstanskogo kompozitora Rakhat-Bi Abdysagina: mirovaya prem'era v Velikobritanii [The opera *The Bruce* by Kazakhstani composer Rakhat-Bi Abdysagin: World premiere in the UK]. *El.kz*. https://el.kz/ru/opera-the-bruce-ot-kazahstanskogo-kompozitora-rahata-bi-abdysagina-mirovaya-premera-v-velikobritanii_107128/

Another compelling example of the revival of Soviet-era traditions can be found in the work of Rakhmadiyev, who composed vivid dance numbers based on *kuis* by folk composers for his operas *Kamar-Sulu* (1961) and *Alpamys* (1972). These scenes later gained popularity as independent symphonic works—*Kudasha-Duman* (Kazakh *kudasha*—“female relative of the groom,” *duman*—“festivity”) and *Dairabay* (a male name). In 1998, they returned to the operatic stage once more when Rakhmadiyev integrated them into his new composition, *Ablai Khan*.

Contemporary composers, like their predecessors, turn to the genres of oral tradition. For instance, in Rakhmadiyev’s opera *Ablai Khan*, Mangitayev’s *Otyrar shaikasy*, Kazakbayev’s *Zhambyl Zhyrau*, and Dungenbay B. Botbayev’s *Domalak Ana*, the vocal parts of certain characters are written in the traditional song-poetic form *terme*. The genre of the funeral lament *zhoktau* appears in *The Fall of Otrar*, as well as in Abdinurov’s *Saken*, Aytkali T. Zhaiymov and Arman A. Zhaiym’s *Beybarys*, Almas Ye. Serkebayev’s *Tomiris*, and Botbayev’s *Domalak Ana*. The latter opera also features ancient forms of Kazakh traditional ritual practice—*bata* (blessing) and *kónil aitu* (expression of condolence) [2], among others.

Thus, certain parallels can be traced between earlier Kazakh operas and contemporary works. These are manifested in the treatment of iconic historical figures and events, the inclusion of large-scale national ritual scenes, and the use of shared musical-aesthetic principles.

Not Merely Love: New Female Protagonists in Kazakh Opera

In the popular Kazakh operas of the twentieth century, the portrayal of women was traditionally constructed around the ideals of love, fidelity, and self-sacrifice. Heroines such as Kyz Zhibek (*Kyz Zhibek*), Azhar (*Abay*), and Sara (*Birzhan and Sara*) represent a collective image of a woman whose destiny is determined by profound emotion. Strong in spirit yet deeply feeling and vulnerable, they fall victim to social conflicts. Thus, Zhibek dies after Tulegen’s death. Sara, in the modern interpretation of the production *Birzhan and Sara* (2018), meets a tragic fate. The tragic drama of Azhar’s fate is inextricably linked to the death of her beloved, Aidar. Despite the courage and fortitude displayed by all these heroines, a tragic outcome becomes inevitable due to the conflict between individual choice and the prevailing social order.

In the twenty-first century, however, shifts are observable in the interpretation of female characters: in the operas *Domalak Ana*, *Tomiris*, *Khan Sultan*, and *Appak—Daughter of the Kipchaks*, the heroines are not only capable of love and self-sacrifice but also act decisively, frequently making decisions that shape the destiny of other characters and the nation as a whole. The plotlines of these operas shift away from the traditional motif of romantic conflict toward broader themes: authority, justice, and societal unity.

A telling example is the character of Tomiris, Queen of the Massagetae, in Serkebayev's opera of the same name, set in the 6th century BCE: she appears not as a romanticized heroine, but as a military commander, strategist, and leader. Her resolve and spiritual fortitude are complemented by a profound sense of duty to her people. Tomiris is not a passive character guided by a man, but an agent of change who makes momentous decisions. She avenges her son, yet her act of vengeance is not reduced to a personal tragedy: it is a political and moral affirmation of justice.

In their respective operas *Domalak Ana*, Zharmukhamet and Botbayev bring to the stage the historical figure of Domalak Ana, who lived in the 14th–15th centuries and personifies motherhood in the Kazakh spiritual tradition. Information about her has been preserved in the written and oral traditions of the Kazakhs.¹⁹ The central heroine is portrayed as a mentor, a mediator between generations, and a bearer of lofty moral values.

The character of the main protagonist in the opera *Khan Sultan. Altyn Orda* [Khan Sultan. The Golden Horde] by Khamit Kh. Shangaliyev (which depicts historical events of the 13th century) is similarly associated with the departure from romantic conflict in favor of the idea of maternal responsibility to her children. Khan Sultan is the wife of Jochi, the eldest son of Genghis Khan, and the mother of future rulers of the Golden Horde. The fate of not only her family but also the state rests in her hands: after the death of her husband, Khan Sultan is left alone with three children and faces a fatal threat. Despite political intrigue, she demonstrates courage, wisdom, and determination to protect her sons and pass power on to them.

¹⁹ Nuryshov, N. (2024, May 15). Ana — asyl qazyna [Mother is a precious treasure]. *Qazaqstan Tarihy*. <https://e-history.kz/kz/news/show/339883>

On June 2026, the premiere of *Appak—Daughter of the Kipchaks* by Serik K. Abdinurov and Alibi K. Abdinurov took place at Astana Opera House, which tells the story of the difficult fate of a young woman who is taken captive; the action is set in the 12th century. Appak²⁰ is a historical figure, the wife of the great poet Nizami Ganjavi (c. 1141 – c. 1209), who dedicated several of his famous works to her. Despite the love and respect she receives in her new life, she cannot forget her native steppes. Appak decides to return to her people and persuades Nizami to accompany her. In her homeland, the Kipchaks prepare to wage war against Derbent; however, Appak halts them and convinces her compatriots that another military campaign will not bring justice, thereby restoring peace between states.

Thus, the portrayal of female characters undergoes a transformation in twenty-first-century operas. While in the traditional twentieth-century repertoire the heroine most frequently appears as a victim, in modern operas she becomes a bearer of social ideas. These characters do not die for love like Kyz Zhibek or Sara, nor do they lament their fate like Azhar. On the contrary, they live and act for a higher purpose—the well-being and future of their people. Such a shift in the interpretation of these characters reflects not only the artistic exploration of Kazakhstani composers, but also broader social shifts taking place within society.

The Contemporary Stage Life of Kazakh Opera

At present, operas by Kazakh composers remain in high demand—and not only the classical works created during the Soviet era. In recent years, the national repertoire has been enriched by new compositions: the premiere of Taskyn Zharmukhamet's *Domalak Ana* took place in 2021 at the Regional Opera and Ballet Theatre in Shymkent; Kazakbayev's *Zhambyl Zhyrau* and Shangaliyev's *Khan Sultan. Altyn Orda* were staged in 2021 and 2024, respectively, at the Abai Kazakh National Opera and Ballet Theatre; and Astana Opera, as noted above, staged *Appak—Daughter of the Kipchaks* by the Abdinurovs (Table 2).

²⁰ Another variant of this name is Afaq.

Table 2. Premieres of Kazakh Opera Productions in Theatres of Kazakhstan (2000–2026)

№	Opera Title	Year of First Premiere	Abai Kazakh National Opera and Ballet Theatre (Almaty)	K. Baiseitova National Opera and Ballet Theatre (Astana) ²¹	Shymkent City Opera and Ballet Theatre (Shymkent)	Astana Opera (Astana)
1	<i>Kyz Zhibek</i>	1934	1934	2002	2016	2017
2	<i>Abay</i>	1944	1944	2008	2015	2015
3	<i>Birzhan and Sara</i>	1946	1946	2000	2017	2013
4	<i>Kamar-Sulu</i>	1963	1963	2009	2021	—
5	<i>Aisulu</i>	1964	1964	—	2010	2024
6	<i>Alpamys</i>	1974	1974	—	—	2021
7	<i>Ablai Khan</i>	2004	2004	—	—	—
8	<i>Tomiris</i>	2007	2007	—	—	—
9	<i>Domalak Ana</i>	2021	—	—	2021	—
10	<i>Zhambyl Zhyrau</i>	2021	2021	—	—	—
11	<i>Khan Sultan. Altyn Orda</i> [Khan Sultan. The Golden Horde]	2024	2024	—	—	—

²¹ The K. Bayseiyitova National Opera and Ballet Theatre was opened in 2000, three years after Akmola (currently Astana) was granted the status of the capital of Kazakhstan. It was closed in 2014 in connection with the organization of the new theatre, Astana Opera. On the Kulyash Bayseiyitova National Opera and Ballet Theatre: Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated July 5, 2000, No. 416. *Ádilet*. <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/U0000000416>; On the liquidation of the Republican State Commission Enterprise “Kulyash Bayseiyitova National Opera and Ballet Theatre” of the Culture Committee under the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan: Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated February 3, 2014, No. 43. *Ádilet*. <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P1400000043>

12	<i>Appak—doch' kypschakskaya</i> [Appak— Daughter of the Kipchaks]	2026	—	—	—	2026
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The first group of works (*Kyz Zhibek*, *Abay*, *Birzhan and Sara*) demonstrates the phenomenon of an enduring stage tradition. Created in the 1930s–1940s during the foundational phase of the genre, these operas have remained in the repertoire of the Abai Kazakh National Opera and Ballet Theatre for decades. Moreover, these works have provided a foundation for the establishment of opera theatres across Kazakhstan in the twenty-first century.

An analysis of the current repertoire of the 2020s (*Domalak Ana*, *Khan Sultan*. *The Golden Horde*, *Appak—Daughter of the Kipchaks*) reflects the exploration of new historical events (specifically the legacy of the Golden Horde), an engagement with profound female spiritual images, and the decentralization of the operatic process, where regional stages take the initiative in commissioning original national scores.

Despite the sustained interest in opera among a new generation of Kazakh composers, the stage life of compositions within this genre does not always unfold successfully: by no means do all of them make it to the professional stage. Such operas are frequently presented in concert performances at philharmonic societies or at higher education institutions specializing in the arts. In the latter case, they are staged by student ensembles. Notable examples of such premiere performances include *Tolyq adam. Oi tolǵaý. Hákim Abai* by Shakhimardan K. Abilov, *Beybarys* by Zhaiymov and Zhaiym, *Saken* by Abdinurov, and *The Bruce* by Abdysagin.²²

Despite the rarity of fully staged theatrical premieres, national opera continues to be actively presented to Kazakhstani audiences. The repertoires of leading opera companies continue to be dominated by productions that achieved classic status during the Soviet period: *Kyz Zhibek*, *Abay*, and *Birzhan and Sara* [12; 13; 19; 21].

²² Within the scope of these processes, the boundaries of the operatic repertoire are expanding: for the first time in the history of Kazakhstani musical theatre, the world premiere of an opera by Kazakhstani composer Rakhat-Bi Abdysagin, *The Bruce*, took place abroad. This event marked a major milestone not only in the young composer's career but can also be viewed as a step toward broadening the international presence of the national compositional school.

It is possible that precisely because of its abundant use of traditional musical heritage, *Kyz Zhibek* has maintained its prominent place on the operatic stage. This work was selected as a cultural symbol of continuity by the Regional Opera and Ballet Theatre in Shymkent in 2016. A year later, another production was staged at Astana Opera House in the capital, featuring updated scenography and significant score revisions [21]. The key modification involved replacing spoken dialogues with recitatives. According to conductor Abzal M. Mukhitdinov, this transition was made possible by the high professional level of contemporary performers.²³ Guest stage director Mikhail A. Pandzhavidze employed several striking visual and dramaturgical devices: an ethnographic reconstruction of assembling a yurt and placing a *tai-kazan* at center stage to prepare festive *beshbarmak*, a matchmaking ritual, a striking staging of an archery contest, and a moving caravan featuring live horses and camels. The ethnic atmosphere was further heightened by 3D visual projections of the starry sky and various natural phenomena characteristic of the steppe landscape.

A distinct stage interpretation of *Kyz Zhibek* was presented by the artistic team of the K. Kuanyshbayev State Academic Kazakh Music and Drama Theatre (Astana, 2023). Stage director Alibek Omirbekuly assigned the vocal roles to dramatic actors. This experiment stemmed from a desire to bring the production closer to a broader audience. Such a conceptual choice, in our view, harkens back to the historical conditions surrounding the initial staging of Kazakh opera, which was realized through the joint efforts of dramatic and musical theatre performers [18, p. 38]. Such a return to the roots of the genre in Kazakhstan is by no means accidental. The production underscores the versatility of the national tradition in any form and demonstrates its continuity: a trajectory moving from epic lore and *aitys* to professional stage realization.

Every season of the Abai Kazakh National Opera and Ballet Theatre in Almaty opens with a production of the opera *Abay*, dedicated to an iconic figure of the Kazakh Enlightenment. This work can also be considered the most sought-after title in the theatre's international touring repertoire. For instance, the company

²³ Urankayeva, Zh. (2017, February 9). Na stsene "Astana Opera" zazvuchit obnovlennaya "Kyz Zhibek" [A renewed *Kyz Zhibek* will sound on the stage of Astana Opera]. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*. <https://kazpravda.kz/n/na-stsene-astana-opera-zazvuchit-obnovlennaya-kyz-zhibek/>

of Astana Opera has presented it abroad on numerous occasions: in Russia (Mariinsky Theatre, Saint Petersburg, 2014; Bolshoi Theatre, Moscow, 2024), France (Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, 2014), Italy (Teatro Carlo Felice, Genoa, 2018), Georgia (Paliashvili Tbilisi State Opera and Ballet Theatre, Tbilisi, 2018), Uzbekistan (Alisher Navoi State Academic Grand Theatre, Tashkent, 2019), and elsewhere. Contemporary criticism rightly characterizes such productions as a “painted musical jewel box” that “today, amidst the directorial chaos in opera and the wearying directorial obscurantism, ranks as an *absolute traditional classic!*”²⁴

Foreign directorial interpretations often substantially, and at times radically, diverge from canonical domestic stagings. In the production by the South Thuringian State Theatre (Meiningen, Germany, 2013), the action of the opera *Abay* was transposed into the setting of a Soviet cinema from the Stalinist era. This concept symbolized the tragic absurdity of totalitarianism as well as timeless philosophical concepts of power, freedom, human dignity, betrayal, and love.²⁵

In the 2021 production, it was of fundamental importance to conductor-director Alan A. Buribayev of Astana Opera to maintain a balance between reverence for a figure sacred to the Kazakh people, a respectful attitude toward the composers’ intent, and the renewal of expressive means. Among the latter, specific elements of visual design and directorial interpretation warrant mention. The production team, led by guest director André Chini, meticulously preserved the canonical features of 19th-century nomadic life (steppe landscapes, yurts, and ethnographically stylized costuming), while enhancing the figurative-symbolic content through modern video projection technologies. The scenographic resolution of the central conflict by set designer Benito Leonori and video designer Mario Spinaci was built upon a vivid and large-scale visualization of the unfolding tragedy (a somber horizon above the steppe, a flock of crows as a traditional symbol of a tragic denouement, etc.) [12].

²⁴ Koryabin, I. (2017, November 24). Ot noveishei istorii — k istokam: put’ “*Abaya*” v XXI veke [From modern history to roots: The path of *Abay* in the 21st century]. *Belcanto.ru*. <https://www.belcanto.ru/24111702.html>

²⁵ Darbasov, T. (2013, October 7). Debyut kazakhskoi opery na evropeiskoy stsene [The debut of Kazakh opera on the European stage]. *Forbes Kazakhstan*. https://forbes.kz/articles/debyut_kazahskoy_operyi_na_evropeyskoy_stsene

The third masterpiece of Kazakh operatic classics—Tulebayev's *Birzhan and Sara*—has remained a sought-after and beloved work since 1946. In 2013, the inaugural season of the new Astana Opera House opened with a staging of this work, underscoring its significance in national musical culture. Five years later, under the leadership of stage director Askhat M. Mayemirov and consultant director Mikhail Pandzhavidze, the theatre's creative ensemble presented a new interpretation of the opera. The production benefited from a high level of technical support through the involvement of Italian set designers and video artists Sergio Metalli and Jacopo Pantani, who filled the stage space with large-scale 3D video projections re-creating scenes from nomadic steppe life. The epic landscapes of the boundless Sary-Arka visually reinforced the intrinsic harmony between Man and the Great Steppe, while detailed depictions of festive fairgrounds, wedding rituals, and colorful stylized costumes generated the effect of a historically authentic tableau [21; 22].

Despite the evident drive toward national distinctiveness, contemporary musical culture in Kazakhstan is also characterized by the renewal of its national classics. An overview of operas staged in the 21st century reveals an inclination toward directorial solutions where stage interpretation is constructed within the framework of the original authorial intent—oriented toward national authenticity—yet utilizing visually striking, contemporary artistic means that engage audiences and align with the latest trends in theatrical production.

Intercultural Communication and Kazakh Opera

In the current sociocultural reality, Kazakh operatic art actively integrates into global processes, continually seeking and discovering new opportunities to expand the horizons of its international presence. In the present century, a powerful creative impetus for mastering a modern visual language has come from the production concepts of guest scenographers, directors, and consultants. Among the most prominent guest specialists involved in the production of operatic stagings are Mikhail Pandzhavidze, Yuri I. Alexandrov, Mario Spinaci, Sergio Metalli, Jacopo Pantani, Benito Leonori, Vyacheslav A. Okunev, and others. Their dynamic

creative energy, combined with the distinctiveness of the national repertoire and the high performance standards of Kazakhstani theatrical companies, has fostered significant growth in the art of opera.

The primary criterion for the authenticity of a national theatre remains a respectful attitude toward the epic heritage or historical, both of which reflect the cultural memory of the nation. For this reason, guest specialists propose production concepts for the domestic audience wherein plotlines do not undergo radical alterations—in contrast to the contemporary operatic stagings so popular today. Exceptions to this trend include the production of the opera *Abay*, staged by Zhubanov's great-grandson Alan Buribayev in Germany and hailed by critics as a “cultural breakthrough of Kazakh music to the West.”²⁶ However, this production was not presented on the theatrical stage in Kazakhstan. This artistic concept offered a bolder interpretation of characters and events, tailored to the aesthetic expectations of the European audience. The Kazakhstani viewer remains more receptive to a familiar narrative framework and epic heroes, reflecting the stability of mental and artistic orientations rooted in traditional values.

A significant factor in renewing the scenic image of opera productions has been the implementation of multimedia technologies, video projections, sound installations, and lighting design. Thanks to these innovations, the scenography of Kazakh operas has been infused with striking visual representations of national archetypes. This new scenographic standard meets the expectations of modern audiences and has generally elevated the social demand for academic art among the Kazakhstani public.

Under the conditions of globalization, it is essential for the national theatre to communicate effectively with the global musical community and to present Kazakh operatic art with distinction. Consequently, domestic opera singers actively participate in various international competitions, festivals, and concert tours. The art of opera singers Saltanat S. Akhmetova and Maria A. Mudryak has achieved widespread acclaim within the global academic community.

In 2014, Akhmetova became a finalist in the Russian television project *Bolshaya Opera* [The Grand Opera]; her luminous soprano timbre and stage charisma

²⁶ Dzhumaliyeva, T. (2012, October 2). Opera *Abay* A. Zhubanova i L. Khamidi v Germanii. Velikaya muzyka idet ot serdtsa k serdtsu [The opera *Abay* by A. Zhubanov and L. Khamidi in Germany: Great music goes from heart to heart]. *MusicNews.kz*. <https://musicnews.kz/opera-abaj-a-zhubanova-i-l-xamidi-v-ge/>

were deservedly noted by an authoritative international jury. On the stage of the capital's opera house, she performs leading roles. Her portrayal of Azhar in the opera *Abay* is recognized as the most authentic in terms of its fidelity to the composers' intent and its stage embodiment of self-sacrificing love.

A vital project that contributed significantly to the integration of Kazakh operatic art into the global musical landscape was the hosting in Astana of the prestigious international vocal competition *Operalia*, founded by Plácido Domingo over thirty years ago. In 2017 and 2024, its programs took place on the stage of Astana Opera, heightening international attention to Kazakhstan's academic musical culture.

Domestic audiences and foreign guests had the opportunity to hear both competition participants and world-renowned singers. Among them were soprano Desirée Rancatore, tenor Giulio Pelligra, baritone Alberto Gazale, and other celebrated masters. The program of the competition events was devised by the distinguished conductor Giuseppe Acquaviva. The 2017 jury comprised globally recognized musical figures,²⁷ who commended the vocal performance of the Kazakhstani singer Mudryak, recipient of the Third Prize. She currently ranks among the top ten sopranos in the world and actively performs in productions on leading stages across Russia, China, Italy, Kazakhstan, and elsewhere.

With the aim of attracting young talent from various countries and supporting Kazakhstani vocalists and directors, the International Opera Academy was established at the Astana Opera House. Leading vocalists from Germany, Italy, and Russia are invited as instructors; masterclasses are conducted by Donata D'Annunzio Lombardi, Federico Longi, among others. A high standard of training is supported by Dmitri Yu. Vdovin, Honored Artist of the Russian Federation and founder and artistic director of the Youth Opera Program at the Bolshoi Theatre of Russia. Maestro Acquaviva, serving as art manager of the Astana Opera International Opera Academy, is responsible for training young soloists and facilitating intercultural communication so essential in today's globalized world.

²⁷ The jury, chaired by Plácido Domingo, included representatives from the world's leading opera houses, among them Giuseppe Acquaviva, Dominique Meyer, Peter Katona, and others. Omarova, A. (2024, August 28). Zasiyali molodye zvezdy opery: prem'yera v Mezhdunarodnoi Opernoi Akademii Astana Opera [Young opera stars shone brightly: A premiere at the Astana Opera International Opera Academy]. *Zakon.kz*. <https://www.zakon.kz/kultura-shoubiz/6482320-zasiyali-molodye-zvezdy-opery-premera-v-mezhdunarodnoy-opernoy-akademii-astana-opera.html>

Conclusion

A review of the development of Kazakh operatic theatre makes it possible to view its trajectory as a circular process: from the folk musical tradition, which already contained elements of theatrical performance, to a fully developed operatic form in the first half of the twentieth century. In the foundational operas of Kazakhstani culture, European operatic traditions converged with a respectfully conceptualized ethnic heritage. The impetus provided by the oral musical tradition laid the foundation for the establishment of a national musical theatre with effective state support.

In addressing the relationship between the current state of Kazakh operatic theatre and the traditions of its formative era, it should be emphasized that the present stage represents the development and continuation of that initial synthesis at a higher level. Modern productions of Kazakh operas consistently demonstrate a clear orientation toward national heritage. The orchestral ensemble is expanded through the active inclusion of traditional musical instruments (*dombra*, *kobyz*, *zhetigen*, and others), in some cases leading to radical conceptual solutions—such as the creation of operatic works composed exclusively for an orchestra of Kazakh folk instruments (the opera *Beybarys*). Such examples illustrate a deliberate effort among contemporary composers to master an operatic idiom that is organically embedded within the national cultural context.

An intensive transformation of value-oriented and semantic accents is taking place through the reinterpretation of classic narrative arcs, in which the image of the female protagonist evolves from a romanticized victim of patriarchal conflict into a spiritually strong and active figure (*Tomiris*, *Appak—Daughter of the Kipchaks*, *Domalak Ana*).

At the same time, while maintaining deep respect for its origins, contemporary productions actively incorporate visual technologies while engaging with international traditions of academic music. The production process is characterized by scenographic and technological renewal, through which the traditional aesthetics of nomadic life and historical-cultural authenticity receive a fresh interpretation. The integration of multimedia and video projection technologies makes it possible to reimagine ethnocultural heritage through a contemporary visual language.

The developmental prospects of Kazakh opera reside in the formation of a national theatre where compositional intent and innovative directorial solutions remain rooted in the national context and draw upon

the profound strata of traditional musical-poetic culture. This ensures the firm embedding of ethnocultural identity within the global academic landscape.

International touring activity, the festival movement, and the involvement of philharmonic and student ensembles in creating new performance formats confirm that Kazakh operatic theatre has expanded beyond the boundaries of a localized phenomenon. Kazakh operatic theatre offers an alternative to the European operatic tradition, presenting to the global artistic landscape a distinctive aesthetic system wherein the academic genre resonates with the national worldview while remaining open to continuous dialogue.

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The article was submitted 21.05.2026;
approved after reviewing 11.08.2026;
accepted for publication 02.09.2026.

Статья поступила в редакцию 21.05.2026;
одобрена после рецензирования 11.08.2026;
принята к публикации 02.09.2026.