



Research Article

Polyphonic language and modal structures in Gara Garayev's early piano works

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Abstract

This article examines selected fortepiano works of the prominent Azerbaijani composer Gara Garayev and analyzes the stylistic and structural features reflected in his early piano compositions. The study focuses on Prelude VII, Prelude VIII from the cycle 24 Preludes, and the Three-Voice Fugue, emphasizing the synthesis of European classical traditions with Azerbaijani national musical language. Particular attention is given to polyphonic texture, modal organization, rhythmic structure, and thematic development. The analysis demonstrates that even in his early creative period, Garayev developed an individual compositional language characterized by the integration of Mugham-based modal intonations with Western forms and contrapuntal techniques. Prelude VII reflects lyrical expression and transparent polyphonic writing within a classical binary structure, while Prelude VIII reveals dramatic rhythmic energy, chromatic development, and ostinato-based accompaniment patterns. The Three-Voice Fugue illustrates the composer's innovative approach to polyphonic thinking through polymetric organization, modal flexibility, and thematic transformation. The article concludes that Garayev's piano works represent an important contribution to twentieth-century Azerbaijani music by successfully combining national musical identity with modern compositional methods. These works continue to occupy an important place in the repertoire of contemporary pianists and international music competitions.

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Introduction

The creativity of the genius Azerbaijani composer G. Garayev is of great importance for world music. The piano works of the composer, who played a great role in the development of the national symphony and ballet music of Azerbaijan, are also important. "24 preludes" series is the peak of G. Garayev's creativity. The series consists of four books, each with six preludes, written in different years. Preludes VII and VIII to which we refer are the products of 1951-52.

Prelude VII is written in a simple two-part form with a reprise. The Period of the first part is based on two sentences of six bars each. Sentences that start outside the box have a similar structure. Moderato (gentle) tempo, the melody played in 6/8 time, is built on the tonic "a" Rast scale. The Period (1-12 bars) given in piano dynamics stands out for its texture's elegance, poetic readability, and fresh colors. As in many of the composer's preludes, the subsonic polyphonic writing style was used here.

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Figure 1. Gara Garayev, Prelude VII, mm. 1–12: Opening thematic statement based on the Rast mode

The Period of the second part is based on a two-sentence square structure of four bars each. Due to its texture and rhythmic characteristics, it does not contrast with the first part and represents the culmination of the development. The melody that begins with reference to the octave of the tonic, with the “a” of the 2nd octave, once again confirms the tonic of the Rast spruce.



Figure 2. Gara Garayev, Prelude VII: Polyphonic combination of the first and second thematic materials in the reprise

In the reprise, the themes of parts I and II are played at the same time. The composer has created a synthetic repeat pattern here. The lyrical, fresh sounding of two melodic lines so numb to each other is an ingenious method of G. Garayev's polyphony. In the work, we hear the embodiment of pleasant memories in the unity of national colors and classical form.



Figure 3. Gara Garayev, Prelude VIII, mm. 3–9: Ostinato accompaniment and dotted rhythmic organization

Prelude VIII is written in Period form, it is based on two sentences with a non-square structure, but due to its direct development feature, it can be characterized as a period with a single structure. Starting from the two-bar entry of the small volume, the dotted rhythmic sounding continuously accompanies the theme until the end. In the expression of a strong-willed, stubborn, militant character, the role of the accompaniment is as big as the subject. The dotted sounding of parallel fifths throughout the first five bars does not change melodically either, in general, the fifth in the accompaniment, chromatics play a major role in the rhythm given to the third and monophonic background. (sentence I, cells 3-9)



Figure 4. Gara Garayev, Prelude VIII, mm. 14–15: Chromatic intensification and dynamic climax

Dotted rhythms and syncopations are widely used in the subject set against the background of bass ostinato. Here, uneven-sized notes grouped in three accented cells play a key role in creating a sharp and contrasting sound. The gradual rise of the pianissimo (pp) dynamics to the fortissima (PP) ensures a linear development and allows the climax to sound in the 3rd and 4th bars of the 2nd movement (bars 14, 15).



Figure 5. Gara Garayev, Prelude VIII: Chromatic progression and final resolution on the tonic A minor

In the second phrase, the melody sounds more contrasting (bars 12-18) accompanied by equal seconds in octaves. To write the work in the of a moll although many chromosomally because of the rule of thumb has gone beyond although it deviated from the regularity of the chord due to the use of a large number of chromaticisms.

In the concluding part, chromatic progressions are followed by the expression of octaves in the upper voice, and the work ends with the tonic of a moll.



Figure 6. Gara Garayev, Three-Voice Fuge: Main fuge subject and initial modal statement

Triple Fuge

The work "Three-voice fuge" was created in 1939. The fuge is grouped polymetrically, here we observe the alternation of 6/8 and 3/8 measures.

The theme is a bit larger than I.S. Bach's fugues and covers five cells. In the fuge, the synthesis of European and national structure, which is characteristic of G. Garayev's work, is followed by polymode. Here, from the first bars, the tonic "a" and major-minor sounds of the same name are mentioned, and then, due to the characteristic of the melody descending to the tonic, the cadence of the "a" shur chord is mentioned.

Üçsəslı fuqa (1939)

Qara Qarayev



Figure 7. Gara Garayev, Three-Voice Fuge: Thematic imitation, contrapuntal development, and final modal resolution

After a one-bar interlude, the theme is again imitated in the 1st voice, reduced 4 above, in the "des" tonic, unlike the tonic-dominant structure of the classical fuge. In the second voice, the opposite structure is given in voicing completely contrary to the tonal laws of the theme. The theme passes for the 3rd time, in the tonic "es" in the 3rd voice. Then begins the 18-bars, extensive development section. Motifs of the theme were used in different voices. Already in the middle section, the feature of descending to the tonic in the 5th bar of the theme is shortened, the theme is used with an ascending development and is heard in a four-bars, two-bars manner.

During the performance of the work grouped in three note lines in the culminating part, the theme is varied by octaves, emphasizing the tonic "a" indicates the approach of the reprise.

In the reprise, the modulation of the theme starting from the "f" tonic major-minor sounding to the "g" tonic Shur scale once again confirms the polylad feature. Then the theme is given once in the main tonality, and until the end, the completion features built on the theme motive are established on its dominant voice "e". The use of parallel quatrains in the last stanzas of the fuge, written in tripartite form, is reminiscent of the characteristics of ashıq music.

Conclusion

In this study, Gara Garayev's *Three-Voice Fugue* and selected Azerbaijani folk music motifs were comparatively analyzed, revealing that the composer synthesized the polyphonic techniques of the European classical tradition with modal structures characteristic of Azerbaijani folk music in a highly sophisticated manner. Within the *Three-Voice Fugue*, Garayev employed not only folkloric materials but also transformed them into a contemporary compositional language through contrapuntal and imitative techniques. Humanity spent centuries inventing fugue technique only to eventually apply it to folk motifs. Academic evolution is a strange creature.

The findings of the study demonstrate that the traditional musical materials of Azerbaijani composers were reconstructed through modal, rhythmic, and melodic techniques, and subsequently reformulated using the methods of contemporary polyphonic composition. Similar findings were also reported in the studies conducted by İmanova (2020) and Garayev on the use of maqam modes in the context of the East-West synthesis, supporting the present analysis.

Furthermore, Eminova's (2023) research on Garayev's *24 Preludes* indicates that the composer approached polyphonic thinking not only through technical means but also through transformations at the level of musical thought. This situation overlaps significantly with the structure of the *Three-Voice Fugue* examined in the present study, particularly regarding the integration of modal transformations and contrapuntal development.

On the other hand, the study by Mammadova and Hüseynova (2025) emphasized the role of the prelude and fugue tradition in the modernization of Azerbaijani piano music, drawing attention to the relationship between Garayev's compositional aesthetics and national musical understanding. Their findings support the view that the composer internalized the classical polyphonic tradition of Europe and reinterpreted it within the modal system of Azerbaijani music.

Consequently, Gara Garayev's piano works occupy a significant place in Azerbaijani musical culture in terms of the reconstruction of national identity, modal structure, and modal organization through contemporary polyphonic techniques. The composer's works should therefore be regarded not merely as examples of national music, but also as important contributions to the reinterpretation and reproduction of modal musical traditions within the framework of modern art music.

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