

Afghan Music Market Falls Silent

Author: [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

Instrument makers in the northern city of Samangan are going out of business as people turn to western music.

Qurban Shah, 61, sits deep in thought in his mud-built shop, drinking a cup of black tea.

On the walls around him hang rows of dutars or two-stringed lutes, and zirbaghali, drums made out of pottery.

Seeing someone approach, Qurban grew animated at the prospect of a sale, and was disappointed to discover it was an IWPR reporter looking for an interview rather than a dutar.

However, he consented to tell his story, and recalled how like his father before him, he has devoted his life to crafting instruments. He showed off various examples of the long-necked dutar with a belly shaped from mulberry wood, which he sells at 10 to 15 US dollars a time, and a zirbaghalis with goat- or sheepskin heads stretched over a tapered clay body.

Qurban is one of the many traditional instrument makers and traders working out of the Bazaar-e-Danbora-Feroshi - the Lute-Sellers' Market - in the northern town of Samangan. The bazaar used to be heaving with activity and full of music, but these days business is slow.

Qurban blames modern popular music for the fall in trade.

"I think of the days when I was selling ten or 12 dutars and the same number of zirbaghalis a day. People came from all across the country to buy musical instruments, because Samangan is renowned for its dutars and zirbaghalis throughout Afghanistan," he said.

"But now I'm extremely happy if I sell just one dutar in a whole day."

Many of the instrument sellers have shifted to other trades.

One of Qurban's colleagues at the market, Nazar Mohammad, commented that foreigners on the lookout for ethnic artifacts now accounted for many sales of instruments. "They know a good thing when they see it - so why do they make these electronic instruments and export them to our country?" he grumbled.

In recent years, imported music based on foreign instruments has begun displacing local styles. Musicians make their living from performing at events such as weddings, but fashions have changed and now people want amplified electronic sounds rather than the strains of a dutar.

"I don't know why people like this electronic music, which gives no enjoyment," said Qurban. "I'm completely at a loss what to do. I don't have any option other than to abandon my father's profession."

Sitting on a raised platform in a tea house in Samangan, 81-year-old Sufi Gulmurad has also seen the warning signs, although he plans to hang on.

"I have sat here and played the dutar to people for 60 years now, and they have paid me money," he said. "But nowadays people don't get us to come to their weddings or other parties, they get musicians with electronic instruments."

As he picked up his instrument to begin playing, Gulmurad said that even though no one pays him any more, he will make music as long as he lives, "I play so that the new musicians will understand that music is a love, not a means of making money."

Ahmad Shah, one of the new breed of musicians who are popular at weddings, has a jazz band in Balkh province, neighbouring Samangan, and plays a Japanese-made electronic piano.

He thinks the days of the old Afghan instruments are over. "If someone turns up to a wedding party with a zirbaghali and a dutar these day, there'll be no one left there after an hour - they'll all have made their escape," he said.

Young people generally prefer newer, imported sounds.

"This local music is a sign of backwardness. We can see what stage the world is at but we still won't abandon the dutar," said Nasrullah, 23, a resident of the northern province of Jowzjan. "I am sure this kind of music will die out by itself, because people in this country don't like old things any more.

"I don't want to listen to the dutar myself - I don't like the sound."

For Nasrullah, the old styles symbolise a past with more limited horizons, "People played the local music because they didn't have access to modern music, but why should they play it now that they do?"

Traditionalists like Qurban and Gulmurad said the youngsters are missing the point. They pointed out that foreign-made instruments are costly, so there is less amateur music-making around than there used to be.

Both men also contrasted the authenticity of Afghan music with the imported, more artificial product.

"In other countries, people are trying to improve their own original music, but in Afghanistan our youth are trying to improve the music of other countries," said Qurban.

Gulmurad added, "I am sure electronic music cannot create for enjoyment, because its sound does not come from the heart - it's mostly pre-recorded. By contrast, when a human being makes something and then plays it, that creates another kind of enjoyment."

Sayed Yaqub is an IWPR journalist in Mazar-e-Sharif.

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