

**A. Bakhtiarkyzy<sup>1</sup>, G.T. Alpeisova<sup>2\*</sup>, D.F. Karomat<sup>3\*\*</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup>Kazakh National University of Arts named after K. Bayseitova, Astana, Kazakhstan

<sup>3</sup>Institute of Fine Arts of the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

E-mail: <sup>1</sup>akerke.erke.1994@inbox.ru, <sup>2</sup>galpeissova@mail.ru, <sup>3</sup>dilkaramat@gmail.com

ORCID: <sup>1</sup>0009-0007-9215-0960, <sup>2</sup>0000-0002-3516-4844, <sup>3</sup>0009-0000-5206-1241

## ALEXANDER KURGANOV AND THE FORMATION OF THE KAZAKH VOCAL SCHOOL

**Abstract.** Alexander Matveevich Kurganov is one of the founders of the solo singing department of the Kazakh National Conservatory named after Kurmangazy, who had a significant impact on the development of Kazakh academic vocal art and the formation of vocal pedagogy. Despite the scale of his contribution, A. Kurganov's work remains insufficiently studied in Russian musicology. The purpose of the article is to identify and systematize the main directions of his pedagogical activity, to determine its role in the formation of the Kazakh vocal school. The sources used are biographical information, memoirs of students, interviews and archival materials, including methodological developments of the singer, stored in the library of the Conservatory. The analysis of these materials allowed us to identify the key provisions of A. Kurganov's pedagogical concept: the priority of solfeggio in teaching vocalists, the development of inner hearing, the focus on independent work of students and high standards of performing culture. The results of the study reveal the significance of the methodological heritage of A. Kurganov as an actual basis for improving modern musical education and training professional singers.

**Keywords:** Alexander Kurganov, vocal art, vocal pedagogy, solfeggio, methodology, musical education, performing school.

**А. Бахтиярқызы<sup>1</sup>, Г.Т. Альпеисова<sup>2\*</sup>, Д.Ф. Каромат<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup>К. Байсейітова атындағы Қазақ ұлттық өнер университеті, Астана, Қазақстан

<sup>3</sup>Өзбекстан Республикасы Ғылым академиясының Өнертану институты, Ташкент, Өзбекстан

E-mail: <sup>1</sup>akerke.erke.1994@inbox.ru, <sup>2</sup>galpeissova@mail.ru, <sup>3</sup>dilkaramat@gmail.com

ORCID: <sup>1</sup>0009-0007-9215-0960, <sup>2</sup>0000-0002-3516-4844, <sup>3</sup>0009-0000-5206-1241

## АЛЕКСАНДР КУРГАНОВ ЖӘНЕ ҚАЗАҚ ВОКАЛДЫҚ МЕКТЕБІНІҢ ҚАЛЫПТАСУЫ

**Аңдатпа.** Александр Матвеевич Курганов – Құрманғазы атындағы Қазақ ұлттық консерваториясының жеке ән салу кафедрасының негізін қалаушылардың бірі, ол Қазақстандық академиялық вокал өнерінің дамуына және вокалдық педагогиканың қалыптасуына ықпал етті. Оның қосқан үлесінің ауқымдылығына қарамастан, А. Кургановтың шығармашылығы отандық музыкалануда жеткіліксіз зерттелген. Мақаланың мақсаты оның педагогикалық қызметінің негізгі бағыттарын анықтау және жүйелеу, А. Кургановтың қазақстандық вокалдық мектепті қалыптастырудағы рөлін айқындау болып табылады. Қолданылған дереккөздер өмірбаяндық мәліметтер, студенттерінің естеліктері, сұхбаттары және мұрағат материалдары, оның ішінде әншінің консерватория кітапханасының қорында сақталған әдістемелік жұмысы болды. Осы материалдарды талдау А. Кургановтың педагогикалық тұжырымдамасының негізгі ережелерін бөліп көрсетуге мүмкіндік берді: вокалисттерді оқытудағы сольфеджионың басымдығы, студенттердің өзіндік жұмысына бағыт-бағдар беру және орындаушылық мәдениеттің жоғары стандарттары. Зерттеу нәтижелері заманауи музыкалық білім беруді жетілдірудің және кәсіби әншілерді даярлаудың өзекті негізі ретінде А. Кургановтың әдістемелік мұрасының маңыздылығын көрсетеді.

**Кілт сөздер:** Александр Курганов, вокалдық өнер, вокалдық педагогика, сольфеджио, әдістеме, музыкалық білім, орындаушылық мектеп.

**А. Бахтиярқызы<sup>1</sup>, Г.Т. Альпеисова<sup>2\*</sup>, Д. Каромат<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1,2</sup>Казахский национальный университет искусств имени К. Байсеитовой, Астана, Казахстан

<sup>3</sup>Институт искусствознания Академии наук Республики Узбекистан, Ташкент, Узбекистан

E-mail: <sup>1</sup>akerke.erke.1994@inbox.ru), <sup>2</sup>galpeissova@mail.ru), <sup>3</sup>dilkaramat@gmail.com

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## АЛЕКСАНДР КУРГАНОВ И СТАНОВЛЕНИЕ КАЗАХСКОЙ ВОКАЛЬНОЙ ШКОЛЫ

**Аннотация.** Александр Матвеевич Курганов – один из основателей кафедры сольного пения Казахской национальной консерватории им. Курмангазы, который способствовал развитию Казахстанского академического вокального искусства и формированию вокальной педагогики. Несмотря на масштабность его вклада, творчество А. Курганова недостаточно изучено в отечественном музыковедении. Целью статьи является выявление и систематизация основных направлений его педагогической деятельности, определение роли А. Курганова в формировании Казахской вокальной школы. В качестве источников использованы биографические сведения, воспоминания учеников, интервью и архивные материалы, в том числе методические разработки певца, хранящиеся в фонде библиотеки консерватории. Анализ этих материалов позволил выделить основные положения педагогической концепции А. Курганова: приоритет сольфеджио в обучении вокалистов, ориентация на самостоятельную работу студентов и высокие стандарты исполнительской культуры. Результаты исследования показывают значимость методического наследия А. Курганова в качестве актуальной основы для совершенствования современного музыкального образования и подготовки профессиональных певцов.

**Ключевые слова:** Александр Курганов, вокальное искусство, вокальная педагогика, сольфеджио, методика, музыкальное образование, исполнительская школа.

### 1. Introduction

In the history of Kazakhstan's vocal art, the name of Alexander Matveevich Kurganov, an outstanding singer and teacher, remains insufficiently studied in the scientific literature. His pedagogical activity, closely connected with the Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory, played a significant role in shaping the foundations of the national vocal school, but has not yet received a comprehensive scientific assessment. The paucity of research devoted to his methodological views and pedagogical experience makes it difficult to fully assess his contribution to the development of professional vocal education in Kazakhstan.

The globalization of music education and the introduction of international standards in the training of vocalists determine the need to review the legacy of outstanding teachers of the past. In this context, the legacy of A. Kurganov, who combined brilliant vocal technique with a deep understanding of musical and pedagogical principles, becomes particularly relevant. His work at the conservatory not only brought the traditions of Italian *bel canto* into local practice, but also laid the foundations for an original Kazakh school of vocal performance, embodied in the art of his famous students such as Ernek Serkebayev, Rosa Dzhamanova and others.

Today, as interest in academic singing continues to grow, A. Kurganov's methodological principles can serve as an effective model for future vocal teachers. His emphasis on solfeggio, the development of inner hearing, the culture of singing and the student's independence as an artist meets the modern requirements of music pedagogy.

The purpose of this article is to present the personality of A. Kurganov and analyze his contribution to the development of vocal art and pedagogy in Kazakhstan. The objectives of the study are:

1. To study archival and biographical materials about the life and work of A. Kurganov;
2. To reconstruct his pedagogical views, principles and teaching methods.

One of the key ideas of this study is the need to intensify research in the field of vocal education by reviewing the achievements of such outstanding personalities as A. Kurganov. The purpose of this article is to introduce into scientific circulation a number of little-known materials, including his handwritten reports, and to systematize his pedagogical experience in the context of national and international development of vocal pedagogy.

Thus, the study not only enriches the existing literature on A. Kurganov, but also contributes to a broader understanding of the pedagogical foundations of Kazakh academic vocal art and emphasizes its relevance in modern educational contexts.

## **2. Research methods and materials**

### **2.1 Research methods**

The pedagogical legacy of A. Kurganov was studied on the basis of a set of sources: archival documents stored in the library of the Kazakh National University of Arts and Kurmangazy Conservatory, memoirs, interviews with representatives of the vocal school, as well as the original methodological manuscripts of the teacher himself. Historical-chronological, descriptive, source-based and analytical methods were used in the work. The historical and chronological approach allowed us to build a holistic picture of Kurganov's life and professional path, and the interview method made it possible to supplement the documentary data with subjective but significant memories of students and colleagues. Special attention was paid to handwritten materials — methodological reports on the role of solfeggio in the training of vocalists and independent work of students. Their analysis allowed us to reconstruct Kurganov's pedagogical principles, identify his priorities in teaching and identify the relationship between teaching methods and the formation of performing culture. As a result, a system of views was identified that reflects both the personal experience of the teacher and the peculiarities of the formation of the Kazakh vocal school in the context of global and national trends in music education.

### **2.2 Material description**

The research's source base consisted of a variety of materials reflecting both the professional and personal side of A. Kurganov's work. Among them are interviews with the daughter of B. Zhylyysbaev, a student of A. Kurganov (Bakhtiyarkyzy, 2024); publications in periodicals, including memoirs about the singer in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* (Brusilovskaya, 2021), articles in online resources (Morozova, 2023; Proskurin, 2001); biographical sketches (Serkebayeva, 2010), as well as archival information and

information posted on the official website of the Kurmangazy Conservatory. Of particular importance were the original materials of A. Kurganov himself, in particular, his report "On the independent work of vocal students" (1954), which outlined the key provisions of his pedagogical concept. In addition, dissertations and scientific papers on related subjects were used (Mahmud, 2018).

### **3. Discussion**

Alexander Matveevich Kurganov is a unique figure not only in the history of Kazakh vocal pedagogy, but also in the international opera art of the first half of the 20th century. Born in Russia, he spent a significant period of his career in Italy, but it was in Kazakhstan that his pedagogical principles were implemented and the school of vocal performance was formed, which influenced several generations of singers.

As E. Morozova notes, "few people know the name of Alexander Kurganov now, but he was once a very famous man: a brilliant singer, a talented teacher. He had a very beautiful, rich voice, and was a very popular opera performer" (Morozova, 2023). His voice was heard on the stages of La Scala, in New York, Philadelphia, Naples, Florence. According to the memoirs of his contemporaries, he was recognized as the third tenor in the world, second only to Angelo Masini and Leonid Sobinov. This recognition attests to the highest level of his technique and artistry.

Despite his international success, his move to Alma-Ata, where he became head of the Department of Solo Singing at the Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory, was decisive in his biography. As D.E. Mahmud emphasizes, A. Kurganov, among others, made a great contribution "to the formation and development of the musical art of modern times", he educated "a whole galaxy of national talents, thanks to which the performing schools of Kazakhstan have gained the worldwide fame and recognition among professionals and music lovers" (Mahmud, 2018:63).

Among his students are the brightest representatives of the Kazakh opera scene: Ermek Serkebayev, Rosa Dzhamanova, Anvarbek Umbetbayev. Their names are closely connected with the formation of the national opera tradition, which is based on the pedagogical concept of A. Kurganov. His approach was based not only on technical training, but also on high aesthetic ideals, the formation of artistic taste, performance culture and scenic expressiveness.

Ermek Serkebaev, in an interview, spoke about the years of study with A. Kurganov: "At the conservatory I was a student of an amazing man, his name was Alexander Matveyevich Kurganov. In the past, he was a famous opera singer, partner of Chaliapin, Sobinov, Nejdanova. And during the war, he came with the evacuees to our region. I went through a real vocal school with him. Moreover, Alexander Matveyevich opened up a huge world of music to me" (Brusilovskaya, 2021). These words confirmed not only A. Kurganov's outstanding pedagogical qualities, but also his ability to inspire his students and introduce them to the world musical heritage.

In addition, E. Serkebaev wrote in his memoirs: "My teacher. With noble manners, a small beard. He loved baritone voices. Although he was a tenor. He was always proud to

sing Radames among the real Egyptian pyramids. He was modest, lived in the same room. He came here during the war from Moscow, like many great musicians. Many students have passed through his hands. He was old, he had no energy, he could no longer practically show how to take this or that note, sing a phrase. But the most important thing that he gave us is the culture of singing, performance" (Serkebayeva, 2018:145). These memoirs emphasize not only A. Kurganov's personal modesty, but also his pedagogical principles, which were based on the transfer of cultural and artistic values, striving for a high level of performance. This attitude to the profession had a lasting impact on his students and became part of the professional tradition he established as a teacher.

Despite such a significant contribution to the culture of Kazakhstan, the memory of Alexander Matveevich Kurganov remains insufficiently significant. In 1981, twenty years after his death, it was planned to celebrate the 100th anniversary of his birth and install a plaque on his house. However, these plans were never implemented. In an interview with B. Zhylysbayev's daughter, we were again told good words about this person. She noted that Alexander Matveyevich was a prominent representative of the *bel canto* trend. He was called the successor of B. Gigli and E. Caruso. The vocal school of Kazakhstan also comes from the Italian *bel canto*, as A. Kurganov was a representative of this trend.

In an interview, she said: "My father, B. Zhilisbayev, loved A. Kurganov endlessly. As a student at the Conservatory, he, along with E. Serkebaev, K. Kenzhetaev, went to Moscow for the All-Union Competition. They were successful and conquered Moscow. Then A. Kurganov was offered the head of the department at the Tchaikovsky Moscow Conservatory. But the students begged not to leave them, to which A. Kurganov replied, well, how am I without you. And until the end of his life, he remained in Almaty and devoted his life to working at the Almaty Conservatory" (A. Bakhtiyarkyzy).

The recognition of Alexander Matveevich Kurganov as the third tenor in the world after such titans as Angelo Masini and Leonid Sobinov testifies to his outstanding vocal abilities and artistry.

Indeed, Angelo Masini and Leonid Sobinov are two legendary singers. Angelo Masini, an Italian tenor, performed on the world's best opera stages, an outstanding tenor of his time, was known for his technical virtuosity and emotional depth of performance. His voice had a unique flexibility and power that made his performances truly unforgettable.

Being the third tenor of the world, Alexander Kurganov was not inferior to his illustrious predecessors. His voice combined the best qualities of both Masini's technical virtuosity and Sobinov's emotional depth. A. Kurganov successfully performed the most difficult parts, gaining recognition and rave reviews from viewers and critics around the world.

Tenor is one of the most sought-after and complex types of voice in opera, requiring exceptional technique, range and expressiveness. A. Kurganov possessed a powerful, expressive voice that captivated the audience with its purity and strength, allowing him to perform the most difficult opera parts with great success.

The international recognition of A. Kurganov became possible thanks to his numerous performances on prestigious opera stages. The audience in New York, Philadelphia, Naples

and Florence applauded to his exceptional talent. An important milestone in his career was his performance in La Scala, after which he was invited to Forlì to meet Angelo Masini. This meeting was the turning point in his career: the great Masini recognized A. Kurganov's talent and shared his knowledge and secrets of skill.

Despite the numerous trials and difficulties that A. Kurganov faced abroad, his talent and perseverance secured him an honorable place among the greatest tenors in the world. His voice and artistry continue to inspire new generations of singers and opera lovers.

#### **4. Results**

Alexander Matveevich Kurganov was born in 1881 in Moscow. His professional development took place in the atmosphere of the rapid development of musical theater at the beginning of the 20th century. The most important role in the formation of his vocal and stage culture was played by classes from outstanding teachers: he studied singing with M.N. Klimentova-Muromtseva, stagecraft with O.L. Knipper-Chekhova at the Music and Drama School of the Moscow Philharmonic Society (now GITIS). After graduation, A. Kurganov began his artistic career in Moscow operettas, and since 1913 he actively performed on the opera stages of Baku, Tiflis, Moscow and other cities, gradually gaining recognition from the public and the musical community.

A key stage in his creative career was a trip to Italy (1925-1927), where he completed an internship under the guidance of the famous Professor Angelo Masini. It was during this period that Kurganov performed in major theaters in Milan, Florence, Naples, as well as in Paris, Madrid, New York, Philadelphia and Cairo. His dramatic tenor was highly appreciated by critics and the public, and personal communication with Masini had a profound influence on the formation of his performing style. The experience gained in Italy became the basis of his subsequent teaching career, which had a significant impact on the development of vocal education in Kazakhstan. After returning to the USSR in the mid-1930s, A. Kurganov was faced with a new artistic context, but managed to integrate the principles of the Western European vocal school into the Soviet musical education system. From 1941 to 1950, he was a soloist at the Alma Ata Opera and Ballet Theater, and from 1944 he was a teacher and then head of the solo singing department at the Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory, where his methodological potential was revealed.

His approach to learning was based on strict discipline, development of inner hearing and ability to read from a sheet, which allowed him to professionally train many outstanding vocalists who have achieved recognition both in Kazakhstan and abroad.

He paid special attention to the discipline of solfeggio, regarding it as an integral part of the training of professional vocalists.

Solfeggio is a very important course for musicians, as it was described by international scholars: "Audiation is a central category in Music Learning Theory... To aurally recall and process music is the procedure of audiating music that one has previously heard. The aural prediction of music is the audiation of music that we anticipate. Finally, to aurally conceive music is the audiation of music that one creates or improvises." (Schüler, 2020:84). "Music literacy is perhaps the most important and the most challenging subject in music education.



It is important because it forms the foundation for almost all musical skills, and it is challenging as it requires more analytical processing than other skills.” (Eroğlu, 2021:347).

In his work, A. Kurganov emphasized the importance of musical hearing and internal auditory skills for a successful career as a singer. He focused on preserving singers' vocal power and developing their music comprehension. Understanding music and its dramatic load could help singers to control their vocal load as well. This fact was confirmed by modern researchers (Zuim, Gerhard, Lloyd, Rosow, & Lundy, 2023).

Alexander Matveevich Kurganov's understanding of the importance of solfeggio for vocalists testifies to his deep understanding of vocal pedagogy and his desire to produce technically well-rounded singers. His emphasis on developing inner hearing and reading skills highlights the important role they play in the vocalist's education and professional success.

A. Kurganov argued that it was important for vocalists to have a good musical ear by nature, since it allowed them to easily navigate solfeggio courses without relying heavily on notes. However, he also noted a common mistake: students with natural abilities often became arrogant, unable to improve their skills after successfully passing exams. Conversely, those who had problems with internal hearing often lagged, it was difficult for them to meet the required standards, and they constantly were insufficiently trained in this important discipline. He believed that low music reading skills may result in lack of confidence and excessive stress during performance. It is well known that stress is one of the main factors in vocal and performance issues (Larrouy-Maestri & Morsomme, 2013).

A. Kurganov emphasized that solfeggio was just as important as the main specialty for a vocalist. The inability to read at least a few bars of music from a sheet of paper or develop an inner ear did not allow to become a full-fledged vocalist. He criticized the tendency of students to depend on their teachers and accompanists, which in practice lead to accompanists spending too much time helping students learn melodies rather than developing their musicality.

Alexander Matveevich emphasized that teachers of solfeggio should ensure that students, starting from the first year of study, gradually develop their skills of recognizing intervals and singing by ear. This gradual development was crucial so that future vocalists could sing from the sheet and determine intervals, modulations and chords by ear. For A. Kurganov, the development of inner hearing was a crucial factor in the professional education of a singer.

A. Kurganov connected the development of inner hearing with the accuracy of intonation and freedom in the study of vocal material. He argued that the current system of teaching solfeggio does not give the desired results to vocalists, since students often considered solfeggio less important than their main specialty. This misconception, in his opinion, put vocalists far behind instrumentalists such as pianists and violinists. He did his best to change the common attitude to vocal musicians.

Alexander Matveyevich advocated a differentiated approach to solfeggio classes, considering the vocal range and comfort of students. He emphasized that the thematic

material on solfege should be carefully worked out so that by the end of five years of study at the conservatory, students can confidently read musical works from the sheet easily. He insisted that students sang naturally and without strain during solfeggio lessons, thereby maintaining healthy vocal practice. He made specific focus on the technique of vocalization, a vocal practice that allows musicians sense their vocal capacities and correct their vocal and melodic errors (Messner, 2024).

Furthermore, A. Kurganov emphasized the need for solfeggio exercises to be meaningful, asking students to imagine themselves adding words to melodies to give their singing context and expression. He cites the example of the great Russian composer Mikhail Glinka, who advocated a distinct method of solfeggio that focuses on enhancing natural tones before moving on to more complex sounds.

Alexander Matveyevich advocated reforming the solfeggio curriculum from purely technical exercises to practically relevant content for vocalists. He believed that vocalists, as future performers, needed to be taught to understand the meaning of the melodies they sang, making solfeggio a vital tool for developing an effective approach to vocal material. This comprehensive approach is preferred by most of vocal teachers, especially when working with talented, prodigy, students (Mondelli, 2018).

Alexander Matveevich Kurganov's views on solfeggio reflected his broader educational philosophy, which held that vocalists should develop well-rounded musical skills to achieve artistic excellence. His insistence on the equal importance of solfege and the major, as well as his recommendations for improving pedagogy, underscore his commitment to developing well-rounded and skilled vocalists. His legacy in vocal pedagogy continues to influence modern approaches to vocal training, emphasizing the need for a balanced and comprehensive musical education.

A. Kurganov also paid great attention to the independent work of vocalists.

From Alexander Kurganov's report "On the Independent Work of Vocal Students" dated March 23, 1954 (Kurganov, 1954), several key assumptions can be drawn. He argued that one of the main tasks for training specialists in musical art was to involve students in creative and, where possible, research-based independent work.

A. Kurganov emphasized that independent study should not be a passive activity, but a dynamic process in which students drew their own conclusions based on their research. He encouraged students to use not only lecture notes, but also scientific literature related to their field. This approach is aimed at developing students' ability to conduct research and think independently, which, according to A. Kurganov, was vital for their professional growth. "A singer," wrote Alexander Matveevich, "should not forget that he is an independent artist, and in the future his creative initiative will help him to create the image that he must portray, and with skillful independent work on the works given to him, he will be able to take his rightful place in the art of singing" (Kurganov, 1954).

Teachers, argued A. Kurganov, were responsible to instill love to the profession in their students. He suggested restructuring the curriculum to allow more time for independent work, reducing the amount of repetitive coursework. This shift, in his opinion, would



allow students to immerse themselves more deeply in their studies, thereby improving their learning experience.

Alexander Matveevich also analysed practical issues, such as students' tendency to procrastinate and inadequately use the resources available. He advocated better time management and personal discipline, urging students to adhere to a strict study schedule. In addition, he emphasized the importance of maintaining a healthy voice through proper rest and nutrition, warning of the dangers of overexertion.

A. Kurganov's analysis provided comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted demands placed on student singers, combining technical training with independent work. His approach emphasized the importance of independence, constant practice, and a holistic view of professional development in the art. He noted that "thoughtful, organized work is of great importance in the development of a young singer. Some students believed that it was enough to work with a teacher and accompanists and everything would be fine. But this position was wrong. It was necessary for a student to write down all the instructions of the teacher and accompanist when coming home, so as not to repeat the mistakes he made" (Kurganov, 1954).

A. Kurganov strived to prepare students not only for the technical requirements of his craft, but also for the broader role of artists who are culturally and ideologically aware. He outlined the main principles and methods of work in his report.

As for his activities outside the university, in addition to his teaching activities at the conservatory, A. Kurganov also played an important role in the formation and development of the Kazakh Opera Theater. His work at the theater went beyond vocal training and included directorial and administrative functions. He participated in the selection of the repertoire, the selection of actors for productions and the general artistic direction of the theater. His efforts helped make the Kazakh Opera Theater named after Abay a significant cultural institution in the Soviet Union.

## **5. Conclusion**

The activity of Alexander Matveevich Kurganov played an important role in the formation and development of Kazakhstani vocal art and professional vocal education. As a teacher, he educated a number of outstanding performers, including B. Zhylyysbaev, K. Kenzhetayev, E. Serkebaev, Y. Pomerantsev, R. Dzhamanova. As head of the Department of Solo Singing at the Kazakh National Conservatory, A. Kurganov was able to integrate the traditions of the Western European opera school into domestic vocal practice, which contributed to the formation of a stable methodological base for Kazakh vocal pedagogy.

An analysis of archival sources and contemporary testimonies suggests A. Kurganov's systematic approach to learning, based on the priority of auditory perception, independent work of students and high demands on performing culture. His methodology is characterized by a well-thought-out structure and is focused on the formation of professionally mature vocalists capable of independent creative thinking and stage realization.

In modern conditions, when music education focuses on a combination of national identity and global standards, the pedagogical legacy of A. Kurganov is of scientific and

practical interest. His approaches can be used in the development of new educational models adapted to the current tasks of vocalist training.

Consideration of the pedagogical system of A. Kurganov makes it possible not only to fill in the existing gaps in the history of Kazakh vocal education, but also to set the direction for subsequent research in the field of vocal pedagogy. His contribution requires further scientific reflection and inclusion in the context of national and international art criticism discourse.

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