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Islam and Music: The Legal and the Spiritual Dimensions*

Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Inanimate wood, inanimate string, inanimate skin¹
from where cometh, then, this song of the Friend?
—attributed to *Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī*

One could say that it is in answer to the rhetorical question posed by the greatest troubadour of spirituality in Islam, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī—who combined music and spirituality with religion and poetry—that Islamic civilization has delved into the significance of music: in a deeper sense, music is the sound of the Friend. The fact that music can be produced through these few inanimate materials—wood, string, skin—joined together is one of the greatest miracles of existence, if one truly understands what music is and how it touches the deepest layers of the soul. At the same time, of course, music has a more external function. It affects the souls of men and of women outwardly, and influences the social structure which brings human beings together. From the very beginning of Islamic history, therefore, the question of music and its legal status has been surrounded by an aura of ambiguity, which, in fact, has been a positive rather than a negative aspect of Islamic Law.

* This text comprises the edited transcription of the author's lecture given at the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions.

¹ Describing the Persian *tār*, or *sitar*.

The Legal Status of Music in Islam

There have been many authorities throughout Islamic history who have considered it a blessing that there is no specific legal injunction against music—and that the *'ulamā'*, the religious scholars, have themselves had differences over the centuries as to whether music is acceptable, that is, legitimate, licit (*ḥalāl*), or illicit (*ḥarām*) according to the *Sharī'ah*, the Divine Law of Islam. Music is, therefore, dealt with in a variety of ways. One of the causes of this ambiguity lies with the very usage of the word "music."

When we say "Islam and music," there is an ambivalence in this terminology that needs to be elucidated. What do we mean by music? The word "music," translated from the Greek into Arabic as *'mūsīqā'* and into Persian as *'mūsīqī'*, for the most part means the same thing as it does in English: Brahms's Third Symphony would be called *mūsīqā* (*mūsīqī* in Persian), or music. There are, however, sounds and patterns which to the ear would appear musical and which would be considered "music" according to the Western definition of the term "music" but which are not called *mūsīqā* in Arabic—hence the juridical difficulty present from the very beginning in defining this term. To explain further: for example, should someone who knows no Arabic and has had no acquaintance with Islam whatsoever hear the chanting of the Qur'an for the first time, that person would hear "music." But the chanting of the Qur'an would never be called *mūsīqā* in Arabic; this would be considered blasphemy. Therefore, the word "music" has been used in a more limited sense in the Arabic language and other Islamic languages than it has in non-Islamic languages. There are expressions in the Islamic world that are music but which would not be called "music."

The debate in which the *'ulamā'* have been engaged has always involved precisely those elements which are called music in Islamic languages. There has never been any doubt concerning those types of expression which are musical without being called music and which have to do with the sacred elements of Islamic revelation. Not even the strictest *Wahhābī 'alīm* in Saudi Arabia would ban the

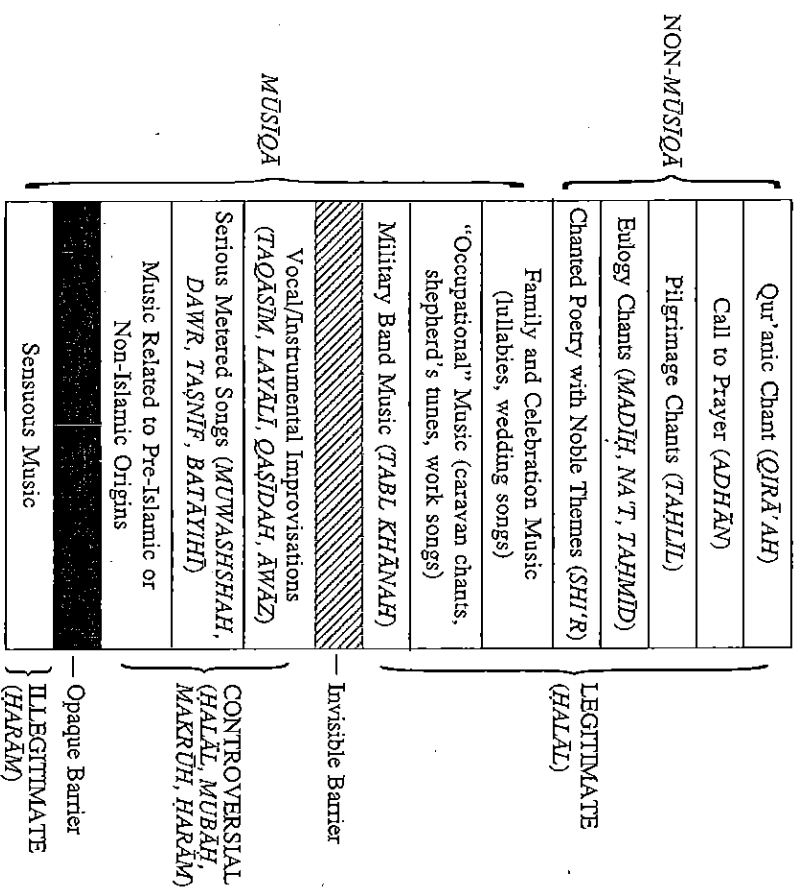
chanting of the *adhān*, the call to prayer. The *adhān* is always chanted, as anyone who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca or Medina will confirm. There is no debate over that. This ambiguity in the usage of the term "music" is, therefore, one of the confusing issues in the Islamic world which has continued over the centuries and which needs clarification.

According to the *Sharī'ah*, the Divine Law of Islam, there are different categories of human actions and corresponding categories of music, which are accepted or rejected legally. First, there is the category of music that is *ḥalāl*, legitimate or allowed, from the point of view of religious law. Second, there is the category of music that is *mubāḥ*. Types of music in this category are allowed, but they are not looked upon with great favor and are perhaps somewhat circumspect; they may be performed, but they are not *ḥalāl* and therefore are in a lower category. There are then those kinds of music, called *makrūḥ*, which are improper, which are disapproved of by religion, but which are not totally forbidden by Islamic Law. Finally, there is that which is *ḥarām*, forbidden or illicit. It is important to reiterate that these rulings are not unanimous and there are differences of interpretation among various religious scholars as to where the distinctions between categories lie. The divisions drawn on the right of the chart in Figure 1 are not, therefore, absolute. On the left, however, a crucial distinction is drawn between music which is non-*mūsīqā*, which is not called "music" in Arabic and other Islamic languages, and music which is called "music."

Of those genres which are "non-music," non-*mūsīqā*, first is the chanting (*qir'ā'ah*) of the sacred text, which, according to the Qur'an itself, should be chanted with a strong, clear voice. There are sciences of chanting of the Qur'an which go back, according to Islamic tradition, to the prophet David and which have continued unabated to this day. The chanting is revealed and of sacred origin; it is not a human creation but divinely inspired.

The *adhān*, the call to prayer, is also—again going back to the time of the Prophet—always chanted. There is no part of the Islamic world, no different school of law, Sunni or Shi'ite, according to

Figure 1
Hierarchy of *Handasar al-Sawt* Genres
(The Status of Music in the Islamic World)²



² From Lois al-Farūqī, *Islam and Art* (Islamabad, 1985), 179.

which the *adhān* is simply uttered. It is *always* chanted, and it is always chanted in a clear, strong voice. Certain syllables in the *adhān* are always elongated according to the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, with a certain inner effect that they have upon the soul.

Next, there are all the chants, called *tahīl*, which have to do with the Hajj, the great pilgrimage to Mecca, as well as with other, lesser, pilgrimages. *Tahīl* are like caravan songs, which are themselves extremely beautiful. The *tahīl*, the singing and chanting, is one of the exquisite art forms that surrounded the often months-long pilgrimage journeys from different parts of the Islamic world to Mecca.

Following this category are the various eulogies, usually called *madih* in Arabic, but including also the *na't*, *tahmīd*, and other eulogies on the life of the Prophet. The great songs that mark religious rites, such as the birth of the Prophet, and ceremonies are always chanted. For example, in Alexandria, every Friday after prayers, at the tomb of Būṣīrī, which is in the center of the city, the *Burdah*, the famous song about the Prophet, is always chanted in its entirety; it is also usually repeated on the radio during the time of the commemoration of his birth. And, in the Shi'ite world, of course, the *ta'ziyah*—literally, "consolation"—the passion play commemorating (in a spiritual sense) the tragedy of Karbalā' and its aftermath, is always "sung" or recited. This, too, then, is a religious category which would never be called *mūsīqī* or *mūsīqā*; to do so would be blasphemy. This kind of chanting or recitation would, nevertheless, in the non-Islamic world be called music.

Finally, we have what used to be traditional in the Islamic world: the recitation of poetry. Arabic poetry deals at once with words and phrases *and* music (for example, the *Kitaḥ al-aghānī* in fact means "The Book of Songs"). Likewise, of course, many Persian and Turkish poems were usually sung. This is the reason so much of the poetry of the Islamic peoples is very musical and, vice versa, why Islamic music always has a poetic dimension to it.

As outlined in Figure 1, all of these types are non-*mūsīqā* and are excluded from the category of music in the Islamic world; and yet they are music. The '*alamā'* have had very little disagreement

about the legal status of this type of "music." There is, to be perfectly honest, one exception to this. Certain Wahābī and Hanbalī 'ulamā' are opposed to the celebration of the birth of the Prophet, which may appear strange but which marks a point of difference within the Sunni world. The elaborate chants and musical performances commemorating the birth of the Prophet and his life are usually decried by them. This is why in Medina, the city of the Prophet, you will not see performed or hear chanted in public this category of eulogy or *madīh* poems concerning the Prophet.

Farther down on the chart there are categories called music or *mūsīqā* in Arabic which have to do with certain features of life or with certain professions. The Prophet, we know, not only accepted but encouraged music at the time of weddings, a practice that exists in every civilization and among all peoples. Therefore, wedding music and music dealing with various family celebrations such as the circumcision of boys, singing a child to sleep with lullabies—what might be called music for family occasions—was also accepted throughout the Islamic world. There are very few people, even the staunchest opponents of music, who have objected vehemently to this category of music.

Next there is what the late Lois al-Farūqī called "occupational music," music that relates to one's work or labor, linking economic activity to the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the inner life. For example, anyone who has seen a traditional builder in the Islamic world will know that, as the stones or the bricks are thrown up to him one by one, he is singing. And the person who is throwing up the bricks is also singing. Or, in Syria, where stone architecture is common, stone chisellers will do the same—they will sing. This practice of course also existed in medieval Europe and in other traditional societies: it is not unique to Islam. Music universally is combined with architecture in the very act of building. The same holds true with harvesting and other traditional activities in which music was included and accepted.

Finally, there is the type of music which people in the West do not usually identify with the Islamic world—though its origins, as far as the West is concerned, are Islamic—and this is what we know as military music. All civilizations, of course, from the old Roman

empire and the Persian empire, had some kind of military music. In Islam as well this was allowed. In fact, as long as it was not lascivious or sensuous, as long as it helped to increase courage and fortitude in battle, this kind of music was not only accepted but encouraged. It is on the basis of that early tradition that the later military band was developed, leading finally to the band of the Janissaries, which itself was the origin of the Western military band as we know it. We have only to think of the "Turkish March" of Mozart to know that it is no accident that it sounds like a military march. Much of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Austrian world was very much interested in the elaborate military music of the Janissaries, a very beautiful form of military music that goes back to this early Median example of the Prophet.

We now come to those realms of music that are controversial in a legal sense. And here, various views have been given by the 'ulamā' on the level of the law. First, there are the different kinds of vocal and instrumental music which are the classical traditions of the Islamic world. Much of the music of the Islamic peoples that one hears in the West today belongs to this category, which would correspond to Western classical music. The music of the Islamic people encompasses several major classical traditions. One of these is Andalusian music—*mūsīqā-al-andalus*—of Morocco which originated in Spain and migrated with the expulsion of the Muslims in 1492 to Morocco. *Mūsīqā-al-andalus* still survives, distinct from Eastern Arabic music, which had its major center in Cairo, where classical Arabic music also began to wane after the introduction of Western music, epitomized by the Cairo opera for whose inauguration Verdi composed his "Aida."

Eastern Arabic classical music also had a great deal of exchange with classical Persian music—as the presence of classical Persian musical names, like *Nahnāwand* and *Chahārḡah* indicates. Classical Persian music itself has a historical continuity that goes back, as far as we know, to the Achaemenian period. Following the Persian conquest of Egypt, ancient Egyptian musical forms were also integrated into classical Persian music, which reached its peak in the Sassanid period. This music was enjoyed at the court of the caliphs and was made popular as well by the great Persian musician

Zaryāb, who also influenced the music of Spain and the Umayyad court of Cordova. The Turkish classical tradition is in some ways close to the Persian and yet is quite distinct. As for North Indian music, it displays elements of Persian music but also has elements taken by Muslims from Hindu sources. For many centuries this tradition has been a very important vehicle for the expression of Sufism in India. Many people in the West do not associate North Indian music with Islam at all, and they think it accidental that most of the masters of North Indian music have names like Ali Akbar Khan. Even Ravi Shankar's teacher, Rīdā Qulī Khan, was a very famous Muslim teacher from Rampur. Here you have, as a vehicle of expression, a tradition which is both Hindu and Islamic and into which sentiments of two different religions have poured.

Other traditions, not perhaps as well known in the West, are also a part of the Islamic musical tradition. The Sundanese music of Java, an incredible tradition of music, is very rich and is specifically Islamic. The music of the Muslims of China, the Hui and those of the Uighur area of Western China, are also very close to ancient Persian music. This music in China has its own local variation; it does not sound identical to, let us say, classical Persian music from Tehran, but, nevertheless, there is a family resemblance. All this, then, constitutes the classical music of the Islamic people, which is combined, usually, with various types of songs, such as those which were developed in Andalusia by Muslim poets.

Another category of music is that surviving from the pre-Islamic period which Muslims accepted—as long as it was not passionate—but did not integrate into their own musical vocabulary. For example, in Java and Sumatra, the rich musical tradition of the gamelan goes back to the Buddhist and Hindu period in that area of the world; Muslims accepted this tradition but did not incorporate it. Likewise, gamelan music on the island of Bali has not been Muslimized; it is pure, classical, and is played by Hindus in Bali. This, then, is a separate category that continues to exist within the Islamic world. Another example is the presence of Armenian music among the people of Azerbaijan. It is in this category that some have tried to include Western classical music.

The categorization of the types of music outlined here has been, as I stated, the subject of a great legal debate in which there has never been total agreement. The categorization of one type of music, however, has been completely unanimous. All music which is lascivious, which may arouse the lower passions, has been banned by the *'ulamā'*. Within the Islamic world, it is more or less clear to people what types of music have been banned—at least it was clear before the onslaught of modernism. The arrival of any new form of music from outside the Islamic world has at first caused a great deal of debate—a debate that dies down only with the arrival of yet another new form. Fifty years ago, some folk songs from Naples and other parts of Italy came to the Eastern Mediterranean and to the Arab and Persian worlds. This Italian music was popular among the more modernized Arabs. The *'ulamā'*, however, debated the categorization of this type and were rather opposed to it, until the next new wave of music came, a very loud and jarring type of music which developed in the Western world in the decades following the Second World War. The categorization of these new forms of Western music then became plain to everybody: I have never heard of any *'ulamā'* who has categorized "rock and roll," "hard rock," or "metallic rock"—which, admittedly, are not very conducive to the remembrance of God (at least not in the Islamic context)—as anything other than belonging to the last category, to that which is *harām*, illegitimate.

There is, therefore, a very wide spectrum as far as religious attitudes toward music are concerned, in contrast to what one might suppose. If someone says, "I am a good Muslim; I know music is *harām* in Islam," this person does not really know what he or she is talking about. The relationship of music to Islam is much more complicated. This ambivalence and ambiguity, as I have said, has played a very important role in the survival and cultivation of music in the Islamic world, from Ismaili songs in India to prayers in Morocco and everything in between. If there had been a categorical definition of what is licit and what is illicit, it would have made a great deal of difference in the creative processes of the art.

Many people, especially modernized Muslims, think that the

great music of the Islamic people developed despite Islam. This, however, is impossible; great art cannot develop despite the world view within which it is cultivated, although it can always protest against something within that world view. Perhaps this misconception is due to the fact that whenever any segment of Islamic society has been under great duress, enduring economic, political or military upheavals, it has usually tried to distance itself from "music" in the Arabic sense—though not from those first categories that are permanent within Islamic civilization and that Islam associates with the delights of paradise, of happiness, and of joy. One of the most remarkable instances of this process occurred in recent years in Iran.

Iran has always been one of the great centers of classical music. Persian classical music has been preserved over the centuries by two patrons—the court and the Sufi orders. Moreover, performers at court were often also great Sufis. During the Qājār period (1779–1923), when many other aspects of Persian culture were decaying, due to foreign invasions, with half of Iran lost to the Russians in 1837, there was a remarkable revival of Persian music. Great masters appeared, one after another, right up to the Pahlavi period—masters such as Darwīsh Khān and ‘Abdallah Khān, some of whose students are still alive, now in their eighties—the last surviving musicians from the very early period of the Pahlavi dynasty. The end of the Qājār period (from the time of Naṣir al-Din Shah [1848]) to the beginning of the Pahlavi period marks the flowering of classical Persian music.

The modern movement, which began with the Qājār period, flourished and spread in the Pahlavi period, and the two patrons of classical music, the court and the Sufi orders, receded into the background. As soon as the aristocracy learned a few words of French or English, it was no longer interested in classical Persian music. The Sufi orders also withdrew from the great cities, and that Sufi music which was to survive in Iran did so in Samandaj in Kurdistan, in Balūchistan, in parts of Khurāsān in the northeast, but was not to be found in the major cities. One could no longer hear Sufi music performed in Tehran. In fact, when Sufi music was performed for the first time on the birthday of ‘Alī, about thirty years ago in Tehran, it was a major event in that city. Classical

Persian music had, therefore, begun to wane until a movement began in the 1960s to revive it. The renewed popularity of classical music led, however, as time went on, to a form of decadence, in which the great income and showy lifestyle of many artists created an ambience of immorality in which classical music was being performed, causing many pious Muslims to turn against this music.

Then came the revolution, and the first thing to be banned was music. The great masters of Iranian music disappeared from the scene; many of them taught music in the basements of their houses, and there was no sign of music in public—music, that is, in the sense we have defined, not the chanting of the Qur’an, of course, or the eulogies, the *madīh*. The first time this taboo was broken, interestingly enough, was when Beethoven’s *Eroica* was played on the radio. One would not, as a matter of course, think of music for Oriental dancing girls and a Beethoven symphony in the same category of things illicit; hence, classical Western music gradually began to be performed.

Possibly the most important legal injunction on music ever given by a religious scholar was that of the late Ayatollah Khomeini, just before his death. Although we do not often identify the image of the Ayatollah Khomeini, who symbolized revolutionary Islam, with music, he in fact loved music very much as a young man. When the head of the Iranian national radio and television, an important governmental instrument, asked in a *farwā*, a religious edict, whether music was *halāl* or *harām*, the Ayatollah pronounced, quite incredulously, that music, as long as it did not incite the passions and except for women singing to men, was *halāl*. Within a few days, this one *farwā*, which took only ten minutes to pronounce, changed the entire musical scene. During all those years when music was not a public event and performers were not being paid thousands of dollars to chant for five minutes, true musicians dedicated to their art had continued to study underground. Following the Ayatollah’s *farwā*, they reappeared. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Shāhidī, one of the finest voices of Iran, and one of the greatest masters of music, survived imprisonment and hunger and began teaching students publicly again. When one of the great teachers of voice, Shajarian, visited me recently in Washington, I asked him whether he had any students. He said, “I

have so many that I cannot accept any students for the next two years; they have to wait in line." Today, after all the ups and downs of various *fatwās* given over the centuries, the opinion of the most powerful legal authority of the land—an authority who would never be identified with leniency, one might say, toward the "feminine arts," of which music, an art which melts the soul, is the supreme example—has caused us to witness a remarkable revival of classical Persian music.

The legality of music in Islam still remains and will always remain ambiguous as divinely willed. This ambiguity serves a useful purpose in that it accepts varying modes and forms of music without permitting that music which separates the listener from religion and is an obstacle to the remembrance of God. It is that music which Islam has always shunned and has never developed. There is *no* music in the Islamic world which does not remind one of God. Even music to which people dance at weddings carries with it a reminiscence of the classical modes, which themselves are related to inner states combined with the yearning of the soul for God.

The Spiritual Significance of Music

Music has a tremendous impact upon the soul and its sonorousness reverberates within us and thus creates a sense of intimacy.

Music, as a means of enlivening the soul and bringing it to a realization of its inner nature and its reunion with God, has remained an extremely important element in the history of Islam, primarily through Sufism. Sufism, the esoteric inner dimension of Islam, corresponds roughly, but only roughly, to what we identify as Christian mysticism; it is not exactly the same thing, but there are certain parallels. The power of music upon the soul was realized from the very beginning of the development of Islamic culture. Two groups of people wrote about it: the Sufis and the Islamic philosophers. I want, first, to quote a text from the tenth- and eleventh-century Muslim writers called the *Ikhwān al-Safā'*, the Brethren of Purity. What they defined as the highest form of music falls under the category of "non-*mūsīqā'*":

Tradition teaches that the sweetest melody which the inhabitants of paradise have at their disposal and the most beautiful song they hear is the discourse of God—great be His praise. It is thus that the Word of God Most High states, "The greeting which [will welcome them], there will be peace!" (Quran X, 10-11) [that is, coming from the Qur'an, 'salām']. And the end of the invocation will be: "Praise to Allāh, Lord of the worlds." It is said that Moses—peace be upon him—upon hearing the words of his Lord, was overcome with joy, with happiness and with rapture to the point of being unable to contain himself. He was overwhelmed by emotion, transported while listening to this serene melody and from that point on regarded all rhythms, all melodies, and all songs as insignificant.³

Moses had heard the most supreme form of music, which is the music of divine revelation itself. The *Ikhwān al-Safā'* defend music on this highest level. They speak also of the impact of music upon the soul: its effects, imprinted by the rhythms and melodies of musicians on the souls of listeners, are of different types:

In the same way, the pleasure which souls draw from these rhythms and melodies and the manner in which they enjoy them are variable and diverse. All that depends on the degree which each soul occupies in the domain of gnosis (*al-ma'arifa*) and on the nature of the good actions which make up the permanent object of his love. Therefore, each soul, while listening to descriptions which correspond to the object of his desires and to melodies which are in accord with the object of his delight, rejoices, is exalted and delights in the image that music makes of his beloved.⁴

It is this tradition which entered into Islamic learning, and, in the old days, any truly learned person was well-versed in theoretical music: a solid knowledge of classical Arabic or Persian music, even if one did not play an instrument or sing, was part of education.

³ Quoted in Jean-Louis Michon, "Sacred Music and Dance in Islam," in S. H. Nasr, ed., *Islamic Spirituality: Manifestations*, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, 20 (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 474.

⁴ Michon, 474.

Therefore, this philosophical explanation of the inner meaning of music was important throughout the history of Islamic thought.

It is the Sufis, however, who not only wrote about the significance of music but also used it in their practices. The Sufi practice of music is called *samāʾ* in Arabic—from the word “to hear,” *samiʿa*—meaning “audition” or “hearing.” The *samāʾ* is not performed by all Sufi orders, but it is performed by many, and in some Sufi orders, *samāʾ* occupies the primary position (as far as techniques for spiritual realization are concerned) after the invocation, which is itself the supreme technique. Other orders, such as the Naqshbandis, have usually not had much recourse to music. Music in the Sufi context varies from simple beating of drums, which is what most Sufi orders use, to very elaborate orchestras. In the range from simplicity to complexity, different Sufi orders use either pure rhythm or pure melody or a combination of both, often together with the chanting of verses. The blending of the chanting of verses, of certain poems either by the founder of the order or by another great Sufi, with music—which usually occurs after the canonical prayers and litanies drawn from the Qurʾan and *Ḥadīth*—prepares the soul for the final invocation and integration into the Divine Presence.

The Sufis have written very extensively on why music is significant for the soul. Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī, one of the greatest of all Islamic thinkers—and an authority on legal, juridical and ethical questions—is also one of our best sources on the significance of music. He writes:

Hearts and inmost thoughts, are treasures of secrets and mines of jewels. Infolded in them are their jewels like as fire is infolded in iron and stone, and concealed as water is concealed under dust and loam. There is no way to the extracting of their hidden things save by the flint and steel of listening to music and singing, and there is no entrance to the heart save by the ante-chamber of the ears. So musical tones, measure them pleasing, bring forth what is in it and make evident its beauties and defects. For when the heart is moved there is made evident that only which it contains like as a vessel dips only what is in it. And listening to music and singing is for the heart a true touchstone and a speaking standard; whenever the

soul of the music and singing reaches the heart, then there stirs in the heart that which in it preponderates.⁵

This statement of al-Ghazzālī's alludes to a very important principle—the Sufi belief that for a person whose soul is ready to move in the direction of the Divine, that is, for one for whom there is already this attraction for the Divine, music has the power of accelerating this attraction and, in a sense, helping the person achieve what is very difficult to do otherwise. Music for such a person becomes a vehicle for the journey of the soul to God, whereas for a person who does not have that inclination, music simply increases the passions. There is a very famous saying in Persian that music causes whatever is within the soul to become more intense. If the soul has an inclination to sink like a rock, it will sink faster, toward the world of passions; but if it has the inclination to fly like a bird, music will strengthen the soul's wings.

Let me allude to one more quotation from the patron saint of Shiraz, again one of the great masters of the exposition of music and himself a noted troubador, Rūzbihān Baqlī, a poet, musician, and commentator of the Qurʾan. He says that:

Spiritual music is the key to the treasury of Divine Verities. The gnostics are divided: some listen with the help of the stations (*maqāmat*); some with the help of the states (*ḥālāt*); some with the help of spiritual unveiling (*mukāshshifāt*); some with the help of vision (*mushāhidāt*). When they listen according to the stations, they are in reproach. When they listen according to the states, they are in a state of return. When they listen according to spiritual unveiling, they are in union (*wisāl*); when they listen according to vision, they are immersed in the Divine Beauty.⁶

This includes all those who seek the knowledge of God. People listen with the different faculties given to human beings; the highest of these faculties is the *sirr*, the inner center of one's being, where

⁵ From the eighth book of the section of al-Ghazzālī's *Ihyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*, trans. Duncan B. Macdonald, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, April 1901, 199.

⁶ From Baqlī's *Risālat al-quds*, in S. H. Nasr, trans., *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1987), 157.

in fact one hears what Plato calls "silent music." It must be remembered that Plato identified two kinds of music: music which is audible and is for everyone, and silent music, which is for the sages.⁷

Music finally, in a sense, flows into silence. Silence is the origin of all spiritual music and is always present in that music—through the use of rhythm, which integrates one level of reality to another, and through melody (the feminine element in music as rhythm is the masculine), which melts the soul and creates the reminiscence for one's own origin.

As I mentioned at the start, in Islamic civilization, by and large, music was very much wed to poetry. Poetry is the favorite art form of the Islamic world, a direct result of the poetic structure of the Qur'anic revelation. There are no Islamic peoples who do not have a very elaborate poetic tradition. In Islam, as the various poetic traditions developed, the poems were often chanted and music played to the accompaniment of poetry. Some of the greatest poets in the Islamic world have also been master musicians, thus creating a poetry which is highly musical. Hafiz is the greatest musical poet of the Persian language—and, therefore, the most difficult of poets to translate. The *Diwān* of Hafiz is both a *Diwān* of poetry and a book of music. If one reads Hafiz correctly, one is truly performing music, not only reading poetry. Let me conclude, then, with one of his poems which both speaks about music and is itself extremely musical.

O cup-bearer, brighten our goblets with the light of wine!
 O minstrel, tell how the world has succumbed to our desires!
 We have seen in the cup the reflection of the face of the Friend,
 O you who know nothing of the joy of our eternal wine-drinking!
 He whose heart has been made living by love never dies:
 Our permanence is recorded within the pages of the cosmic text.⁸

⁷ The idea of silent music is associated with Plato although not explicitly mentioned by him. The idea is, however, fully implied in the *Republic*, Book VII, 531, as well as in some of his other writings.

⁸ Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, 173–74.

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