

Music in the Islamic world

The Islamic Spectrum symposium

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(PLAY 1 Hane + Teslim of HICAZ SAZSEMAISI on Oud)

Good afternoon, that was a section of a piece of Turkish Classical music, it's a piece known as a semai, one of the main Arab and Turkish classical forms. It was composed by Udi Refik Tal'at Alpman in the makam Hicaz, part of a vast repertoire of music that can be heard around the Turkish and Arab world. This instrument is the Oud, which exists in both an Arabic and a Turkish incarnation, this being the Turkish variety. It is the pre-eminent instrument of the Middle East, and one of the most widely-played in the world. It is the ancestor of all wooden-topped plucked stringed instruments, including the guitar.

Although Islam has spread much further than the Middle East region where it originated, and as we know, our neighbour Indonesia now has the largest population of Muslims in the world, it is still "Arabic", or "Middle Eastern" that most people connect with the term "Islamic".

Although there are some problems with discussing Islamic music (which I will touch on very shortly), in this presentation, I plan to give an extremely brief tour to some of the far reaches of Islamic civilisation. As with the extract of Oud music that I started with today, time constraints are such that, to enable me to play as much different music as possible, the excerpts are heavily edited.

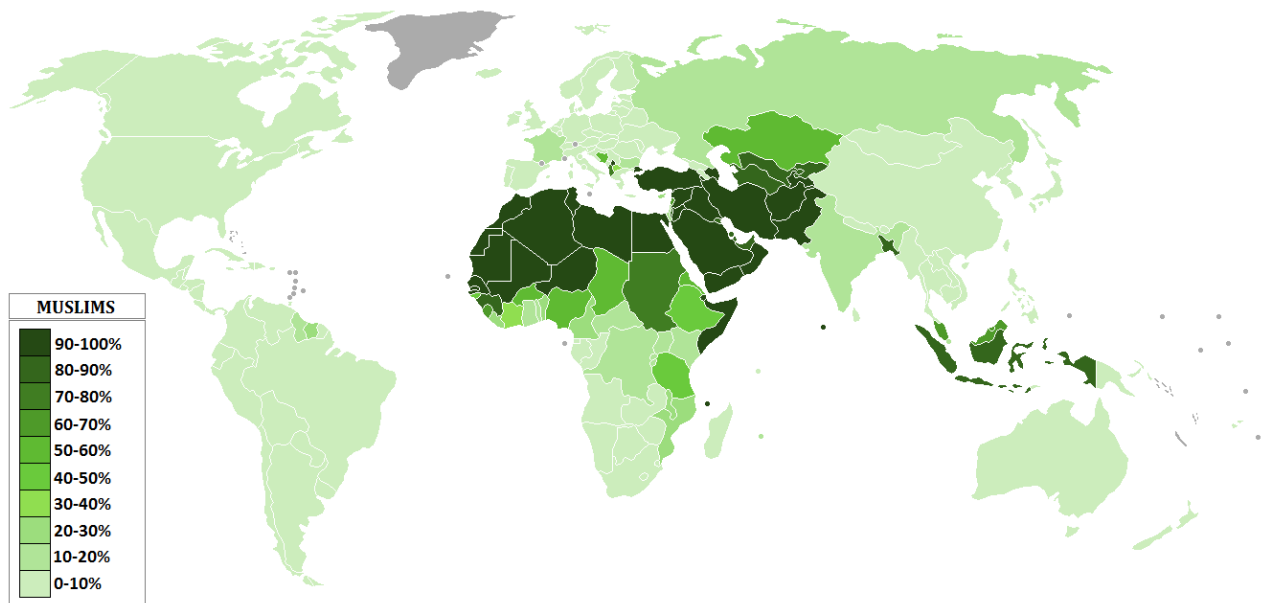
With any luck, this will whet your appetites to explore further the delights of this repertoire. To get an idea of the extent of the Islamic World, and at the risk of going over ground that might have been treated in earlier sessions today, I thought a map might be useful here.



This map shows the areas of greatest concentration of Muslim people, with dark green representing Shia followers, and light green showing Sunnis.

Clearly, we are not talking simply of the Middle East here, and we could reasonably expect that the music would vary across the globe from Africa to Pakistan to Indonesia.

Seen another way, here is the Muslim world,



as expressed by the percentage of Muslims of different countries, where – the darker the green, the higher the percentage.

This is all very well and good, but perhaps we should deal with the issue of whether music itself is permissible in Islamic culture?

There is no explicit mention of music in Islam’s holy book: the Qu’ran.

However, in the Hadith (the collection of traditions and sayings attributed to the Prophet Mohammed), there are some passages which approve of and celebrate music, and others which denounce music. In some cases, a single passage can be interpreted in both, opposite ways.

Here’s a passage from the Hadith of Bukhari

“From among my followers there will be some people who will consider illegal sexual intercourse, the wearing of silk (clothes), the drinking of alcoholic drinks and the use of musical instruments, as lawful.”

Clearly, the implication here is that these activities should be viewed as unlawful.

For those who wish to use this quotation as evidence against music’s acceptability, the statement can be taken on face value – the use of musical instruments is part of a list of activities that should be considered unlawful.

Surprisingly though however, this passage is also used to support the contrary position. The inclusion of the word “AND” in the phrase “drinking of alcoholic drinks AND the use of musical instruments” is taken to mean: music when used in combination with alcohol or licentious activities is unlawful.

Elsewhere, there is a story of the prophet Mohammed rebuking someone for not providing a bride with music, as the bride comes from a people that is sensitive to poetry and she would have therefore been pleased to hear singing.

Although there is no mention of music in the Qu'ran, there are some passages of it which get analysed in determining the permissibility of music.

There are at least three sections which discuss *"frivolous talk"*, *"befooling with your voice"*, and *"wasting your lifetime in pastime and amusements"*, all of these sections are given as evidence of music's unsuitability.

Here is verse 31 from the book Luqman from the Qu'ran

"Some there are who would indulge in frivolous talk, so that they may without knowledge lead men away from the path of God and hold it up to ridicule. For these there shall be shameful punishment."

This passage is used by some scholars, with music associated with the concept of frivolous talk, to validate music's prohibition.

One of the extraordinarily rich traditions in Islamic life is the highly ornamented, recitation of Qu'ranic and other religious texts.

Probably the most well-known example of this is the "call to prayer" that can be heard in many parts of the world where Muslims live.

To a Christian or Jew, this would be singing, and therefore music, but it is not music in the minds of many Islamic scholars.

There are tight rules governing the execution of the recitation, and it is crucial that these rules are adhered to, to prevent the recitation crossing a boundary into "music".

It is not a boundary that a Western musician would recognise, particularly in an age where all manner of sounds are being seen as fair game for inclusion in "Western Art Music" compositions.

Given that Qu'ranic and other religious recitation is not deemed to be music, and that music is not, in general, supported by religious thinkers, it should be no surprise to realise that the body of religious music in Islam is significantly smaller than that of Christianity.

The major exception to this is the Sufi tradition, where music plays a significant part in the ritual, particularly the whirling dervish ceremonies.

What is remarkably rich, varied and endlessly fascinating, is the multitude of different non-religious musical styles that have developed around the Islamic World.

In this sense then, the notion of "Islamic Music" is vastly different to what one might mean were they to refer to "Christian Music"

After all things have been considered by the different groups of theological thought; opinions and positions vary from

- a) Music is forbidden in any context, no instruments of any sort are permissible, no singing (with strict rules as to how recitation of the Q'uran is permissible)
- b) the daff, (or def, or duff) is the only acceptable instrument
- c) instruments are acceptable, singing is permitted as long as the music doesn't excite or entice the listener

- d) singing and instruments are OK, as long as they're not combined with such things as alcohol and nakedness

So, what is this duff instrument, you may ask? Well I just happen to have brought one here today. This is a drum that I bought in Tehran some years ago.

It's essentially a frame-drum and comes in a variety of guises & sizes...

[>] (*PLAY INSTRUMENT*)

Even within those who permit the duff to be played, there is controversy: are you allowed to have these jangly bits rattling around behind the skin, or are they excessively decadent? This particular duff has jingles, as you can no doubt hear.

[>] (*pictures of duff with and without jingles*)

So, enough talking of the technicalities of Islamic music classification, let's listen to some recordings of Islamic music from some different parts of the world.

Turkey: Call to prayer - Adhan

As I mentioned earlier, the chanting of the Qu'ran is central to Islamic life.

Among the other titles that can be bestowed on a Muslim, like Hajji: meaning one who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, is the term Hafiz, which means the bearer has memorised the entire Qu'ran.

Apart from the Qu'ran, two other works are recited throughout the Islamic world; the tekbir, and the call to prayer or "Adhan", which is heard at five particular times during the day.

Recitation styles vary from country to country and from individual to individual but here, we listen to the first part of a call to prayer, as performed by a Turkish reciter, Hafiz Hüseyin Erek.

[>] (*play music*)

"Allah is the greatest,
I bear witness that there is no God except Allah,
I bear witness that Mohammed is Allah's envoy,
Come to ritual worship,
Come to happiness,
Allah is the greatest,
There is no God except Allah."

Turkey – Three instrumental improvisations (taksim)

The art of instrumental improvisation, or taksim, following the rules of the makam is a key feature of Arabic, Turkish and Persian musics.

One explanation of the notion of makam is this: If you have a continuum with a (musical) scale at one end of the line, and a fully fledged melody at the other, a makam is somewhere in the middle.

A scale is a collection of notes, a makam is more than that, some notes have different degrees of importance, you stress this note, you move from this note to that note...

Here we have short extracts from three different instruments performing taksims.

The three extracts here are taken out of context, each one is considerably longer than we will hear, and is a self-contained entity.

The three instruments that we will hear are:

- the ney (an end-blown flute),
- the kemanche (a small fiddle),
- and the tanbur (a fretted lute that is either plucked, as in this case, or bowed).

You will notice that the sound quality of the tanbur recording is not in the same league as the others. It is a historic recording of the great Turkish composer Tanburi Cemil Bey, from around 1910. Often instrumental suites or concert programs intersperse composed works with taksims, or use taksims as introductions to pieces.

The improvisation follows the melodic framework and other guidelines that the makam imposes on it, modulating, where appropriate to other related makams, and returning to the original makam to conclude.

[>] (*play music*)

South Sinai Egypt – Ba’ad al- ‘Asaha

Perhaps the oldest part of the Arab world folk repertory is the music of the Bedouins. This ballad, the title of which means “After dinner” is a courtship song.

You hear, in this performance, a chorus of men with a soloist, and one melodic instrument the “simsimiyya” which is a 5-stringed lyre plucked with a plectrum. It was once made from wood, but now, like the drums that also accompany the song, uses such materials as oil-cans for its structure.

[>] (*play music*)

A young man meets a girl who arouses his desire. She says, “Go young man, before my parents hear my anklet bracelets striking against each other.”

Tunisia: Mawal I

Bagpipes are found in dozens of forms in different parts of the world, with the Scottish Highland pipes being but one small example of the great diversity.

In the Scottish case, there is a blow pipe (fairly universally required in a bagpipe, it’s what fills the bag up with air), a chanter (which plays the melody) and three drones.

In other parts of the world there may be one drone and one chanter.

Tunisia has two very similar instruments which utilise a double chanter and no drone, it comes in versions “with” and “without” bags.

The version of the instrument we will hear in this recording, doesn’t have a bag, so of course, isn’t a bagpipe, but as you can see in these photos, the instruments are strikingly similar, and sound identical. The only difference in sound being, that the bagpipe can produce sound indefinitely, whereas without a bag to provide continuous air, the unbagged one requires stops from time to time to allow the performer to breathe.

On this recording, there is a singer, a mizmar player, and a percussionist who plays the drum that we see here in three different guises.

Known widely as a darabukka, it is also called tabla in Egypt (although it's unrelated to the tabla of India) and in Greece is known as the doumbeleki.

This piece, from Tunisia, is a mawal, which is a vocal improvisation, not unlike the series of taksims we heard previously.

[>] (*play music*)

Pakistan – Raga Bairagi Bhairva

In the music of Pakistan, you can hear much in common with the music of North India. Both are based on the raga system, which in turn is connected to the makam system of Arab, Persian and Turkish music theory.

Many of the names of instruments in India and Pakistan come from related or at least vaguely similar instruments from Persia. In some cases, the name is now more widely known as connected to the Pakistani/North Indian instrument, for example the tabla.

You can see that the tabla from the sub-continent has two drums which are pitched differently and are tuneable with the ropes that lace between the bottom and the top of the instrument.

The other instrument here is the Sarangi, a complex bowed instrument with sympathetically resonating strings which are activated in response to other sounds produced by the instrument.

[>] (*play music*)

Indonesia - Aceh: Ratép Meuseukat

Remarkably, in the performance practice of the Indonesian province of Aceh, male and female performers combine in the following piece.

You hear a female soloist and a group of 40 teenage girls who use body percussion to augment their singing by beating the floor with their hands, slapping their bodies, and clapping their hands.

In the second section here, a group of male musicians enter playing percussion and the double-reed wind instrument the shawn, closely related to the Tunisian hornpipe we heard earlier.

[>] (*play music*)

“Oh the baby is being swung to sleep in a hammock.
Oh baby, oh.
Oh dear, oh dear.
Let us shake the baby's hammock”

Indonesia – West Sumatra:

Dendang Manangkok/ Marindu Harimau

The Minangkabau or Minang or Padang people of the highlands of West Sumatra live by a combination of Sunni Muslim and pre-Muslim beliefs.

Next we will hear two extracts from a long sequence of tiger capturing songs.

The Minang people venerated the tigers that they shared the forests with, treating them as Kings and Queens of the forest.

However, tigers were a problem in some areas, and they have been known to wipe out entire villages. The traditional way to remove a tiger was for two shamans to sit in the forest and sing songs to respectfully entice the tiger to enter a cage which had been set.

The sequence starts with the standard Muslim greeting “Assalaam mualaikum”, then goes on to praise Allah, Lord of the Universe, the compassionate, the merciful.

The shaman then goes on in Minangkabau with occasional Arabic phrases thrown in, explaining how the tiger killed a young girl, and how the tiger has sinned against Allah, the Prophet, the angels, and the child’s family.

[>] (*play music*)

After this section concludes one of the shamans sings a slow, soft lullaby whilst the other shaman plays a long end-blown flute.

[>] (*play music*)

“Sway, sway, Oh tiger sway,
While climbing the mountain,
Oh tiger, you are great,
Mind how much land has been given to you, tiger.”

I’d like to finish this afternoon with a little story.

As with many things involving humankind, people like to defend their position or sporting team or country or religion by criticising another person’s.

Jean During, quoted in Amnon Shiloah’s book “Music in the world of Islam”, reports a discussion about music between a great contemporary Persian poet and some Westerners.

Extolling the extraordinary richness of Western art music, the Occidentals (Westerners) compared it to an ocean in relation to which Persian music is only a miserable drop. On hearing this the poet said:

“Your music is indeed an ocean and ours in comparison is only a drop. But that ocean is only water while this drop, it is a tear.”

Thank-you.

References:

- *The Mood of the 'Ud* – The LA Mayer Museum for Islamic Art
- *Maqam: Music of the Islamic World* – The Alternative Museum
- *Music in the world of Islam* – Amnon Shiloah
- *The Music of Islam* – Celestial Harmonies – 17 CD set