

Music in Islam

Is listening to music unlawful?



Islamic jurists have debated this issue for centuries, although it is not clear how the question arose as there is no direct censure against music in the Quran. There are just as many arguments in support of as there are against the listening of music being unlawful in Islam.

Some jurists explain that singing is “unlawful” because it employs poetry, and they point to the Prophet condemning poets in Sura 31:5-6, where it says:

“There is one who purchases a ludicrous story, that he may seduce men from the way of Allah, without knowledge, and may laugh the same to scorn: these shall suffer a shameful punishment.”

The jurists argue that the “ludicrous story” meant singing. Another possible argument against the listening of music is Sura 26:224-6 which says:

“And the poets do those follow who go astray. Dost thou not see that they wander distraught in every vale?”

H.G. Farmer argues that “this was probably not directed against poetry as such, but simply against the poet who in the eyes of the Prophet was the incarnation of pagan idols, and who, was pouring out satires and invective against him.” (Farmer, p 23).

However, since objectors to listening to music could not find any real basis to discredit music listening, they turned to *Hadith*, which was considered the second authority to the Quran.

Farmer narrates that A'isha, the wife of the Prophet, has handed down a tradition that the Prophet once said, "Verily, Allah had made the singing girl (*qaina*) unlawful, and the selling of her and her price and teaching her." (p 24).

Farmer describes the following *Hadiths* in favour of listening to music:

"There are two attributed to the Muhammad saying "Allah has not sent a Prophet except with a Beautiful Voice," and "Allah listens more intently to a man with a Beautiful Voice reading the Qur'an than does a master of a singing-girl to her singing. Anas ibn Malik (d. 715) claimed that Muhammad "used to make him sing the *huda* (caravan song) when travelling, and that Anjusha used to sing it for the women and Al-Bara ibn Malik (the brother of Anas) for the men. Al-Ghazzali claims that the *huda* are poems equipped with agreeable sounds (*sawat tayyiba*) and measured melodies (*alhan mauzuna*)." (Farmer, p 25)

When the Prophet, who heard the voice of the singing girl and was asked if it were sinful to sing, the Prophet replied "Certainly not." (Farmer, p 26)

Scholars agree that the Prophet tolerated musical instruments, and that his own marriage as well as that of his daughter, were celebrated with music. Historians suggest that the Prophet had to restrict the poetry of Pagan Arabia and this was interpreted by some as the forbiddance of poetry. Many of the traditions were deeply embedded in the society at that time and the Prophet had to adapt to the social resistance and accept Pagan customs under new sanctions (Farmer, p 34).

Pagan Arabia had a custom of music during their festivals of feast, and this, too, says Farmer, "found a place in the public festivals connected with Islam, such as exists today in the '*id al-adha*, the *id al-fitr*, the *yaum ashura*, and the various *mawalid*.'" (Farmer, p 35). Music was allowed during various celebrations such as births, weddings, and others. The love-song, which had a strong tradition in pre-Islamic Arabia, was allowed.

Soon after the spread of Islam, cities of Mecca and Medina, "which were concentrations of political and religious power under the Orthodox caliphs, developed into important centres of

rich musical life. Among the thousands of slaves who had been sent to Arabia were many qualified artists and talented musicians, who had brought their craft with them. Patronized and generously rewarded by the elite, the best singers and instrumentalists could thus demonstrate their finest achievements.” (Shiloah. p 11).

Many sources acknowledge that the founders of the four legal schools, the Hanafi, the Maliki, the Shafi'i, and the Hanbali, did not like listening to music, for a variety of reasons, and decided against its legality, although many treatises have been written to prove the opposite.

Although there is no censure in the Quran, there is evidence supporting both views, and there are no conclusions whether or not listening to music is unlawful in Islam.

2. Development of Music

In pre-Islamic times, the oral recitation of poetry was the mark of artistic achievement. At the time, the common form of poetry was the *qasida* – a long monorhyme (aa, ba, ca) in praise of someone although it was also used for preaching morals as well as to praise God and honour the Prophet and his family.



A Greek lyre

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Bedouin culture was transmitted orally. The few pictorial art provide a glimpse into the music styles and includes scenes of dancers accompanied by lyres, drums, and double reed instruments. The high status enjoyed by musicians at that time brought about the increased importance of musical activity, which consequently started to develop its own means of expression. The earlier melodious recitation and chanting gradually evolved into more refined and sophisticated musical features. An important aspect was the growing awareness of the potential expressiveness of the human voice. The voice was considered a reflection of the human soul's mysteries and feelings.

One of the earliest complete and extant works on music is the *Book of Diversion and Musical Instruments* by Abu'l-Qasim Ubayd Allah ibn Khurradadhbih (d.911) and *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems* by al-Mas'udi (d.956). Both sources record a story describing the emergence of the first musical tunes. The oldest and simplest type of melodic rhythm, the *huda*, broke the silence of the desert, enchanting the lonely traveler. Other simple genres emerged, such as songs performed during the watering of animals, and other daily chores. Among the more musically developed forms were the variety of communal songs and dances at family celebrations, pilgrimages to holy shrines, and social evenings.

For the first three centuries after the emergence of Islam, the Hijaz, and specifically Medina, was considered the musical centre with the most talented male and female singers throughout the Arabian empire. Yunis al-Katib (d.765), a Persian singer, wrote several books on the music of the city. Although none of his books have survived, they have been quoted by others. The singers from the Hijaz remained influential for several generations until the onset of the Abbasid era (750-1258).

3. The Art of Music in Islam

As Islam spread, the music of the community became entwined with the musical traditions of the conquered lands. The elite, who were enriched by the influx of wealth, sought amusement that was best expressed in music and song. The migrants brought their art and music with them, thereby influencing the cultures of the local peoples. As long as it did not contradict with Islamic teaching, the Arabs assimilated the new artistic forms creating unique styles. The musicians enjoyed high status as a result of increased importance given to musical activity by the wealthy rulers.

Numerous male and female singers composed their own music in Damascus and Medina during the time of the first four caliphs (632-661) and the time of the Umayyad dynasty (661-750). The prominent singers of Mecca and Medina established a school of singing that lasted for more than a century. (Touma, p 7). Many women had respectable careers as musicians and singers. Koskoff reports that in “Fatimid times, there seems to have been self-employed female singers, who lived in respectable districts, sang at private parties.” (p 72).

The bulk of the information on music and musicians of this period comes from the monumental work *Kitab al-aghani* (*Book of Songs*) by the historian and poet Abu'l-Faradj al-Isfahani (d. 967). The *Book of Songs* is one of the most celebrated works in Arabic literature. It contains a collection of poems from the pre-Islamic period to the ninth century, all of which had been set to music and includes biographical details about authors, composers, singers, and writers on music.



“The Poet with Musicians and Singers,” illustration from *Kitāb al-aghānī* (*Book of Songs*) by Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, 13th-century manuscript; in the National Library, Cairo.

Encyclopaedia Britannica

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/319518/Kitab-al-aghani>

4. The Healing Power of Music



The Ikhwan al-Safa (Brethren of Purity) was a brotherhood that flourished in Basra, in Iraq, in the second half of the tenth century. They wrote a vast encyclopedic work (*Rasa'il*) of fifty-two tracts dealing with sciences and philosophy. The section on music focuses on harmony, emphasizing the idea that music reflects the harmonious beauty of the universe. Similarly, said the Ikhwan, the proper use of music at the right time has a healing influence on the body. The Ikhwan devoted a special section to the making and tuning of instruments.

In his monumental work *Qanun fi'l-tibb* (*Canon of Medicine*), Ibn Sina (d. 1037) discusses a special relationship between music and medicine that recurs in Arabic and European texts even as late as the nineteenth century.

Al-Kindi (d.870), in his work *Book of Sounds Made by Instruments Having One to Ten Strings*, explains that instruments help create harmony between the soul and the universe; consequently, each society has instruments that reflect its nature, and each instrument is purported to express the specific beliefs and characteristics of the society to which it belongs.

Greek and Arabic literature refer to the healing of patients with music played on lyres and aulos (Shiloah p 51). In his encyclopedia, *Mitfah al-tibb* (*The Key to Medicine*), Ibn Hindu (d. 1019), acknowledges the healing qualities of music for some ailments so long as the services of professional musicians are employed. Ibn Sina (d. 1037) in his *Qanun fi'l-tibb* (*Canon of Medicine*), which was a standard medical textbook in Europe until the seventeenth century,

writes about the musical nature of the pulse and the special relationship between music and medicine.

Shiloah states that from “about the fifteenth century on, the theory of music therapy held a prominent place in literature about music.”(p 52).

5. Influence of Western Music

In pre-Islamic times, poetry was recited orally and was the mark of artistic achievement. In Muslim regions, the voice was considered a reflection of the human soul's mysteries and feelings. Instruments, then, were believed to have been created to enrich vocal music.

Colonialism and other political events greatly impacted intellectual and artistic spheres. Western music was introduced into Muslim regions by military bands, who were instructed to teach locals Western instruments and basics of Western music which began to gain prominence. Many youth studied composition and piano-playing with European musicians while others went abroad to study.



Sa'id Pasha, the Egypt ruler, granted Count Ferdinand Lesseps permission to build the Suez Canal. On November 17, 1869, the Sa'id presided over a celebration to open the Suez Canal. As part of the festivities he planned to inaugurate a new opera house in Cairo. The performance of Verdi's masterpiece *Aida* in Cairo on December 24, 1871 was the first opera ever performed in this region. Henceforth, performances of operas, ballet, and works by European composers, or compositions by local musicians educated in Europe, became part of the musical life in many of the major centres in the Muslim world.

There was a synthesis of local and Western styles. However, in the second half the nineteenth century, there was a shift from displays of individual skill and personal creativity to collective discipline due to the increased emphasis on composed music and the impression made by the great orchestras of the West. The introduction of new instruments and new techniques of playing altered the forms of interaction between a singer and the traditional instruments. The concept of a concert performed on stage by a large ensemble changed the intimate relationship between the musicians and the audience that had previously prevailed.

These new conditions, and the need to keep pace with technological progress, led to electronic means of amplification. In turn, the singer no longer relied solely on the power of the voice.

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