
Music in the World of Islam

A Socio-cultural study

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1 Pre-Islamic Music

The vast expanse of Arabia, within the boundaries of which the prophet Muḥammad founded Islam in 622, was not, as once thought, a country of rude barbarians living as nomadic or semi-nomadic warriors and rustics. It is true that the central and northern parts of the Arabian peninsula were largely desert, populated mainly by nomads and semi-nomads. In addition, however, there were settled villages and in the south and north there flourished an Arabian civilization of high achievement. There were also tribal market-places that displayed not only wares but works of the intellect as well. These were conceived in quite elevated fashion, reflecting inter-tribal social, cultural and behavioural codes, and the concepts they rested upon.

The Arabian peninsula was also far from isolated from the major civilizations around it; cuneiform inscriptions bear evidence of outside contacts as early as the Assyrian and Babylonian kingdoms. The earliest contacts were made primarily through caravans traversing overland trade routes, transporting commodities, the most important of which was frankincense. Indeed, the power and prestige of the flourishing southern kingdoms, also famous for their agriculture, rested on this trade. The Bedouin element throughout Arabia fulfilled an essential role in the traffic on the main routes from the Persian gulf to Syria and from Syria to Mesopotamia, Egypt and southern Arabia. Contact with the ancient Arabian civilization – cradle of many intellectual achievements, including music, musical theory and the development of musical instruments – grew closer and became more evident with the penetration of Christianity into the extreme south, the flourishing of Jewish communities and the establishment by the Byzantines and the Sassanians of vassal Arab kingdoms on the fringe of their respective empires.

The long and significant exposure in the pre-Islamic era to Babylonian, Egyptian, Greco-Roman and Indo-Persian civilizations undoubtedly left imprints, occasioning the interaction of musical ideas and sounds. However, as concerns music our insight is hampered at the outset – should we attempt to determine the exact nature of possible borrowings, influence or interac-

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tion – by the absence of actual musical documents. We have no tangible relics to facilitate investigation of the distant past. Nor, in our case, have we the relative advantage of the advanced Near Eastern civilizations in which the music's visible relics, in the words of C. Sachs, 'are dumb vision', that is to say they can be seen but cannot be heard (Sachs 99: 13). Arabian music does not provide us with iconographical musical scenes, or with instruments excavated from tombs. Except for some names and brief messages extant in graffiti on rocks, Bedouin culture was transmitted orally. Such pictorial art, limited though it was to rock drawings, nevertheless gives certain hints. Among the thousands of specimens in the style defined by specialists as style IV are three lyres engraved in rock near Najd Mussamma (present-day Saudi Arabia), dating from the third or second millennium BC. The engraving belongs to the last phase of style IV, which is the most widespread style to be found in all Middle East desert areas and includes many scenes of dancers accompanied by lyres, frame drums and, occasionally, double reed instruments associated with priests (Anati 123: 103–106). According to the specialists, this style also marks the earliest use of alphabets by Arabian groups in the peninsula. Also, at the advent of Islam, the lyre was among the instruments in use. It has survived through the ages and is still in vogue in coastal towns of the Red Sea area where it is played by fishermen in coffee houses (Shiloah 375). This example certainly illustrates Arabia's contacts with adjacent civilizations, but the state of our knowledge does not permit us to come to definitive conclusions as regards the nature and direction of these influences.

To this point, the bulk of our knowledge about music of the pre-Islamic age comes from later Islamic sources. Indeed, the earliest attempts to describe past musical events were made in the ninth century, when the Great Musical Tradition was at its height and had already gained wide acceptance among rulers and intellectuals. Much of the urbanized élite tended to consider pre-Islamic music as inferior and 'primitive'. To a large extent this view concurred with the Muslim hagiographic image of the pre-Islamic age in Arabia as backward and barbaric – *djābiliyya*. In a similar spirit, historians tended to denigrate the simple folkloric nature of Bedouin music. In addition, traditions associated with pre-Islamic music might have suffered a degree of impairment as a result of their long oral transmission. The paper industry began to spread only in the second half of the eighth century, thanks to Chinese paper-makers who were taken prisoner when their army was defeated at Samarkand in 751. Thereafter the basis of Arab culture was transformed: from an exclusively oral tradition it became a genuinely literary one. The inferiority of Bedouin music was best defined by the great thinker and sociologist ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406): 'The Arabs did not know anything except poetry, because at that time, they practised no science and knew no craft. The desert attitude was their dominant trait'. He evaluates

their songs as 'primary and simple types of tunes . . . that can be grasped by nature without any instruction'. While extolling the merits of classical poetry, ibn Khaldūn remarked that it was 'a small drop in the ocean of sound harmony' (Rosenthal 63: II, 401–402).

This having been the intrinsic quality of their music, Arab poetry served as a point of departure in the development of music before and after the advent of Islam.

The *djāhiliyya*

The Muslims call the period preceding the advent of Islam *djāhiliyya*, which means time of ignorance and backwardness. The same period, however, saw the flourishing of highly sophisticated poetry on the elevated level of discourse that marks the Golden Age of Arabism. It was the epitome of artistic achievement, the measure of Arab learning and the perfect expression of Arab wisdom. As this poetry was recited orally in public, the magic power of the spoken word bestowed the pleasure of sound and rhythm on its listeners. Some of its basic attributes continued to prevail long after the advent of the new faith.

The prevalent genre in this poetry – the *qaṣīda* – was based on a union of metre and rhyme, with the same rhythmical structure and rhymes repeated in each line (*bayt*) of the poem. The most distinctive unit in Arabic verse, the *bayt* was divided into two equal half-lines, or hemistiches. Every line consists of a certain number of feet. The metric system, which in essence is quantitative, is built on distinguishing clearly between the short and long syllables that comprise a word. Since Arabic philologists were not acquainted with the concept of syllable they adopted the distinction between quiescent and active components. For instance, the word *qad* represents a quiescent component which is equivalent to a long syllable, marked (–), and the word *laka* has two active components, equivalent to two short syllables, (marked üü). There are eight basic rhythmic feet which combine different patterns of quiescent and active 'syllables'; each foot is represented by a mnemonic word, derived from the root *f'l*. For example, the feet *fā'ilun* combine a sequence of quiescent–active–quiescent 'syllables' or long–short–long (–ü–). Al-Khalīl ibn Aḥmad (d. 791), a distinguished grammarian and musician who at a later period codified the metric system, assigned the graphic symbol *o* for an active or short 'syllable', and *o /* or *o* for a quiescent (or long one). In this manner the feet *fā'ilun* would be *o / o o /* or *o. o o*. Thus, each of the 16 classical quantitative metres established by Al-Khalīl and designated by proper names, allocates a fixed number of feet to each line in a poem. Let us take as an example the *tawīl*, one of the metres favoured by the old poets and first in the Arab hierarchy. In accor-

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dance with the mnemonic words it has the following pattern: *fa'ūlun mafā'ilun fa'ūlun mafā'ilun* repeated twice (marked either: oo.o. oo.o.o. oo.o. oo.o.o. or: ũ-- ũ--- ũ-- ũ---). As this pattern recurs throughout the poem, its lines become absolutely symmetrical (CHAL 32: 15-18).

The defined rhythmic organization characterizing Arab quantitative metre tends to inspire rhythmic musical organization. Incidentally, the metric system soon became the model used by many music theorists when expounding the fundamentals of rhythm, including recourse to the aforementioned mnemonic words and graphic system (CHAL 32: 450-58).

Among the known classes of poetry were:

1. The short piece, *qit'a*, consisting of seven or ten lines in *radjaz* metre whose basic feet -- ũ -- are repeated three times in each hemistich. Pieces in *radjaz* and shorter variants were used in tribal war songs and other folk songs.
2. The *qaṣīda*, considered the highest achievement of Arabic eloquence. It has from ten to 100 lines, its standard pattern consisting of three sections, each one leading into the next.

The sections are an amorous prelude; a transitional section of disengagement, and the body of the poem containing its theme: that is, panegyry, satire, love, lamentation, glorification of the tribe, and words of wisdom (CHAL 32: 38-104). The best pre-Islamic *qaṣīdas* were the *Mu'allaqāt* (suspended poems) that number either seven or ten lines. They were called 'suspended' as it was customary to hang outstanding examples of the genre in the Meccan shrine -- *Ka'ba*. These poems were chosen as the winners of poetry competitions held in the market place of 'Ukāz, near Mecca. The oldest was by the poet Imrū'l-Qays, a descendant of the ancient kings of Yemen; others were composed by the illustrious poets 'Amr ibn Kalthūm, 'Antara, Hārith ibn Hilliza, Labīd, Tarafa, Zuhayr, al-A'sha and Nābigha. Among the great bards were talented poetesses of whom al-Khansā' was the most celebrated; these gifted women excelled in elegiac art works, giving expression to grief in verse, song and dance (CHAL 32: 111-113).

According to the belief that prevailed among ancient Arabs, the poet (*shā'ir*, pl. *shu'arā'*), as the name implies, was thought to be endowed with supernatural knowledge and in rapport with spirits (*djinn*) from whom he received his magical powers; the *djinn* as an inspirational source re-emerged among some poets and musicians in Islamic times.

The magic of rhythm and word that epitomized classical poetry was enhanced by the chanting that underscored public recitations. This kind of recitation was given a special name: *inshād*, which originally meant raising the voice -- *nishda* -- from which is derived *inshād al-shi'r*, a protracted poetical recitation delivered in a loud voice. This meaning obviously gave rise to

nashīd, a term that at a later period designated various musical forms. Originally this term also referred to the raising of the voice; its extended musical connotation probably derived from the melodious reciting of poetry in public as practised in pre- and post-Islamic times. Whether sung or declaimed, poetry was a symbol, a bond of unity between settled and nomadic tribes. It reflected the inter-tribal code of behaviour based on concepts of honour, blood-feud, jealousy over womenfolk, hospitality and defence of the weak, including women.

Generally speaking, there were three types of poetry: spontaneous poems that included short improvised pieces for dances and joyous social occasions, war songs, and ceremonial poems extolling the fundamental values of Bedouin society. The latter type generated sophisticated forms of art poetry that combined tribal and amorous aspects. The main consumers of this refined form were the upper classes in the Arab kingdoms of Ghassān and al-Ḥīra as well as in Mecca and Medina.

Music

In describing pre-Islamic music, Muslim historians, who were concerned only with their own civilization and its immediate forerunners, usually referred to the simple folk songs heard in the Bedouin encampments. One of the earliest complete and still extant works on music is the *Kitāb al-lahw wa'l-malāhī* (Book of Diversion and Musical Instruments) by the geographer Abū'l-Qāsim 'Ubayd Allah ibn Khurradādhbih (d. 911). Part of the material in the book is presented as a dialogue between the Caliph al-Mu'tamid and ibn Khurradādhbih himself in *Murūdj al-dhahab wa ma'ādin al-djawābir* (Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems) by the famous historian and geographer al-Mas'ūdī, who died in 956. That the historian al-Mas'ūdī had recourse to ibn Khurradādhbih's work proves that the latter was long considered an important, authoritative source. Both sources record an anecdote describing the emergence of the first musical tunes. In the *Kitāb al-lahw* version it is said that Muḍar ibn Naẓar struck his servant's hands. The man cried out in pain: 'O my hands! my hands!' On hearing his sonorous voice, the camels were deeply moved. Al-Mas'ūdī's version reports that the same Muḍar fell from his camel and broke his hand. In his pain, Muḍar, who had a beautiful voice, cried out *yā yadāh* (O my hand!). Hearing this, the camels were impressed and invigorated. Both authors conclude that this was the origin of the first song genre, the *ḥudā'* (Shiloah 82: X, 112–16). Numerous texts repeat this story of the origin of the *ḥudā'* as well as the anecdote. As a caravan or camel song, the *ḥudā'* became identified with the *nawḥ* (lamentation or elegy). It is said that the *ghinā'* (lit. song) was derived from this rudimentary form of singing; in the Muslim era, *ghinā'* became the generic term for art music. We assume that in those early

days it was loosely used as a generic term covering a whole range of songs in which the melodic and rhythmic components play separate roles.

The oldest and simplest type, the *hudā'*, was said to break the infinite silence of the desert, enheartening the lonely traveller and his mount. The melody of this simple song had a narrative, nostalgic character, based on a repeated melodic phrase. Other simple genres, such as songs performed during the watering of animals, were of similar character. The song sung while the animals were brought to drink seems to emphasize the importance of water in a dry area, and may have some kinship with the biblical 'Spring up, O well' (Numbers, XXI, 17), thought to be one of the oldest songs known, and most typical of ancient Israel's nomadic era.

Among the more musically developed forms were the variety of communal songs and dances that enhanced family celebrations, pilgrimages to holy shrines and to tombs of saints, as well as social evenings. On occasions that took place in the camps, male and female poet-musicians, each in his or her own group and in a pronounced nasal timbre, intoned tunes in light verses improvised on the spot. Perhaps because of their social function, those songs use many responsorial forms, the audience participating to a marked degree, singing, dancing, clapping hands and drumming. The number of 'new' melodies when compared with the frequent addition of 'new' texts was very limited. In a given genre one tune can be used for several texts.

Most of the enigmatic terms reported by later authors such as *naṣb*, *sanad-thaqīl*, *sanad-khafīf*, and *abzādī* were probably related to the types mentioned above (Wright 132: 435–437).

The Lakhmides and Ghassānides: advent of a sophisticated musical style

In his concluding statement about the development of pre-Islamic music, al-Mas'ūdī writes:

From the *ghinā'* Quraish (the tribe to which Muhammad and the keeper of the Ka'ba shrine in Mecca belonged) knew only the *naṣb* (a simple song genre), until Nadar-ibn al-Hārith went to the [Lakhmides kingdom] al-Hīra where he learned to play the *'ūd* (lute) and how to use it in accompanying art songs. Then he returned to Mecca and taught its people who consequently started to employ the *qaynāt* singers – *qayna* (a class of singing-girls) – to perform this new style'.

The *qayna*, who played an important role in the promotion of light music, were often extolled by poets and depicted as accompanying themselves on a lute called variously *mizhar*, *kirān* and *muwattar*.

The tradition related by al-Mas'ūdī touches on a crucial issue – it implies contacts between inhabitants of Arabia and the two major powers of Western Asia: the Iranian dynasty of Sassanians founded by Ardashir I in 224 AD, extending from Syria well into Central Asia, and the Christian

Byzantine empire, via the vassal Arab kingdoms, the Lakhmides and the Ghassānides.

The Lakhmides

In the third century the North Arabian Lakhmid dynasty, which had its centre in the city of al-Hīra, developed as an Iranian vassal state; its role was to help the Sassanians in their struggle with the Byzantine empire. The Lakhmids reached the acme of their power under King al-Mundhir III (503–554) and, like their protectors, were patrons of art and fostered Arabic poetry. Under al-Mundhir's successor 'Amr ibn-Hind (554–569), al-Hīra became an important literary centre. Most of the famous poets of the time visited his court.

The Ghassānids

The Ghassānids, located in areas that are now part of Syria, Jordan and Israel, were the allies of Byzantium, serving as a buffer protecting the spice-trade route against Bedouin desert marauders. One of their kings, the Christian al-Hārith ibn Djabala (reigned 529–569), was instrumental in reviving the Syrian Monophysite church which taught – or was accused of teaching – that the Person of Jesus Christ embodied only one nature rather than two (divine and human). The Ghasānids, too, patronized Arab poets. One of them, Ḥassān ibn Thābit (563–683), who in his youth visited the court of the monarch Djabala ibn al-Ainam, has left us an interesting account reported by the tenth-century author al-İṣfahānī in his *Kitāb al-aghāni* (Book of Songs). Ibn Thābit claims to have seen and heard ten singing-girls, five of them Byzantines, who performed songs of their country to the accompaniment of the *barbaṭ* (lute), and five from al-Hīra who sang their native songs. Arab singers used to come from Mecca and elsewhere to amuse the monarch.

Thus we see that in the courts of both kingdoms poets, musicians and poet-musicians such as the bard al-A'sha, known as *al-ṣannādj* (the 'harpist') brought the message of classical poetry to the Lakhmids and Ghassānids; with them pre-Islamic culture attained its highest development. From these centres, lyrical encomia in tribute to the fascinating charm and artistry of songstresses heard at court and in taverns were brought back to Mecca, Medina and the market-places.

The Sassanians

Music in al-Hīra flourished under the direct impact of the highly refined and strictly organized art music of the Sassanians. We have fairly rich informa-

tion about the music in their Zoroastrian state church. Indeed, the earliest native Persian sources relating to music, musical life, instruments and names of celebrated musicians of this period have survived; significant echoes of this literature resounded in later Arabic works. The emerging picture indicates that music and musicians enjoyed an exalted status at the imperial court. The founder of the dynasty, Ardashir I, is reputed to have established an administrative system under which the king's entourage comprised seven bodies of officials, one of which included musicians. Thus it is altogether clear that the musicians in the Sassanian court occupied an elevated status in the king's retinue and were represented in the three hierarchic classes of courtiers. The important personage in charge of the curtain that separated the king from his ministers was also responsible for determining when and what to sing. To a large extent, this same hierarchical system would later be adopted by the 'Abbāsid caliphs in their courts. Such high rank conferred upon musicians found interesting expression in the credo of the communist-like Mazdakite movement. Named after Mazdak (489–531), it gained widespread popularity among the lower classes. Believing in the dualistic Zoroastrian religion (the struggle between the forces of good and evil for control of the world), the movement considered music to be one of the four spiritual powers surrounding the God of light, a hierarchy reflected on earth in the dominion of the king.

Among the known musicians referred to in the Sassanian source, the most famous was Barbad, court musician to King Khusrow Parwiz (reigned 590–628). He became legendary for his exceptional creativeness and fabulous virtuosity. He is credited with the invention of the seven *khosrovania* (systems or modes attributed to Khusrow the king) as well as the 30 characteristic melodies and 360 short compositions corresponding to the days of the week, month and year respectively. This important modal theory that goes back to the seventh century, as well as anecdotes extolling Barbad's achievements, were often cited in later Arabic writings, where he was sometimes referred to as Barbad and sometimes as Fihlīz. The author of *Kitāb al-aghānī*, for instance, relates an anecdote praising the rare virtuosity of Fihlīz which enabled the celebrated musician to play a lute that had gone badly out of tune while he was away (Barkechli 101).

As was the case in earlier Iranian periods, the Sassanians cultivated dance as a form of art. Iranian dancers, who had long been in great demand in India and China, maintained their reputation under Islam, despite the radical change in attitude toward all forms of dance; the treatise on art dance included in *Murūdj al-dhahab* by the famous Arab historian al-Mas'ūdī who died in 956, (Shiloah 356) is entirely founded on the dance tradition of the Sassanians (see Chapter 11). Another testimony refers to the Umayyad Caliph al-Walīd who wrote to the governor of Khorasan (Persia) asking him to send a group of female dancers to Damascus.

During this period instruments and instrumental music attained great perfection. Depictions of harps, lutes, shawms, trumpets and drums appear on rocks, in wood-carvings, ceramics, and iconographical sources.