Introduction

In his marvelous book of reflections, *Ṣayd al-Khāṭir*, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1200) makes an interesting observation about the singing of two laborers he once saw. They were alternately singing as they carried a heavy tree trunk. One of them would sing, and the other would listen attentively and then either repeat it or respond in song. Ibn al-Jawzī marvels at the wonderful power of singing to make their task lighter:

> I thought about the reason for this. I realized that each one of them was focused on what the other was singing, taking delight in it, and thinking of the response, so he kept on moving while forgetting the heavy load he was carrying.[1]

He then notes that all of us have to carry a load of difficulties in our lives. We need to keep our *nafs* (self) patient when deprived of things it loves or when facing things it hates. "So I realized that the best way of traversing the path of patience is through diversion."[2] As an example he mentions the Sufi master who was traveling on foot with a disciple while they were thirsty and he kept assuring that they would drink at the next well. Taking our mind off the immediate difficulties can take many forms, and it is obvious that what the laborers did in singing was make a productive use of this distraction.

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1. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Ṣayd al-Khāṭir*, فصل: تعليل النفس [Section: Keeping the *nafs* occupied], 78.
2. Ibid.

Yet the same Ibn al-Jawzī is quick to censure singing in his *Talbīs Iblīs* (Devil's Deception):

> You should know that listening to singing entails two things. First, it distracts the heart from pondering the greatness of Allāh, praised is He, and engaging in His services. Second, it inclines the heart to the seeking of quick pleasures that seek their fulfillment in all the sensory desires.[3]

He then goes on to affirm, as many did before him, that singing *is* the charm for fornication and adultery.

The apparent contradiction between the two statements may be useful in understanding the nature of the controversy about music in the Islāmic discourse. Let us make the ridiculously simplistic assumption that these two passages were all that was available in the Islāmic source texts regarding music. We can then visualize the arguments of the various groups in this debate through this microcosm. Those supporting music would use the first passage and argue that music was the essential tool for lightening the burdens of life and traversing the path of patience. They would also argue that Ibn al-Jawzī himself listened to singing (because he listened to the laborers). Their opponents would, of course, use the second passage to show it was impermissible. And the Orientalists would use both passages to "prove" that Islāmic teachings on the subject were nebulous and self-contradictory and for that reason the music controversy in Islām could never be resolved.

In reality there is no conflict between the two statements because they are talking about two different things. The first is talking about the permissible work song; the other about the impermissible singing for vain entertainment. The first aims at making us forget hardships in a job that we must perform; the second makes us forget the job itself. It is our inability or unwillingness to differentiate between the two categories that makes the issue intractable.

James Robson, for example, begins his book *Tracts on Listening to Music* with this assertion: "The question of the lawfulness of

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3. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs*, ذكر تلبيس إبليس على الصوفية في السماع والرقص والوجد [On Iblīs' confounding of the Sufis in regard to *samāʿ*, dance, and ecstasy]*, 195.

Part 2 thus presents the discussion among scholars of all persuasions in sufficient detail. Then, in part 3 we take stock of our current situation. Chapter 11 deals with some snapshots from the current music scene in the Muslim world. The arguments examined here are not rooted in the historic scholarly discussion on the subject despite the frequent reference of their proponents to it. That is why they are placed here and not in part 2. Three issues are discussed. On the theoretical side there was American musicologist Lois al-Faruqi who tried to "Islāmize" most music in the Muslim societies and claimed that it was informed by the Qur'ānic recitation. On a practical level there are the *nashīd* concerts aimed at using "good music" to fight bad music to save our youth. We examine these here. The last issue discussed here is *talḥīn* or singing in Qur'ānic recitation, an old problem with a new momentum generated by our widespread ambivalence about music.

Finally, if the realization of our current situation ignites some concern, then chapter 12 may provide advice and reflections to positively channel the energy so released.

A discussion of the Islāmic view of nashīds in the light of contemporary fatāwā is given in appendix 1. A detailed look at books about Islam's view of music written since the third century of hijrah is provided in appendix 2. Appendix 3 includes biographical notes regarding the lives of more than one hundred and twenty prominent people mentioned in this book. A glossary has also been provided in the end.

Of necessity this book contains a lot of references to Arabic works. The standards for doing so are still evolving and there is no scheme that is completely satisfactory. In this regard I have adopted a new style for listing the section or chapter headings. In classical books section headings often contain significant useful information. I have provided these headings in Arabic while giving an English translation in parenthesis. Arabic is much easier to read for those who know it, while a translation will help others gain insights about the author's purpose. A transliteration here would not be desirable as it would be unfathomable for those who do not understand Arabic, and less than satisfactory for those who do.

CHAPTER 1

Islām and Poetry

GHINĀʾ MEANS SINGING, AND TO SING YOU NEED
something that can be sung. Quite naturally, poetry precedes
singing. In case this simple point is not obvious to someone—
like the devoted followers of Sigmund Freud—we may refer to
sociologist Georg Simmel who says: "The source of vocal music is
the spoken word, which is exaggerated by emotion in the direction
of rhythm and modulation."[1] He argues that vocal music arises
when plain language is felt inadequate to express powerful emotions
like anger, joy, or mystical religious feelings.

Thus, we begin our inquiry into singing with an inquiry into
poetry.

Power of the Poet

It is generally known that poetry was the highest achievement and
the pride of Arab society. Poets enjoyed roughly the same kind of
power that is displayed today by the mass media. And nearly the
same concern for truth and justice. An Arabic saying captured it

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1. Georg Simmel (1882), "Psychological and Ethnological Studies on
Music," in *Georg Simmel: The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays,*
trans. by K. Etzkorn (Columbia University Press: New York, 1968), 100.
Quoted in Etzkorn, *Music and Society*, 12.

Music Before and After Islām

SINGING HAS ALWAYS BEEN PART OF HUMAN SOCIETIES. People sing for different reasons and in different ways, with or without instruments to enhance their singing. Some of these are legitimate and others are not. By looking at the many uses of music in the pre-Islāmic world and Islām's attitude about them we can gain a good understanding of Islām's outlook on music and singing. History is not a substitute for a discussion of jurisprudence, but it is a helpful first step.

Ḥudā' and Rajaz

In Arabia it all started with the song of the cameleer, the *ḥudā'*. A good voice was said to enchant the camels and its rhythm was said to pace the camels' steps. A ḥudā' singer could thus speed up the camels through his singing. According to a ḥadīth the impact of sound on camels was discovered accidentally by Muḍar ibn Nizār, the father of the Quraysh. One day he hit the hands of one of his slaves with a stick because the latter had failed to control a camel he was taking care of and the camel had separated from the group. The slave started crying in pain "ya yadāh ya yadāh" (Oh my hands, oh my hands). Surprisingly, the camels were attracted by the cry. Muḍar then said, we could derive some song like this

company of his musician and boon companion Ṣafī al-Dīn al-Urmawī (d. 694/1295), when Helugu's armies were knocking at the doors of Baghdād. Incidentally Helugu must have appreciated the musician's role in the success of his campaign; while al-Mustaʿṣim was brutally murdered and the entire city devastated, al-Urmawī was honored by the Mongol invader.

This lesson of history was beautifully captured in the famous Urdu verse by poet Iqbal (d. 1357/1938):

> Come, let me tell you the fate of nations.
> Swords and shields in the beginning; flutes and strings in the end.

The Music Debate in History

There are two distinct currents in the history of music in the Muslim world. First, there was ghinā', the sensuous music for fun and entertainment sponsored by kings. While poetry was the Arabs' own product, this music was imported, first from Persia and Byzantium, then from Greece. The kings patronized not only singers and songstresses, but also music theoreticians like Yaʿqūb ibn Isḥāq al-Kindī (d. 256/870), and Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī (d. 339/950). After the fall of Baghdād, "the golden era of music" came to an end. To be sure various kings and sulṭāns, in Turkey, India, Irān, and central Asia, did sponsor court musicians from time to time, but neither the intensity nor the impact of their engagement was at the levels of the ʿAbbāsī courts. Needless to say, whatever transpired in the courts of the later Umawīs, the ʿAbbāsīs, or the Mughals in terms of singing girls or use of musical instruments had nothing to do with Islām.

However around that time "the golden era of Sufism" was starting. The major Sufi orders—Qādiriyyah, Chishtiyyah, Suhrawardiyyah, and Naqshbandiyyah—took form in that period. These were associated with Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 561/1166), Khawājah Muʿīn al-Dīn Chishtī Ajmeri (d. 633/1236),

an impression of an unbridgeable chasm between the two groups. But this was essentially a defense of samāʿ within stringent limits. While extrapolating from the permissible singing they did caution about the dangers of the slippery stone. Further, even this defense belongs to an intermediate period in the history of Sufism. As we shall see in chapter 8, this was abandoned by the latter Sufis as they saw problems even with a cautionary approach.

In appendix 2 we look at the books written to condemn music followed by those justifying samāʿ. These books were written by well-known authorities belonging to all schools of fiqh, in every Muslim land, all through the centuries. Together these books cover nearly the entire music debate in Muslim history. This timeline of books on music is an important part of Islāmic history and is very helpful in understanding the issue in its broader context. The common ground between all these books is the prohibition of most musical instruments, mixed gatherings, emulation of secular music, vain amusement and entertainment, and anything having any sensual dimensions. None of them praises the professional singer, whose expertise is in the censured ṭarab-producing ghināʾ. There is recognition, even by the supporters of samāʿ, of its potentially very destructive consequences—resulting in many restrictions and cautions. At the same time they agree on the permissibility of poetry (if the text is morally clean), poetic recitals, and instrument-free personal singing. It shows that what has been painted as a never ending controversy actually contains within it a huge consensus. A few such as Ibn Ḥazm and Ibn Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī stood outside the consensus. We look at their arguments in a separate chapter.

Musician in the Muslim Society

We will conclude this chapter by looking at the historic attitude of the Muslim society toward the musician. The term "artist" is of a recent vintage. It came during the colonial period from English and other European languages. The Muslim society's original term for the male professional singer was mukhannath.[37] It means an effeminate man. While some men were called mukhannath

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37. Al-Manbijī, *Risālah*, 26.

Islām versus Christianity on Music

We now turn to the claim made by Farmer: "Islam never really eradicated the pagan ideals of the Arab so far as music is concerned."[48] Farmer is delighted to report that Islām totally failed in its dealing with music. His desire to promote music in the Muslim world can be properly understood in light of this claim. It is true that the prevalence of music in the Muslim world reflects a failure of Muslims. However his claim is much bigger than that and needs to be carefully examined.

To make his case he relies on "the great *Kitāb al-Aghānī*" and *al-ʿIqd al-Farīd*. We have already looked at the problems with these resources and with his history. But even if we were to accept everything that *al-Aghānī* and *al-ʿIqd* mention, the judgment of failure will still have to wait. To see where Islām failed or succeeded, we need to contrast Islām's record with that of Christianity, because Islām succeeded precisely where Christianity failed.

Even the questionable sources must agree that Islām banished music from its acts of worship and from the masjid. Pagan Arab worship consisted of whistling and clapping in ḥajj ceremonies and other devotions. Islām obliterated it for good. Despite all the controversies and debates about music in the Muslim world, the masjid and all prescribed acts of worship in Islām have remained completely music free.

The potential causes were there. People knew about the power of music and could have entertained the idea of harnessing that power in the service of God. In fact that is what drove other religions to the use of music in worship. And Islām did have its share of misguided Sufis who could advance that argument. Ibn Qayyim reports an interesting incident about some errant Sufis who tried to use music during ḥajj. "I saw them in ʿArafāt. While the people were all occupied in duʿāʾ and turning to Allāh in total humility and devotion, they were busy in this cursed samāʿ with duffs and flutes."[49] He himself expelled them from Masjid Khīf several times. The masjid is still there, as are all the places involved in the ḥajj,

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48. Farmer, *Arabian Music*, 31.
49. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Ighāthat al-Lahfān*, 1:261.

Verse 3: The Shayṭānic Voice

<div dir="rtl">وَٱسْتَفْزِزْ مَنِ ٱسْتَطَعْتَ مِنْهُم بِصَوْتِكَ</div>

Lead to destruction with your (seductive) voice those of them whom you can.[37]

This is from the five verses in Sūrah al-Isrā' that are describing the story of creation. After Shayṭān refuses to prostrate to Adam, he asks Allāh for respite until the Last Day so he could misguide the children of Adam. This is granted. Then Allāh tells him that he can use all the weapons at his command for this purpose; Hell has ample space for those who would decide to follow him. But he will have no power over the true servants of Allāh. Among the weapons of Shayṭān is his *ṣawt* or voice as mentioned here. It refers to the calls of Shayṭān for sin in all their forms, from whispers to loud music and every decibel in between.

'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās ﷺ gave the general interpretation (all calls for sin) for the word *ṣawt* while Mujāhid and Ḍaḥḥāk referred specifically to music. Mujāhid interpreted *ṣawt* as ghinā', mazāmīr, and lahw.[38] Ḍaḥḥāk interpreted it as mizmār (flute).[39] Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said it referred to duff.[40] These interpretations serve to remind us that musical sounds are among the powerful weapons of Shayṭān.

This verse also negates the idea that human beings are helpless creatures in the face of Shayṭānic attacks; rather, they are fully responsible for their actions and will be punished when they choose to follow the Shayṭānic call.

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37. *Al-Qur'ān*, al-Isrā' 17:64.
38. *Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*, Sūrah al-Isrā', verse 64, 13:118.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Ighāthat al-Lahfān*, 1:286. The permissibility of duff is limited to special occasions and is subject to restrictions. Beyond those it remains subject to censure as this statement from Ḥasan al-Baṣrī shows.

CHAPTER 6

ISLĀMIC SOURCE TEXTS
The Ḥadīth

THERE ARE ABOUT A HUNDRED AḤĀDĪTH THAT censure and prohibit ghinā' and musical instruments, and there are about twenty that show its limited permissibility for special occasions. While a large number of the former aḥādīth have weak chains of transmission, there are some among them with strong chains as well. These include the famous—and most discussed— ḥadīth from Bukhārī. Below we look at this and other selected aḥādīth and discuss their authenticity as well as interpretation.

A word of caution is in order here. The science of Ḥadīth criticism is a complex and involved subject. While my purpose here is to make the deliberations of the Ḥadīth masters accessible to the average reader, the discussion will, of necessity, become rather detailed. I have limited such treatment to those aḥādīth for which it was absolutely necessary. However, those not interested in that level of detail may choose to move to the concluding paragraph of the section discussing authenticity and concentrate more on the interpretation of the text, which follows.

and horns for this purpose, which shows that they should be permissible.

It is sufficient to look at the account of that event to see the folly of this reasoning. Shāh Waliyullāh describes what happened:

> When the Companions learnt that congregational ṣalāh is required—and it is not easy to gather people in one place and at one time except through announcement—they discussed ways of making this announcement. Some suggested a fire be lit. The Messenger ﷺ rejected that for its mimicking of the Magians. Some suggested use of horns. He rejected that for its mimicking of the Jews. Some suggested use of bells. He rejected that for its mimicking of the Christians. So they could not reach a conclusion. Then ʿAbdullāh ibn Zayd saw the *adhān* and *iqāmah* in his dream. He mentioned it to the Messenger ﷺ who said, this is a valid dream.[44]

It is interesting that any one would try to extract a ruling of permissibility for music from a rejected suggestion.

Aḥādīth Indicating Permission

There are some cases where singing and use of duff are permissible. These are mentioned in generally agreed upon Ḥadīth reports. The difference of opinion here centers on the extent of this permissibility.

Ḥadīth 1: Eid (ʿĀ'ishah ﷺ)

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ رَضِيَ اللهُ عَنْهَا دَخَلَ عَلَيَّ رَسُولُ اللهِ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ وَعِنْدِي جَارِيَتَانِ تُغَنِّيَانِ بِغِنَاءِ بُعَاثَ فَاضْطَجَعَ عَلَى الْفِرَاشِ وَحَوَّلَ وَجْهَهُ فَدَخَلَ أَبُو بَكْرٍ فَانْتَهَرَنِي وَقَالَ مِزْمَارَةُ الشَّيْطَانِ عِنْدَ رَسُولِ اللهِ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَأَقْبَلَ عَلَيْهِ رَسُولُ اللهِ صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ فَقَالَ دَعْهُمَا فَلَمَّا غَفَلَ غَمَزْتُهُمَا فَخَرَجَتَا قَالَتْ وَكَانَ يَوْمُ عِيدٍ يَلْعَبُ السُّودَانُ

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44. Shāh Waliyullāh al-Dihlawī, quoted in Usmani, *Takmalah Fatḥ al-Mulhim*, 3:267–68.

CHAPTER 8

SAMĀ: THE SUFI PERSPECTIVE

MUSIC FOR FUN AND ENTERTAINMENT WAS IMPORTED
from Persia and Byzantium into the Muslim world and sponsored
by corrupt kings beginning in the Umawī period. There was no
doubt in the minds of those who engaged in it that it was wrong.
However one group tried to justify music on religious grounds.
These were the Sufis who were initially known as *zuhhād* (ascetics)
as they had given up this world and its attractions for the sake of
Allāh. The love of Allāh was the defining attribute in their lives.
Some of them discovered the power of a good song in nurturing
this love. To distinguish it from the sensuous singing, they called it
samāʿ, which means listening but also refers to the spiritual songs
so listened. For them samāʿ was a means of getting closer to Allāh.
Its goal was to reach *wajd* or the state of ecstasy in which a person
becomes totally absorbed in the love of Allāh.[1]

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1. According to Abū ʾl-ʿAbbās al-Qurṭubī *samāʿ* means both listening and
understanding. It is in the latter sense that the word has been used in verse
8:23 (Surāh al-Anfāl). Earlier Sufis used the term to refer to a sudden flash
of understanding whether it resulted from listening to poetry or prose. Later
on it was used to refer to the spiritual songs. See Abū ʾl-ʿAbbās al-Qurṭubī,
Kashf al-Qināʿ, 44.

Neither samāʿ nor wajd were commanded by the Qurʾān or the Sunnah. Neither the Prophet ﷺ nor the Companions practiced the former or sought the latter. However, some of the people who turned to it were reputable people of good character whose sincerity cannot be doubted. They felt their hearts melt when listening to good poetic verses sung by those who shared their feelings. Their writings are full of anecdotes describing the great power of samāʿ. At the same time they were aware of possible problems with it. They imposed many restrictions and issued many cautions to avoid these problems. Later Sufi masters, realizing that none of these precautions helped, decided to abandon it.

Thus we can discern three periods in the Sufi involvement with samāʿ. An initial period of opposition, an intermediate period of justification with severe restrictions, and finally abandonment and prohibition with the caveat that we should not criticize those who had engaged in it in the preceding period because they had complied with the restrictions even though it was no longer reasonable to expect this compliance. Whatever goes on in the name of samāʿ today is in defiance of authentic Sufi teachings, although today's proponents rely on the arguments and debates that belong to the bygone intermediate period.

FIRST PERIOD – OPPOSITION

Among the early Sufi masters Fuḍayl ibn ʿIyāḍ (d. 187 AH) said, "Ghināʾ is the charm for fornication."[2] Abū ʿAbdullāh al-Ḥārith ibn Asad al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243 AH), another eminent Sufi master and author of many books, said: "Ghināʾ is prohibited just like the meat of carrion."[3] Both of them used the term ghināʾ and did not make an exception for the Sufi samāʿ. According to Ibn Taymiyyah renowned Sufi masters from the first three centuries stayed away from samāʿ. This was true in all parts of the Islamic world whether it was Ḥijāz, al-Shām, Yemen, Miṣr, Maghreb, Irāq, or Khurasān. This includes Ibrāhīm ibn Ad-ham (d. 161/778), Maʿrūf al-Karkhī (d. 200/815), Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 215/830), Aḥmad

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2. Ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Dhamm al-Malāhī*, no. 22, p. 42.
3. Abū ʾl-ʿAbbās al-Qurṭubī, *Kashf al-Qināʿ*, 51.

The Case for *Malāhī*

WHILE THE SUFIS WERE INTERESTED IN USING SONGS to nurture love for Allāh, some in the now-defunct Ẓāhirī (literalist) school were interested in entertainment. Two of its leaders, Ibn Ḥazm and Ibn Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī, tried to make a strong case for malāhī and ghinā'. Theirs was an extreme case as affirmed by ʿAbd al-Ḥayy al-Ḥasanī who writes: "Despite their differences no imām or scholar granted unrestricted permission for samāʿ and ghinā'. But Ibn Ḥazm and Ibn Ṭāhir exaggerated their permissibility and declared it to be absolute."[1]

Their arguments have been conclusively refuted by the scholars. However they continue being recycled by those interested in justifying music. The latest attempt is made in a fatwa of al-Azhar. In this chapter we look at all three.

Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064)

ʿAlī ibn Aḥmad ibn Saʿīd ibn Ḥazm al-Ẓāhirī was a very intelligent and sharp scholar. He authored more than four hundred works, forty of which are available today. He did much to revitalize the Ẓāhirī school, started by Dāwūd ibn ʿAlī al-Ẓāhirī (d. 270/884),

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1. Al-Ḥasanī, *Al-Ghinā' fī 'l-Islām*, 85.

one of them. This should be contrasted with the words of Shaykh al-Suhrawardī, who after defending samāʿ advised everyone engaging in it to stay away from the duff, because it was safer to stay clear of controversies. Additionally there is a refusal here to see that only *some* music is controversial; most music is prohibited by a near consensus of the scholars. And the type of concert we are talking about, with a mixed gathering and use of musical instruments, falls within that agreed upon red zone.

There was a related call that "we should agree to disagree." This has become a cliché, repeated endlessly without any understanding. It sounds polite and civilized. But this great-sounding principle, like all principles, has its scope that has been delineated by the great authorities in Qur'ān, Ḥadīth, and Fiqh. There are issues on which we should agree to disagree. This includes many differences in the details of Islāmic law among the various schools (e.g. regarding methods of offering ṣalāh) and no one has a right to condemn the other owing to these differences. But not every issue can claim immunity from censure and reprimand on this ground. As we see in the timeline of books on music (appendix 2), in all generations prominent scholars have condemned music (ghinā' and malāhī) in no uncertain terms. When the great majority of authorities have *agreed to condemn* something, it is not polite or right to ask to *agree to disagree* on it.

The power of music was also used as a justification for its use. We must use it for *daʿwah* (inviting people to Islām), the argument went. Another justification cited was the successful use of music for charitable fund raising. Daʿwah and charity are important Islāmic duties. But what kind of a daʿwah is it that makes hijab clad young Muslim women shout, sway, and dance in public? If the tool is not giving the right message even to Muslims, how can it be expected to give it to non-Muslims? And since when did Islām require us to employ musical entertainment to do daʿwah or promote charity? The message of Islām is a very serious message. We have to make sure that it is not distorted or compromised by the medium we choose for delivering it. The same is true of charity. People can and do give tips when they are pleased with the performance of