

Islam and Music

The Views of Rûzbahân Baqlî, the Patron Saint of Shiraz

by

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IT is often said that music is forbidden in Islam and this assertion is repeated by many contemporary Muslims as well as by orientalists. Yet, when one studies the Islamic world, either in its present form or during various stages of its history, one is startled by the presence of music in many of the most fundamental aspects of that tradition. The call to prayer (*al-adhân*) is almost always sung,¹ as is the Holy Quran whose chanting is the most nourishing of all music for the soul of the people of faith (*mu'minûn*). During Ramadân, even now in some Islamic cities, one can observe the age old tradition of waking people in time to eat before the dawn and the beginning of the fast by means of chants, drums and sometimes trumpets. Moreover, funeral orations performed under the most strict religious canons are usually sung melodies and in some holy sanctuaries music accompanies religious ceremonies as in Mashhad in Persia at the tomb of Imâm 'Alî al-Ridâ where drums and an instrument resembling the oboe welcome the rising sun every morning at the earliest moment of the day. Finally it might be mentioned that the Muslim armies performing the holy war (*al-jihâd*) were accompanied from the earliest times by a type of music which intensified the qualities of bravery and courage within the hearts of the soldiers and that the first military band was created by the Ottomans and later emulated in Europe.

Besides these specifically religious instances from the Sharî'ite point of view,² there is of course that ocean of celestial music connected with Sufism, music varying from the playing of drums in the Senegal to elaborate performances including many instruments found in Turkey and the Indian sub-continent primarily among the Maulawîs and Chishtîs. This music is also of a directly religious character, although here the esoteric rather than the exoteric dimension of the religion is involved. Furthermore, this type of music overflows to embrace nearly the whole community of believers of certain occasions such as the anniversary of the birth or death of great saints.

¹ In some regions of the Islamic world such as Indonesia, the *adhân* is in fact accompanied by drum beats, which carry through the jungle much farther than the voice of the muezzin.

² The religious view of course encompasses the inner dimensions of religion as well, if religion is understood in its most universal sense. Therefore, the Sharî'ite point of view is not synonymous with the religious view in Islam but comprises one of its most important and indispensable elements.

There is also the more popular form of music, or folk music as it is called today, which has existed as an integral part of the life pattern of various groups, especially in the countryside and among the nomads throughout the Islamic world and which has been sung or played by peoples who have adhered most strictly to the *Sharî'ah*. Sometimes this type of music has served as inspiration for various Sufi masters who have adopted it for strictly spiritual ends in their gatherings. Even Jalâl al-Dîn Rûmî, the founder of the Maulawî order, often took songs from taverns of Anatolia and converted them into vehicles for the expression of the profoundest yearning for God.

Besides all these forms of music, one must mention the great classical traditions of music in the Islamic world such as the Persian, Andalusian, Arabic of the Near East, Turkish and even North Indian traditions which have survived to this day. Although the origin of these musical traditions goes back to ancient civilizations, they became fully integrated into the Islamic universe and took their place among the major expressions of Islamic art. These classical traditions were supported mostly by the courts of various caliphs and sultans or the nobility and were more of an aristocratic and knightly art than anything else as far as patronage was concerned,³ but the content of this art remained highly contemplative and spiritual. Often the musicians supported by the court or the aristocracy were themselves members of the Sufi orders as can be seen so clearly in Persia and India during the past three centuries⁴ This classical tradition was in any case closely related to Sufism and in certain cases, such as that of the Maulawî order, the cultivation and preservation of the classical tradition was directly due to a Sufi order.⁵

Many of the outstanding Islamic men of learning especially philosophers, mathematicians and physicians were well-versed in music and its theories and some like al-Fârâbî, Ibn Sîna and Urmawî were notable authorities in musical theory.⁶ Certain Muslim physicians used music to cure ailments of both body and soul and several treatises were written concerning the therapeutic

³ See S. H. Nasr, "The Influence of Sufism on Traditional Persian Music" (trans. by W. Chittick) *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Autumn, 1972, pp. 225ff.

⁴ See J. During, "Elements spirituels dans la musique traditionnelle iranienne contemporaine", in *Sophia Perennis*, vol. 1, no. 2, Autumn 1975.

⁵ To this day the best performers of classical Turkish music are connected with the Maulawî order despite the eclipse of this order in recent times in Turkey.

⁶ See R. Erlanger, *La musique arabe*, 5 vols., Paris, 1930-1939; the numerous works of H. G. Farmer on both the theory and practice of Arabic music; N. Caron and D. Safvat, *Iran* (collection *Les traditions musicales*), vol. 2, Paris, 1972; and A. Shiloah, "L'épître sur la musique des Ikhwân al-Safâ'," *Revue des Etudes Islamiques*, 1965, pp. 125-162; 1967, pp. 159-193, which includes the translation of the important treatise of the Ikhwân al-Safâ' on music.

view of music.⁷ Men of letters were also usually acquainted with music. Poetry in particular has been almost inseparable from music throughout Islamic history as the *Kitâb al-aghânî* of Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahânî illustrates for the early Islamic period. In both Arabic and Persian literature, the close wedding between masterpieces of poetry such as the *Burdah* or the *ghazals* of Hâfiz and their musical rendition is to be observed in almost all periods and climes. The same holds true of Turkish, Urdu and other Islamic languages. One can hardly conceive of Urdu, Bengali and Sindhi poetry, just to cite a few languages of the Indian sub-continent, without recalling the sessions of poetry (*mushâ'arah*) which are usually combined with the singing of poems and the *qawwâlîs* which are by nature musical performances with instruments but in which the chanting of poetry has the central role.⁸

With all these considerations in mind, it might be asked what is the meaning of the banning of music in Islam? What domain does the banning involve and what kind of music falls under the Sharî'ite injunctions concerning music? There is no doubt that this question was debated by noted jurists and theologians including such eminent authorities as Ibn Hazm and al-Ghazzâlî.⁹ But the question of the significance and legitimacy of music in the total structure of the Islamic revelation is not merely juridical or theological. It involves most of all the inner and spiritual aspect of Islam, and therefore the answer must be sought above all in Sufism. It is of interest to read, concerning this question, the words of one of the most eminent of Sufi masters, Rûzbahân Baqlî of Shiraz,¹⁰ who was an authority in both Sufism and the *Sharî'ah* as well as on music itself. The words of the patron saint of Shiraz in his *Risâlat al-quds* are a most telling witness to

⁷ Al-Fârâbî wrote a treatise entitled *al-'Ilâj bi'l-mûsîqâ (Cure through Music)* and the Ikhwân al-Safâ dealt with the effect of music upon the soul in their *Epistles*. See Shiloah, *op. cit.*

⁸ Traditional treatises on music often contain a section devoted to the relation between music and poetry and to those letters whose sounds are melodies, the *hurûf al-musawwatah*. See for example, al-Hasan ibn Ahmad al-Kâtib, *La Perfection des connaissances musicales*, trans. by A. Shiloah, Paris, 1972, pp. 99ff.

⁹ Al-Ghazzâlî has in fact dealt with the question in his capacity as authority in both exotericism and esotericism.

¹⁰ Rûzbahân Baqlî Shîrâzî was born in Fasâ near Shiraz in 522/1128 and died in Shiraz in 606/1209, where his tomb is a major centre of pilgrimage to this day. He was a master of both the exoteric and the esoteric sciences and the author of numerous works including a monumental commentary upon the Holy Quran. His most famous works, however, are the *'Abhar al-'âshiqîn*, edited by H. Corbin as *Le Jasmin des fidèles d'amour*, Tehran-Paris, 1958, and again by J. Nourbakhsh, Tehran, 1349 (A.H. solar); and *Sharh-i shatahiyyât*, edited by H. Corbin as *Commentaire sur les paradoxes soufis*, Tehran-Paris, 1966. A *shath* is a paradoxical saying which contains a profound esoteric significance: Rûzbahân assembled the early sayings of Sufis which belong to this category and commented upon them. He thereby gained the title of "*Sultân al-shattâhîn*", the king of those who express paradoxical utterances. He has also been aptly called by Corbin one of the foremost among the *fedeli d'amore* of Islam. On his life and doctrines see the French prolegomena of Corbin to the above cited editions of Rûzbahân and also H. Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, vol. II, 1972, pp. 9-146.

the significance of music, the conditions under which it is legitimate, the kinds of people who may listen to music, and the kind of music which is worthy of being performed and listened to.¹¹

“On the Meaning of ‘Spiritual Music’ (*samâ‘*)”

‘Know O Brothers—May God increase the best of joys for you in listening to spiritual music—that for the lovers of the Truth there are several principles concerning listening to spiritual music, and these have a beginning and an end. Also the enjoyment of this music by various spirits is different. It can be enjoyed according to the station of the Sacred Spirit (*rûh-i muqaddas*). However, no one, save he who is among those who reign in the domain of gnosis (*ma‘rifat*), can be prepared for it, for spiritual qualities are mingled with corporeal natures. Until the listener becomes purified from that filth, he cannot become a listener in the gatherings (*majâlis*) of spiritual familiarity (*uns*). Verily, all the creatures among the animals have an inclination toward spiritual music, for each possesses in its own right a spirit. It keeps alive thanks to that spirit and that spirit keeps alive thanks to music.

‘Music is in the coming to rest of all thoughts from the burdens of the human state (*bashariyyat*), and it exits the temperament of men. It is the stimulant of seigneurial mysteries (*asrâr-i rabbânî*). To some, it is a temptation because they are imperfect. For others, it is a precept (*‘ibrat*) for they have reached perfection. It is not proper for those who are alive on the natural plane, but whose heart is dead, to listen to music, for it will cause their destruction. It is, however, incumbent upon him whose heart is joyous, whether he discovers or fails to discover the soul, to listen to music. For in music there are a hundred thousand joys, of which with the help of a single joy one can cut across a thousand years of the path of attaining gnosis in a way that cannot be achieved by any gnostic through any form of worship.

‘It is necessary that the passions in all the veins of the seeker after music becomes diluted (as far as the passions are concerned) and that the veins become filled with light as a result of the purity of worship. In his soul, he must be present before the Divine and in the state of audition so as to remain free, while listening to music, from the temptations of the carnal soul. And this cannot be achieved with certainty except by the strongest in the path of Divine Love. For spiritual music is the music of the Truth (*al-Haqq*). Spiritual music comes from God (the *Truth-Haqq*); it stands before God; it is in God; it is with God. If someone were to conceive one of these relations with something other than God, he would be an infidel. Such a person would not have found the path and would not have drunk the wine of union in the spiritual concert.

‘The disciples of love (*mahabbat*) listen to music without recourse to their carnal soul. Those who walk upon the path of yearning (*shawq*) listen to spiritual music without recourse to reason. The possessed followers of intense love (*‘ishq*) listen to spiritual music without recourse to the heart. Those agitated by spiritual familiarity listen to music without recourse to the spirit.

¹¹ *Risâlat al-quds*, ed. by J. Nourbakhsh, Tehran, 1351 (A.H. solar), pp. 50-54, “*Fî bayân al-samâ‘*.”

If they were to listen to music with these means they would become veiled from God. And if they were to listen to it with the carnal soul they would become impious (*zindîq*). And if they were to listen with the power of reason (*'aql*) they would become creditable. And if they would hear with the heart they would become contemplative (*murâqib*). And if they were to listen with the spirit they would become totally present. Spiritual music is the audition and vision of Divine Presence (*hudûr*). It is terror and sorrow. It is wonder in wonder. In that world canons cease to exist. The man of knowledge becomes ignorant and the lover is annihilated.

‘In the feast of Divine Love, the listener and the performer are both one. The truth of the path of lovers is accompanied by music but the truth of its truth is without music. Spiritual music comes from discourse (*khatâb*) and the lack of it from beauty (*jamâl*). If there is speech, there is distance, and if there is silence there is proximity. As long as there is audition, there is ignorance (*bikhabar*) and the ignorant dwell in duality. In hearing spiritual music, reason is dethroned; command becomes prohibition and the abrogator (*nâsikh*) the abrogated (*mansûkh*). In the first stage of the spiritual concert, all the abrogators become abrogated, and all the abrogated abrogators.

‘Spiritual music is the key to the treasury of Divine Verities. The gnostics are divided: some listen with the help of the stations (*maqâmât*); some with the help of the states (*hâlât*); some with the help of spiritual unveiling (*mukâshifât*); some with the help of vision (*mushâhadât*). 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 (*wisâl*); when they listen according to vision they are immersed in the Divine Beauty.

‘From the beginning to the end of the stations (*maqâmât*), there are thousands upon thousands of stations each of which possesses thousands upon thousands of pieces of spiritual music, and in each piece of music there are thousands upon thousands of qualities, such as change, warning, elongation, union, proximity, distance, ardour, anxiety, hunger, thirst, fear, hope, melancholy, victory, sorrow, fright, purity, chastity, servitude and lordship. If any of these qualities were to reach the soul of the ascetics of the world, their soul would involuntarily depart from their bodies.

‘Likewise, from the beginning to the end of the states (*ahwâl*), there are thousands upon thousands of *maqams* in each of which there are a thousand allusions (*ishârât*) within spiritual music. And in each allusion there are many kinds of pain such as love (*mahabbat*), yearning, intensive love (*'ishq*), ardour, purity, aridity and power. If one of them were to pass within the heart of all the disciples, the heads of all of them would become separated from their bodies.

‘Also from the beginning of spiritual unveiling to its end during the hearing of spiritual music, there is one theophanic display after another. If the lovers of God were to see one of these displays they would all melt away like quicksilver. Likewise, in mystical vision during the spiritual concert hundreds of thousands of qualities become revealed, each of which prepares a thousand subtleties (*latâ'if*) within the being of the gnostic. Such qualities as knowledge, truth,

calamities, flashes and gleamings of the Divine Lights, awe, strength, inconstancy, contraction, expansion, nobility and serenity, will cast him to the Invisible beyond the invisible world, and reveal to him the mysteries of his origins.

‘Through each leaf in the paradise of spiritual vision, and from the trees of the qualities, the birds of light will sing the eternal song with uncreated notes before the soul of his soul. One syllable of that song will annihilate the gnostic from the state of servitude and make him subsistent in the state of Divinity. It will seize the foundations of his being and bestow another foundation upon him. It will familiarize him with himself and make him a stranger to himself. It will make him know himself, audacious *vis-à-vis* himself and fearful of himself. While he is amidst the assembly, it will transform him into its own colour. It will speak of the Mystery of mysterious with him and enable him to listen to the discourse on Divine Love from its tongue.

‘Sometimes it says ‘thou art I’, and sometimes ‘I am thou’. Sometimes it makes him annihilated in subsistence and sometimes subsistent in annihilation. Sometimes it will draw him near; at other times provide peace for him through familiarity. Sometimes it fatigues him with the scorching of Unity; at other times it brings his soul to life through perplexity. At times it makes him listen; at other moments to flee or to recite. Sometimes it casts him into the state of pure servitude; at other times into the essence of lordship. Sometimes it makes him inebriated with beauty; at other times humbled by majesty. Sometimes it makes him sober, or strengthens him, or makes him inconstant. Sometimes it takes his soul through the languor of spiritual music. At other times, through the eradication of the calamities caused by the unceasing light shining from the dawns of Unity upon the roof of Majesty, it will place him upon the throne of kingship. Sometimes it will make him fly with the aid of the mystery of blessedness through the space of pre-eternity. At other times, by means of the shears of transcendence, it will cut the wing of resolution in the space of self-identity.

‘All these are to be found in spiritual music and still more. He knows this truth who, at the moment of spiritual vision and through the beauty of this vision in the presence of the Divine Presence, acquires from the eternal *saki* without the toil of non-existence the wine of spiritual familiarity; one who is able to heal the sublime words issuing from the blessed dawn within the invisible dimensions of the “rational spirit” (*rûh-i nâtiqah*). He will know who is there. Those who are here do not know its exposition. These teachings are neither for the unripe who would fall into a state of doubt through them, nor for strangers who would become stranded by them. For this is the heritage of Moses, the secret of Jesus, the ardour of Adam, the sincere friendship of Abraham, the lamentation of Jacob, the suffering of Isaac, the consolation of Ishamael, the songs of David, the familiarity of Noah, the flight of Jonas, the chastity of Joseph, the calamity of Jacob, the remedies of John, the fear of Zackarias, the yearning of Jethro and the spiritual unveiling and vision of the friend, Ahmad (Prophet of Islam)—May the blessings of God the Merciful be upon all of them.

‘These words are the secret of ‘I am the Truth’ (*ana’l-Haqq*); they are the truths which glorify God. The reality of spiritual music belongs to Sarî Saqatî; the speech of this music to Abû Bakr Wâsitî; and the pain of this music to Shiblî.¹² The spiritual concert is permissible (*mubâh*) for the lovers of God; it is forbidden (*harâm*) for the ignorant.¹³

‘Spiritual music is of three kinds: one for the common people, one for the elite and one for the elite among the elite. The common people listen through nature and that is destitution.¹⁴ The elite listen with the heart, and that is being in quest. The elite among the elite listen with the soul, and that is being in love. If I comment upon music, I fear that it will cause constraint in the world of those with large ears. For I come from the ruins of annihilation and I have brought the mystery of subsistence. If I speak, I speak without foundation.¹⁵ I speak according to the foundation of the listener. My musician is God and I speak of Him. My witness is God and I see Him. My words are the song of the nightingale of the eternal covenant.¹⁶ I hold discourse with the birds in the pre-eternal nest.’

*My case has become strange to all strangers,
And I have become ‘wonder among all that is wonderful’.*

* * *

The very sobriety of Islam prevented music from becoming an externalized profanation. While on the exoteric level it remains con-fined to special situations such as those already mentioned in which music is governed strictly by canons to prevent it from arousing animal passions, esoterically music became the means of arousing the sentiments and transforming the soul. But then it was played under conditions that guaranteed the subjugation of the carnal soul before the transmuting effect of music was allowed to enter the arena.

¹² These are among the most famous of the early Sufis whose inner spiritual states and outward utterances have been echoed in later chapters of Sufism over the ages.

¹³ This is in reference to the Sharî’ite division of human actions into the obligatory (*wâjib*), permissible (*mubâh*) and unlawful or forbidden (*harâm*). For example the eating of pork is forbidden, choosing a certain colour for one’s everyday dress is permissible and performing the daily prayers obligatory.

¹⁴ By “nature” is meant the imperfect nature of most men dominated by the passions (*tabî’at*) and not the primordial nature (*fitrah*) which lies also within the heart of every man but which is hidden and veiled in most cases by the state of negligence, ignorance, and passion or by that condition which is interpreted by Sufis as the state of *tabî’at*.

¹⁵ By ‘without foundation’, Baqlî means relative to the audience and not without principles.

¹⁶ This is in reference to the pre-eternal covenant between man and God mentioned in the Quran, “Am I not thy Lord”? (VII: 172)

Islamic civilization has not preserved and developed several great musical traditions *in spite of* Islam but *because of* it. It has prevented the creation of a music, like the post-classical music of the West, in which an “expansion” takes place without the previous “contraction” which must of necessity precede expansion in the process of spiritual realization. Islam has banned music which leads to the forgetfulness of God and forbidden those Muslims from hearing it who would become distracted from the spiritual world and become immersed in worldliness through listening to music. But Islam has preserved music in its most exalting and yet sober aspect in its psalmody of the Holy Quran and the like for the whole community, while in its inner dimension it has made of music the ladder to the Divine Presence with a contemplative quality which is an echo of paradise where are combined the sensuous and the ascetic, the otherworldly and the beauty of the here and now. It has made of spiritual music, a vibration and echo of that Reality which is at once transcendent and imminent.

The *samâ‘* or spiritual music of which Baqlî speaks is the voice of God calling man unto Himself and a means whereby man is led back to his spiritual origin. It is an adjunct to the Path (*tarîqah*) to God, and only he who is willing to undertake the necessary discipline to become worthy of traversing this Path has the right to listen to this music. As for others, they should not disdain the path which they are not meant to follow, for to negate or deny any of God’s gifts is to commit a sin for which man must ask the forgiveness of Him who alone can forgive. Ultimately man is himself God’s music and Islam as an integral tradition could not but include this reality and to provide the possibility for those with the right qualifications to hear the music of the lyre of their own existence being plucked by the Divine Hand.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

The true saint goes in and out amongst the people and eats and sleeps with them and buys and sells in the market and marries and takes part in social intercourse, and never forgets God for a single moment.

Abû Sa‘îd ibn Abi ’l-Khayr.