

Music and Interfaith Dialogue: Christian Influences in Arabic Islamic Music

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Abstract: The long history, life and existence of Christians in the Muslim Arabic society has allowed for many intercultural and human exchanges. Among the numerous cultural experiences shared and exchanged between both Christian and Muslim Arabs is music. This paper attempts to show how Christianity has influenced religious Islamic music in view of linguistic, historical, social and cultural factors. As an example, I have chosen a religious chant from Egypt, one of the Islamic Arab countries in the Middle East with a long tradition of Christian presence. Through the analysis of the lyrics in this chant, I will examine how Christian lyrics are imbedded within an Islamic Sufi chant. Such influences and exchanges make music a possible element for dialogue, to which both Christians and Muslims contribute in agreement and without dispute, thus creating a space where the admiration and expression of beauty allows for a certain experience of harmony; a harmony which we might lack in our common daily lives.

Key words: Music • Religions • Dialogue • Arabs • Peace

INTRODUCTION

If we contemplate music as a human, creative and act of free will, we can notice very meaningful reactions that occur as we listen, play or make music. These reactions do not only have an effect on us, but also influence our human relations. The fact that music joins us together and enhances “our self-awareness and self-esteem, mutual tolerance, sense of spirituality, intercultural understanding, ability to cooperate, healing-to name but a few.”, as described by Felicity Laurence, can indicate a “specific potential” of music in the process of peacebuilding, since it can somehow “enable, catalyze and strengthen empathic response, ability and relationship” [1].

The musical act, especially in choirs, results in relations of empathy. June Boyce-Tillman suggests that empathy “leads to free expression” [2]. Cynthia Cohen considers it to be a “powerful medium for expression, communication, healing and transformation” [3].

Music is the expression of sentiments, ideas, frustrations or a medium for protest over a great variety of matters drawn from our lives. Communication can be established among individuals as well as among groups, because music, as expressed by Kofi Annan: “leaps across language barriers and unites people of quite

different cultural backgrounds. And so, through music, all people can come together to make the world a more harmonious place” [4].

Arabic culture and its music, contains many influences from various cultures and religions whose history was evidently important throughout the centuries. The contact that peoples of the Arabian Peninsula and its surroundings had with the Babylonian, Egyptian, Greek - Roman and Hindu - Persian civilizations, gave place to many influences and to the exchange of musical creations and melodies [5].

The pre-Islamic Bedouin Arab culture that existed in the Arabian Peninsula, Jordan and some parts of Syria valued oral tradition, mainly poetry, as a vehicle to transmit its various messages in society. Poetry was a symbol of union among both nomad and sedentary tribes. It reflected the intertribal code of conduct based on the concepts of honor, jealousy, hospitality and protection of the weaker members, including women [6], therefore music, did not have the same importance at the time.

The famous Arab historian al-Mas‘ūdī, tells us in his book “Murūj al-dhahab wa-ma‘ādin al-jawhar” [7] a story about Mu‘ar ibn Nizār, who fell down from his camel and broke his hand. The man had a beautiful voice and when he cried out in pain saying “!Yā Yadāhī” (which means “oh

my hand") the camels were so moved that they started crying. The author considers this story to be the start of the first genre of chanting: "al-hudā". This is why this genre is identified later on with *al-nawh* (lamentation) [8].

Just like *hudā'* [9] there is another type of melodic recitation, produced by reading poetry out loud to a specific melody. The kind of melody used gives emphasis to the words and rhymes of every poet. This type is called *al-inshād*. In the Arabic dictionary, *al-inshād* comes from the word *nashīd* which means raising the voice and when it comes to poetry it means to read loudly with a certain melody [10]. Other synonyms that Arabs used to describe this kind of chanting or recitation with some variations, are *al-samā'* and *al-ghinā'* (they mean literally to listen and to sing), *al-tahlīl* and *al-sinād* [11].

As the Arabic culture is pre-Islamic and Christianity had a longer history and experience with music for various reasons and factors, we will try to show how and for what reasons Christianity influenced Arabic Islamic music.

Islam and Music: Islam has contradictory and extreme opinions and judgments on prohibiting or admitting the use of music. This is due to the fact that in the Qur'ān the verses which might refer to music are not explicit. It is clear that some Islamic groups have negative ideas about music and have caused the attitude we have now in the Islamic world towards music.

In the Qur'ān the reference to music is very ambiguous and it happens only in the following verse: "There are some men who buy diverting talk to lead astray from the way of God". Luqmān 31, 5.

The interpretation of this verse is related to music, because clerks claim that the "diverting talk" refers to singing. But the prohibition of music in Islamic times was imposed by clerks based on Hadith which describe the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, not so much with a base on the Qur'ān.

Islam perceived a danger in music, thinking that it could take people to different places, in emotional and psychological terms, leading them into a state of nirvana, sensual pleasure, outside this world and far from its control, which, as a result could alienate them from God. Especially when it came to feminine voices, which some imams and clerks considered and still consider to be a 'aura (shame or disgrace), it was deemed to be the work of seductresses, which lead to an uncontrollable evil: in short, an act of the devil.

On the other hand, many Muslim scholars also believe that talent is a divine gift that should be used for good and not for evil. Expressing feelings, experiencing and loving the beauty created by God through art cannot be prohibited by Him. Songs, made with lyrics, are good if the words are good, but if the words are evil or inappropriate, this makes the song and its music evil, inappropriate, pushing Muslims to bad deeds [12].

What Islam really intended was to condemn the pre-Islamic spirit of singing which included the three magical idolatrous rituals of *Talbiya*, *Tahlīl* and *hawāf*, usually accompanied by dances and consuming alcohol consummation around the gods of the Kaaba, condemned by the prophet Muhammad on one hand and the celebrations of *qiyān* on the other.

Islam considered singing and music one of the many forms of entertainment and associated it with musical atmospheres that contained prohibited pleasures such as alcohol, sex and *al-Maisar* (gambling). Musicians, singers and artists were usually the servants and slaves who served wine, danced and played music to entertain the rich masters in their feasts and private parties [13]. These servants had the name of *Qiyān* (for women) and *Ghilmān* (for boys) and had a very important role in developing types of music and in singing the reknown poems in different melodies. One of these *Qiyān* was the famous Sirīn, the *qīna* (in singular) of hassān bin Thābit (the poet of the prophet Muhammad) which was given to him together with the Coptic Maria. It is said that both sang very well and in fact, the prophet liked Maria so much that he decided to marry her [14].

The first acknowledged Islamic religious melody is the call for prayer *Adhān*, which started as a way to summon Muslims for prayer according to prayer hours. This custom followed the example of the trumpets of the Jews and the bells of the Christian churches of the Arabian Peninsula. The prophet chose Bilāl, an Ethiopian slave who converted to Islam and had a beautiful voice to do this. He became the first *Mu'adhdhin* of Islam, who called on to prayer singing and was known as the *Mu'adhdhin* of the prophet. After that, *al inshād* was associated with religious chanting and reciting the Qur'ān melodically in what is known today as *tajwīd* [15].

Among Muslims who support the use of music in worship are Sufi groups. The religious Islamic Sufi chant expresses adoration to a god that forgives sins and accepts repentance. It describes all the beauty of His creation (like the sky, stars and planets) and tells of the virtues of His prophet recalling his qualities, in addition to

dealing with the names of God in an exercise known as *al-dhikr*. In this songs genre and the range of expressions it employs, it is hard not to notice the influence of mystic Christian monks, who coincided with the Muslims in Ethiopia and Mecca [16].

The presence of Sufi schools and their musical traditions represents the contradiction explained earlier concerning the use of music in Islam. While there are famous schools of Sufi music in countries such as Syria, especially in Aleppo, Egypt, Iraq and Morocco, each following a special order known by Sufis as *harīqa*, such schools are not as developed nor have significant presence in countries such as Jordan, Palestine and Saudi Arabia.

It seems that these conflicting ideas became part of the culture in many countries and kept religious music from developing because of the above mentioned polemic concerned with the various interpretations on prohibiting or allowing the use of music. However, the status of music changes according shifting political and religious views and laws in each of these countries. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, the government supports radical ideas against the use of music, which is why many musicians found refuge in a nearby country like Jordan to perform their music, where other interpretations of its role allowed.

Christianity and Music: In Christianity [17], music has always been very important and its use goes back as far as the Old Testament. Jewish people chanted to God out of happiness, joy, tribulation and pleading salvation [18]. Saint Paul invites Christians to sing on numerous occasions, like in the Epistle to the Colossians (3:16): "...with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God."

In Orient, starting the VIII century, Christians had to adapt to the new reality under the Muslim conquest and the fact that praying and practicing religion was increasingly difficult each day, not only because of oppression or unjust politicians coinciding with some Islamic periods, but also because of the new reality in the society where Christians frequently lived far from where the practice of their faith was allowed. That is why chanting the liturgy was one of the most efficient and important methods for memorizing the word of God [19]. Based on this, many priests, including some Church Fathers, like Saint Ephrem the Syrian (307-373) and Saint John of Damascus (ca.780) [20], started composing hymns that consisted in poetic verses where, through dialogues and stories, liturgy was set to rhyme to be recited in their own way.

Byzantine music and Syriac music are the two main types of music that influenced Arabic music in general and religious music in particular. These were transmitted through commercial voyages, wars or exchanges between Arabs on the one hand and other countries and peoples in the region on the other.

Byzantine music [21] came through the Greeks with the conquests of Alexander the Great in all of the Mediterranean, which started in 333 BC and continued developing until it got to be the music of the Orthodox and Catholic Melkite Churches of present-day.

An interesting cycle started developing in Arabic culture. Influenced by Greek and Persian musicologists, the studies and works of the famous Arab musicologists such as al-Kindī (ca.796-873) [22], al-Fārābī (ca.872-950) and Avicenna (ca.980-1037), indirectly affected ecclesiastical music carrying with it a special Arabic print. However, the one who introduced evident changes in the development of Arabic music and who influenced greatly Byzantine music was hafī al-Dīn al-Urmawī in the XIII century [23].

All the changes that came into the music of the Byzantine Church took place following the conquest of Byzance in 1453, which brought the influence of Asiatic music. Between the XVI and XVIII centuries the musical notation and the study of music developed with the use of many manuscripts and the need to go back to the roots of music so as not to lose the tradition under the Ottoman domination.

Another great influence in the Arabic music is the Syriac music, which has its origins in the music and culture of the ancient Sumerians and Akkadians (2334 BC). Nothing much is known about Syriac music, because it was transmitted orally. But as it was used in prayers and liturgical chants of the Christian Church of Antioch, Iraq and Iran, this music was preserved and is known now with the same oral tradition as the music of the Syriac Church.

Many musicians acknowledge the exchange that took place between the different cultures: Aramaic, Byzantine, Persian and Arab. According to them, the Arabic scales known as *maqāmāt* are based in the Syriac melodies which in their turn are based in the ancient Babylonian melodies. There are also other opinions that support the existence of a connection between the Babylonian and the ancient Hebraic music, which the first Christians adopted from the Jews, who had that influence during the time they lived in Babylonia following their captivity [24].

Musical Arab Context: Far from the Arabian Peninsula to the north, the great Arab Christian kingdoms [25] of the Ghassanids (220-638) [26] and the Lakhmids in the regions of Syria, which extended from Jordan as far as Iraq, developed as very important artistic and cultural centers. In the royal courts of both kingdoms, poets and singers gathered to entertain the rulers and the fame of their poets and singers reached the Arabian Peninsula as well as many other regions through the commercial routes. This exchange gave the Arabic culture its development and splendor, during which time the Arabs of the north (the lakhmids and the Ghasanids) got to know the Arabic classical poetry and, in turn, the Arabs of the south (in the Arabian Peninsula), got to know the Byzantine and Persian music [27].

In Hira, Ardashir I of the Sassanid's promoted music and gave it an important role in his court. He was famous for receiving musicians at his *majlis* and enjoying their melodies and music. This promoted the use of many musical instruments and the encounter of musicians and artists. Many influences of this music reached the Arabic music.

During the first centuries of Islam and following the conquests, of the VI and VII centuries, the Muslims brought a great number of captives from many lands to the cities of Mecca, Medina and Hijaz. Great richness and innovation resulted in different musical styles, due to the fact that many of these captives not only brought their music and traditions with them, but also were musicians and singers themselves, able to play many instruments. These interrelations allowed for contact between the Arabs and many musical cultures, especially the Byzantine and Persian, who in turn applied the new melodies to their poetry.

The same occurred in the cities conquered by the Muslims, where music started to become a part of the actual Islamic culture, corresponding in each case to the cities' different cultures of origin (mainly Syriac, Byzantine and Persian cultures). Having so many artists

and musical varieties necessitated developing a proper Arabic musical theory. This is how music flourished later on in the Muslim Caliphate from the countries situated in Asia and Africa as far as *al-Andalus* in Spain, where it reached its peak.

During many periods, such as the time of the Caliph 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān, music flourished and received great support, because it was a time of economic splendor, where the rich spent a lot of money to listen to good music and paid to bring musicians from many different parts to the cities of Hijaz, Mecca and Medina [28].

In the Umayyad era music played an important role in the distraction of the people from political issues and the state showed great interest in music and musicians, which gave place to important musical exchanges and new developments, especially for Persian musicians [29].

Also in the Abbasid Caliphate there was a time of musical splendor as part of the cultural splendor of that epoch. This attention given to music went so far as to found schools for teaching music as a science. The first caliph that demonstrated his interest in music was al Mahdī, but the most famous was Hārūn al-Rashīd (786-809) with his reknown Tales of Thousand and One Nights [30].

Musical Example: The example I chose in order to talk about Christian influence in Islamic music is a small fragment of a long Sufi chant from Egypt called Allah Mahabba (God is love) performed by Sheikh Ahmed al Tunī [31]. In this piece, the Islamic chanter *munshid* performs a combination of ancient poetry and folk expression from Upper-Egypt [32].

In his home land, a small town near Assyut in Upper-Egypt, people hold religious traditional Muslim and Coptic celebrations called *mūlids*, which are festivals for celebrating either a Christian saint or the birth of the prophet Mohammad [33]. The voice of the *munshid* is accompanied by oud, ney, violin and percussion (riqq and tabla).

Lyrics

My bell rang in my monastery (meaning in my heart)
Seemed like the crosses moved
The body moved
Wanted to speak a word with the one who lives in the heart
Wanted to speak a word with the monk of the monastery
He talked to me with every tongue
I asked about him, asked the old (word)
God is love
God in my heart is love

Darab naqūsī fī dayrī (ya'nī fī qalbī)
Qul taharrakat al-Silbān
Tahazz al-jithmān
(Wa li sākin al-qalb akallimu kilma)
Wa li rāhib al-dayr akallimu kilma
Kallamni kilma 'ala kull lisān
Ana sa'alt 'alayh al-qadīma
Allāh mahabba
(Allāh fī qalbī mahabba)

In this Sufi chant we can perceive the Christian vocabulary and meanings the artist is trying to express when talking about love. As he sings he tries to explain with a few words what he is singing, such as when he explains that by “monastery” he means “heart” and by “the one who lives in his heart” he is referring to “the monk in the monastery”.

The interpretation from an Islamic point of view, transmitted by the artist, is that love in our hearts is related directly to God and both love and God live in our hearts. The bell is the heart beat that moves the singer’s heart with love and therefore moves his whole body. He continues saying that he wishes to speak a word with the monk and therefore with the one who lives in the heart. He asks “him” about “the old word” which is love: God is love.

In a non-contradictory way, the words of this verse are too charged of meaning to be of Islamic origin, since for a Muslim none of the vocabulary mentioned has practical relevance: the cross, a monastery, monks or bells are not part of Islam and therefore are not part of its tradition. Especially that according to Muslim faith, Christ is just one prophet of God and has no divine nature, which means that the salvation and resurrection connected to the cross for Christians cannot be part of the Muslim terminology.

It is clear that these words and their existence respond to Christian origin. This is perhaps why the artist keeps explaining what he is interpreting. However, if the same chant is explained from a Christian perspective, according to the same lyrics, one can identify with the moving “crosses” and “body”, a reference to Christ and to salvation. The images of “kalima” (word/Verb), “rāhib” (monk) and “allāh” (God) all have poetic significance in as much as they are symbolic of Christ.

What is remarkable in this example and in many such chants, is that the artists always find a common value and beauty within the text and the music which prompts them in the first place to sing such lyrics. The artist in this chant was motivated by the value of “love”, a divine love that moves the heart and body and which is conveyed by all religions and many prophets by mentioning in other verses of the chant prophets such as Moses as well as Jesus, known by Muslims as ‘Issā ibn Mariam.

Interfaith Dialogue: I have tried to show that, just like culture, music is a mixture of many influences. It is the experience of living or knowing different cultures included in the processes of learning and exchanging ideas. In the Arab world, this same type of experience enjoyable through religious music is also found in society between persons of both Christianity and Islam.

Music is a language that allows for much more than expressing one’s feelings and thoughts, because it also forces both musicians and audiences to listen, a virtue that is not always easy to enjoy in usual life situations or dialogues. If the musicians stop listening, they cannot continue playing or singing, since they would interrupt the harmony of the musical act. Learning, appreciating and enjoying silence is an initial exercise that leads these members to listen, which by itself leads them towards dialogue. It allows them to forget their differences and be united in the beauty of the music they are creating, listening to or transmitting to their audience.

Religious choirs bear yet another special relationship, which is the spiritual relationship. A choir is like a small community, where the musicians experience a sense of belonging to a group of persons who share interests and/or talents, each with their own different or special, personalities, but also with their own voice or instrumental performance which contributes to the group in a way that creates solidarity and shared experience. There is a transcending relationship that the singer feels and shares with God (he is singing to him and receiving the energy and love from him). In turn, this feeling and energy is transmitted from the singer to his other colleagues and vice-versa and also to the audience listening to him and his colleagues.

It is essential to look for common human values between both religions, such as love, compassion, fraternity, forgiveness, etc., just like in the above chant. These values are found in the essence of both Christianity and Islam and can allow us to build our relations on shared noble human values that can allow us to empathize with each other, to feel each others’ hardships and reconcile until we find peace and harmony with in the same society and shared Arab culture.

Religious music helps develop and preserve linguistic, musical and religious identities, which offer a foundation for a human, cultural and interfaith dialogue. These identities represent one of the most important bases for an authentic dialogue: one which does not obliterate one’s own identity nor denies it in order to seek acceptance from the other party. It is important to know who we are, what we really believe in and to reconcile it with our own identity before addressing the other.

In order to start a meaningful dialogue with a person from a different religion, one cannot have in mind proselytism or syncretism as an objective. Dialogue should be initiated based on values and beliefs contributed by a Christian person according to his own religion, as well as by a Muslim according to Islam.

CONCLUSION

Music “can enable people, somehow, to “get inside” each other’s minds, feel each other’s suffering, recognize each other’s shared humanity-that is, in common understanding, to have *empathy* for each other” [34].

The oriental cultures in Syria, Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula were close to each other and had many similar influences and the effects in their music. The religious factor played an important role later on in determining the use and development of music in these cultures, giving each one a part of its character.

Historically both Christianity and Islam had a moment of conflict with music or with the use of some melodies, both believing that the temptation or the effect that music might have on human souls might lead them astray from God’s ways. But Christianity found a way through reform to use music to liturgy and to use it in prayer, which helped develop music, finally flourishing through and in the Church. This was not the case in Islam since generally speaking the other side that supports music, could not establish itself, or within their religion endow to music the same importance it had in the Church.

In conclusion, there is no separation between Christian Arabic or Muslim Arabic culture. There is only the Arabic culture, rich in both Christian and Muslim elements, with its own music that both Christians and Muslims applied and made use of, each in their own way. This could be one of the bases for interfaith dialogue, since music is one of the nonviolent instruments for creating spaces for dialogue and communication, fighting thereby extremism and building on common values within a human culture of nonviolence.

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