

# Understanding Music Theory Pedagogy and the Muslim Student

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<http://theoryofpaul.net/islam-mtp/>

# Who are we?

## **Tristan Mukherjee - Orange slides**

Native of West Bengal

Trained in classical and jazz music on piano, guitar and voice

Spiritual musician fundamentally embedded in Sufi expression

Raised in Eastern culture and music

Pursued higher music education to better hone spiritual musical articulation

## **Paul Miller - Blue slides**

Native of New York (American)

Classically trained musician, violin and viola

Loose/vague Christian religious affiliation

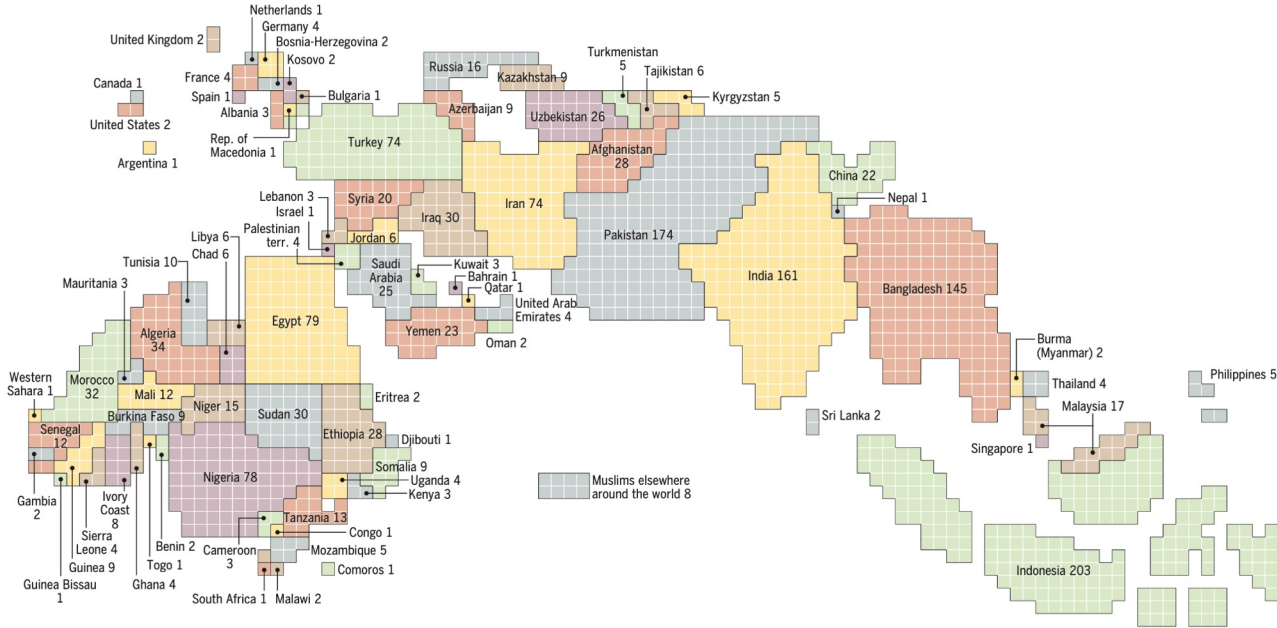
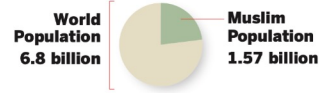
Spiritual alignment deeply influenced by music of Karlheinz Stockhausen

Performer and teacher at a university in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

## What is at stake here?

## World Distribution of Muslim Population

*This 'weighted' map of the world shows each country's relative size based on its Muslim population. Figures are rounded to the nearest million.*



Although Muslims make up nearly 25% of the world's population, they account only for about 1.1% of the population in the USA, and 5% in Canada.

In the USA, they are concentrated on the East Coast, particularly in New York State and New Jersey, whereas in Canada there are sizable populations in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia.

Nearly half of American Muslims report encountering some form of racism. Many encounter racism on American college campuses.

Sources: Mohamed Beshar et. al. (2017), Lipka (2017).

# Basic accommodations for Muslim students

**Prayer times** (*salat*). Muslims pray five times a day. These times depend on astronomical phenomena and change slightly every day; some times are more flexible than others. Breaking for prayers may require accommodations in scheduling, meetings, exams, etc.

Certain musical activities or performances may require **gender-segregated spaces**, in line with Islamic practices of modesty (*haya*). A separate space may be all that is necessary.

Islamic **dress codes** may require students to wear head garments such as a *hijab* or other coverings in class, performance and rehearsals.

Sensitivity to **religious observances**, particularly the month of **Ramadan**, may require minor adjustments to class schedules, assignment deadlines, or exam dates. Analogs in Rosh Hashanah, Easter, etc...

**Cultural sensitivity** means that teachers should ensure that course materials, discussions, and instructional approaches are respectful to Islamic students. For example: when possible, remove texts from Christian chorales or other overtly religious music studied in class; do not require students to sing the words (just sing solfège).

**Dietary restrictions** mean that especially during events or rehearsals that involve food, ensure that students have access to *halal* options.

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As with any member of a religious community: engage in **dialog** and **communicate** with students to understand their needs.

# Islamic Classical Music: Background and culture

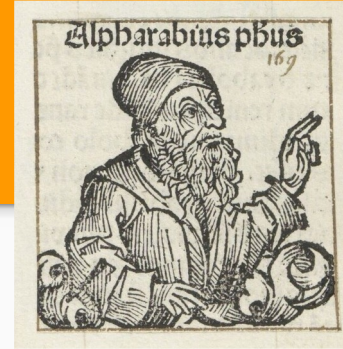
With such a vast diaspora – stretching from Canada to France, Germany, Morocco, Egypt, Nigeria, Syria – and from Iraq to Bangladesh and Indonesia, Islamic music is impossible to generalize easily.

Islamic music traces historical roots to the decades after the Prophet Muhammad's death (c. 632 CE,) to the so-called "Golden Age" (c. 8th – to 13th century CE) when scholars such as Al-Farabi (*Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr* ('Great book on music'), c. 950 CE) made significant contributions to music theory, notation, and instrument fabrication.

Traditional Islamic pedagogical methods include oral transmission *talaqqi* (derived from the Arabic word *iaqiya*: "to meet" ) and *ijaza*, meaning "permission or license to teach a text or subject".

In some *hadith*, music is criticized. Islamic scholars still dispute the role of music within their faith. However, today most agree that unless music is accompanied by unacceptable behavior or consumption of alcohol, it is *halal*.

Purported artistic impression of Al-Farabi



*Liber Chronicarum*  
(Hartmann Schedel, c. 1493 CE).

Image from *Cantigas de Santa Maria* showing European and Islamic musicians in 13th century CE playing music together.

Anonymous artist.



# What are some types of Islamic music?

Just a few notable musical repertoires associated with the Islamic world include:

1. **Quranic cantillation.** Very close to Islamic religious practice. Muslims hold the words of the Quran in extremely deep reverence. Some Islamic scholars exclude cantillation from “music,” in order to set it apart, marking it as special.
1. **Music from the Iberian peninsula.** Muslim influence on *Hispania* from c. 711 – c. 1492 CE resulted in many songs, not to mention the dispersion of Islamic instruments through Europe. This *Andalusi* music (*Al-Andalus*) influenced Troubadour traditions, Sephardic Jewish music, and other European musics of the Middle Ages.
1. **Janissary bands.** A creation of the Ottoman Turks in the 14th century CE. Used to great effect to strike terror into opposing armies. These were the first military bands. Parodied in music of Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Rameau, Gluck, Rossini, and many others.
1. **Sufi music.** Incredibly exuberant religious festivals incorporate singing and music. *Dhikr* (or *Zikr*) – “remembrance of God”. Sufi Mevlevi – whirling dance of the dervishes, symbolizing a journey of spiritual ascent and union with God. Qawwali singers such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (1948-1997) achieved great fame.
1. **Gamelan music.** While also tangentially connected to Hindu/Buddhist practices, Gamelan music is strongly aligned to the *Wali Sanga* – Islamic saints of Indonesia. Many American music schools have the advantage of housing Gamelan ensembles.
1. **Jazz.** Many Islamic artists have been drawn to the the practice of jazz, especially free jazz, such as Ahmad Jamal (1930 – 2023).
1. **The Oud (‘ud).** Islamic lute, a short-necked unfretted plucked instrument, direct ancestor of European lute (*al-‘ud*). Known throughout Muslim countries, considered the principal instrument in many. Well suited to ornamentation (trills, slides, vibrato, grace notes, etc.)

# Moving Islamic music towards the classroom (1)

Some important questions to contend with:

1. What should the role of identity be, as a part of music theory curriculum?
2. What do we give up in the curriculum, in order to make space for other cultures' music?

Aspects of musical art native to Islamic music – typically called “ethnomusicology” in western parlance – have generally fared poorly in anglo/american music theory curricula.

However, Deborah Rifkin notes that “curricular changes with the most support” at her institution included “...increase[d] offerings and engagement with diverse cultures and music” (Rifkin, 440).

Justin London encourages students to “achieve the broader goals of encouraging musical curiosity and articulateness” (London, 428), and noted that the mission statements from several major music schools mention goals, such as creating communities that are “rich with cultural, social and intellectual diversity” (ESM), or spaces that encourage “free inquiry and embrac[e] diversity” (FSU).

NASM guidelines mention “culture” 21 times. Under “Music Program Components → Musicianship”, we read:

...undergraduate musicianship studies develop or provide...(4) musical perspectives informed by studies of various cultures and historical periods...(90).

Under “Liberal Arts Degree → Competencies”:

An ability to address culture and history from a variety of perspectives (101).

# Moving Islamic music towards the classroom (2)

Some basic elements of Islamic music theory include, but are not limited to:

1. Melodic modes: *maqam*
2. Rhythm, rhythmic cycles: *wazn* or more usually, *iqa'*
3. Improvisation: *taqsim*
4. Musical form: *qawalib*
5. Composition: *ta'lif*
6. Creativity: *ibda'*
7. Song: *ughniya*

There is quite a lot of writing on all these components of Islamic music from well over a thousand years!

Given the immensity of the subject – not to mention the long literary discourse – what could be suitable for a successful class, of say, 50 minutes' duration?

1. Mention, but do not focus on Quranic cantillation.
2. Although there are many Islamic artists today specializing in well-known genres (e.g., jazz, pop, even metal bands!), teach students a concept that engages with concepts of Islamic music directly.

**Microtonal intervals** are fundamental to many genres of Islamic music, where they contribute to the sound and expressive nuance. Consequently, Islamic theory opens the idea of microtonality. Egyptian theorists embraced the scale of 24 equal-tempered quarter steps (*nim*) in the early 20th century (though this was the subject of much debate.) This concept has since evolved to the  $\frac{3}{4}$  tone (*tik*) as the predominant interval.



# A class transcription and analysis project

“The building blocks for *maqamat* are sets of 3, 4 or 5 notes (trichords, tetrachords and pentachords). The Arabic word for these sets is *jins* (plural *ajnas*). The word *jins* means the gender, type or nature of something. In general each *maqam* is made up of two main *ajnas* (sets) called lower and upper *jins*. These can be joined at the same note, at two adjacent notes, or can overlap each other.

A *maqam* may also include other secondary *ajnas* which are very useful for modulation. Instead of thinking of a *maqam* as a collection of 8 or more individual notes, it's often useful to think of it as a group of two or more *ajnas*.”

Adapted from *Maqam World* (Farrah and Sumas).

## Maqam Rast

ascending form

Rast on C      Sikah on E $\flat$       Rast on G

descending form

Rast on C      Sikah on E $\flat$       Nahawand on G

1   3/4   3/4   1   1   3/4   3/4

1   3/4   3/4   1   1   1/2   1

Maqam **Rast** has two forms shown above. In general the first form (Rast-Rast) is used on the way up, and the second form (Rast-Nahawand) is used on the way down. The secondary jins is the [Sikah](#) trichord on the 3rd note, often used in [modulation](#).

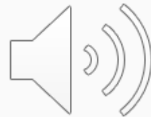
# Oud piece – Munir Bachir

**Munir Bashir** (1930 – 1997) was an *Oud* virtuoso, and a musician who was deeply connected to *maqam* system. Represents the Baghdad/Ottoman school of *Oud* playing (as opposed to Egyptian).

*Oud* ('Ud) – forerunner to western Lute (*al-'ud* → lood → lute). The most popular version has five courses of strings (Bachir here plays a six-course *Oud* at right).

*Maqam Râst* is fairly easy for western ears to understand, though some *maquam* are even closer to western scales. Bashir was criticized by some who thought he pandered to western taste.

This is the first 30 seconds of a piece that lasts almost nine minutes long. The handout/"worksheet" contains some an activity that could potentially be adapted for class use.



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