

# Islamic Music – Class Handout and Worksheet

Islamic music includes music made by Muslims. It exists geographically from Morocco to Egypt, France to Germany, Syria to Turkey, across Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia and beyond. Islamic music theory dates back to the 7th century CE and influenced Western music theory, instrument production and musical taste. Although some Islamic scholars forbid the singing or performing of what in the West is called “music”, today they are in the minority. Most Muslims accept music as an everyday part of their lives and religion.

Islamic music includes Quranic cantillation (singing of sacred texts, which is permitted (*halal*) throughout Muslim communities,) the exuberant musical celebrations of the Sufis, Janissary band music, and much more. Today we will hear the beginning of a piece for *Oud* ('*Ud*), and instrument that Muslims introduced to Europeans during their rule of *Al-Andalus* (modern-day Spain), which dates from c. 711 – c. 1492. This was a time when Christians, Jews and Muslims lived – for the most part – together in relative peace with one another.

The performance is by Munir Bashir (1930 – 1997), a master of the instrument who represents the Baghdad style of *Oud* playing. It is called simply “*maqam Râst*”. What does this mean? Islamic music generally employs scales called *maqamat*. Here is a simple explanation of *maqam* by Johnny Farraj, from his web site [www.maqamworld.com](http://www.maqamworld.com):

The Arabic *Maqam* (plural *Maqamat*) is a system of scales, habitual melodic phrases, modulation possibilities, ornamentation techniques and aesthetic conventions that together form a rich melodic framework and artistic tradition. The *maqam's* melodic course (in both composed or improvised music) within that framework is called *sayr* in Arabic.

Each *maqam* scale can be built by chaining together two (or in some cases, three) scale fragments or building blocks called *jins* (pl. *ajnas*). The *maqam* gets its intervals, melodic behavior and overall mood from these constituent *ajnas*. The first *jins* always starts the *maqam* scale with its tonic at the 1st degree, and the second *jins* starts at the *ghammaz* (modulation point) of the first *jins* (usually its last note). If a third *jins* is used, its tonic coincides with the second *jins's* *ghammaz*, and so on. The note immediately below the tonic is called the leading tone.

Traditionally, each *maqam* is based on a scale. The first note in the scale is called the tonic. *Maqam* scales are usually made of 7 notes that repeat at the octave, although a few *maqam* scales may extend beyond 8 notes. In addition, a few *maqam* scales do not achieve octave equivalence at the 8th note.

According to tradition, *maqamat* are classified into families based on sharing the same first (root) *jins*. The root *jins* plays the largest role in defining the *maqam's* character. The most common *maqam* in the branch usually shares its name with the root *jins*. Remaining *maqamat* in the same family are called branch *maqamat*, and are based on the use of a different second (upper) *jins*.

We will work together to try and transcribe – in whatever way you choose – the opening. There are several clues already given to you on the back of this handout. Note that Bashir's performance transposes the *maqam* to F. Some questions you might want to discuss:

1. How is the *maqam* expressed in this music?
2. How can we notate the microtonal intervals? Try to sing the *maqam* scale (up and down) with whatever solfège works for you.
3. What ornaments are used? How can we identify the main notes, and notate the ornaments?
4. To what degree is the concept of time signature useful in this music?
5. What about key signature? Is this a useful concept?
6. Are there repeated segments (beginning,) cadential segments, or internal patterns?
7. What do we gain, and what do we lose by transcribing this music into Western notation?

**Maqam Rast**

ascending form

descending form

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*.



'Ud made by Emmanuel Venious in 1916

For the recording, a complete sample transcription, and more information on Islamic music (including links to videos, images, and texts,) please follow this QR code.



Munir Bashir (1930 – 1997)



# Maquam Râst

Munir Bashir

