

Music and Morality

Listening to Dangers Inherent in the Cosmos

Modern scholarship on the history of music in the Middle East often places Islam in moral opposition to music.¹ Yet Islam—in both its orthodox and its heterodox forms—was never something apart from the twelve-maqam system's conception, nor was it separable from the structures of empire in which the twelve-maqam system thrived. The institutions of Islam had been enmeshed with the structures of empire for several hundred years before the twelve-maqam system emerged. Thus, even as music became a subject of Graeco-Arabic writings, texts about a spiritual culture of “listening” (*sama'*) also emerged. Listening practices in Islam developed as an aspect of Sufism, and the mystical conception of Islam fostered by Sufism maintained a strong degree of influence in the Mongol and Turkic courts, where the twelve-maqam system gained dominance. Mystical practices like spiritual listening provided mechanisms to know the truth of Islam without direct knowledge of Arabic or the Qur'an. This made Sufism a key force in Islam's spread beyond the Arabic-speaking world.

Indeed, Sufism would prove hard to separate from dynastic governance even when dynasts sought other avenues of Islamic spirituality. The Safavid Dynasty officially denounced Sufism in favor of Shi'ism when they came to power in the sixteenth century. The importing of Shi'a clergy to create their new Shi'a empire brought with it attacks on the Sufism patronized by past dynasts, and this included attacks on the musical practices the new Shi'a religious class associated with Sufism. While these attacks insisted on the immorality and debauchery of both Sufism and music, they were political arguments that served to elevate Shi'ism over Sufism in a political context. Sufism, however, never fully ceded its political power, nor did all Safavid rulers fully remove it from their own spiritual lives. Both

mystical or juristic actors within Islamic institutions were seeking political agency within the structures of dynastic governance, and such political agency was an aspect of religious authority.²

The ability to perceive the divine directly via sound—be it the spoken word, metered chanting, or full musical expression—held a special place in conceptions of Islamic spiritual life before the rise of the twelve-maqam system. The culture of listening grew alongside the twelve-maqam system, similarly premised on a body of previously established wisdom from Arabic sources. Though writings on listening belong to a distinct literature on Sufism, the legitimation of both music and listening was rooted in a similar culture of previously established knowledge and wisdom. Conversely, the more formal ceremonial aspects of rituals for remembrance through chanting (*ḡikr*) or divine musical listening (*samaʿ*) were closely related to the broader activities found in the ongoing culture of courtly gatherings organized for formal entertainment that often involved a great deal of music and poetry. Song texts associated with the twelve-maqam system and songs of majles at the court contain songs about the Sufi *samaʿ* as well as songs that use Sufistic poetic metaphor.

The relationship between music-making and Sufism vis-à-vis the court culture of the twelve-maqam system can be established from the body of mystical writings that address the subject of *samaʿ*, which appear concurrently with writings about the twelve-maqam system. During the dominance of the twelve-maqam system, many older Sufi texts from Arabic were translated and circulated in Persian, while new Persian writings also appeared. Some writers about the twelve-maqam system were also mystical poets. While texts about listening initially appeared in larger works about Sufism—*adābīyāt i-taṣawwuf*—later discussions of spiritual listening appeared next to descriptions of the twelve-maqam system when genres of Sufi writings became less common after the fifteenth century.³ The ideas and practices surrounding *samaʿ* were not ultimately a countercultural phenomenon: concerns about how to do it properly mirrored concerns about how to make music properly as a matter of objective perspective. Both had implications for how humanity would or would not benefit from music, and the benefits and deterrents stemmed from the set order of the cosmos.

Writings about the practice of listening brought together two perspectives, one of Sufi practice and one of orthodox intellectual understanding. This dialog of perspectives highlighted the unique temporal challenges of music's morality in a cosmos ruled by divine laws that manifest in physical ways. The systematic affect of the twelve-maqam system on a listener extended from divine, cosmic realities. Sufistic writings about listening ultimately had to consider this situation and the problems of aural cosmic power vis-à-vis the imperfection of humanity. In this context, Islam as whole was not morally adverse to music. It did, however, need to consider the implications of music's power in the universe. There were legitimate reasons to be wary of music's cosmic power, when considering the fallibility of humanity rather than the perfection of systematic musical structure.

Though many discussions about *sama'* in Sufi texts did refer to specific Sufi gatherings dedicated to listening to music and poetry in order to attain unity with God, they did so in the course of discussing the broader implications of finding God through listening. While descriptions of music and the twelve-maqam system often started from defining the nature of sound, so too did discussions of *sama'* begin from the question of simply hearing sound. In discussions of listening, there was no limit to how one might find unity with God through hearing a sound, be it through the Qur'an itself, music, poetry, idle speech, or abstract noises. In one of the Sufi texts written in Persian, *Kashf al-mahjūb*, the Sufi teacher 'Ali ibn 'Usman Hujviri (d. c. 1072) discussed the word *sama'* first as the general term *listening* and classified it as one of the five senses, all of which may be used to perceive God and the greatness of God's creation. He stated that listening was the most important of all the senses because in order for God's message to be known it must be heard.⁴ Yet all kinds of sound could reach humanity through the sense of hearing. In one story authors commonly recounted in Sufi texts, Satan appeared to the mystic Junayd (830–910) in a dream and Junayd asked Satan if he ever had the opportunity to produce evil among his companions. Satan then told Junayd that he had the opportunity to affect Junayd's companions every time they were listening (*sama'*) or looking (*naẓar*).⁵

While creating music of the twelve-maqam system was a specialized activity based on specific knowledge, most humans had access to hearing regardless of their moral or intellectual abilities. This was fraught with peril, as it opened up everyone to all kinds of influences regardless of their preparedness for such influence. Yet within the larger context of discussing how listening could bring one closer to God or perhaps lead one astray, writings about listening did often place music in a favorable category, at times for its accessibility. Most writings on listening mention music or melody (*lahn*), both in terms of specific Sufi practices and in more general terms. In both his Arabic and his Persian writings, the eminent scholar Ghazzali (1059–1111) named a variety of different types of spiritually beneficial musical listening in addition to the official Sufi ceremony. These additional categories valued accessibility, such as hearing songs that people sang on their pilgrimage to Mecca, songs for mourning, songs for holidays such as weddings, love songs between husbands and wives, parents and children, Muslims and God, as well as songs that promoted bravery.⁶

While discussions of the twelve-maqam system focused on achieving a perfect method for creating music based on rarified forms of knowledge, writing about listening confronted how humanity had universal access to all kinds of sound regardless of education or spiritual preparation. Texts about listening addressed the ease with which human ears can perceive any kind of sound either actively or passively, and weighed the benefits and pitfalls of music as an overt sound phenomenon created specifically to manipulate the human condition. These texts address the complex moral landscape created by music's accessibility

to all people and attempt to balance multiple factors that determine the meaning of music in context.

THE BASIS FOR APPROVING AND DISAPPROVING OF MUSIC IN SAMA' TEXTS

The vast majority of Sufi texts about sama' as a systematic practice directly addressed whether or not it was lawful (*ḥalāl*), generally allowable (*mobāḥ*), morally questionable (*makrūh*), or forbidden (*ḥarām*) in Islam. The most important influences on how Sufi authors viewed the morality of sama' in these terms, derived from a particular author's understanding of how various considerations related to sama' were viewed by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions as well as other great Muslims. Some of the stories that conveyed this information were about the private life of the Prophet Muhammad and remain part of Islam's hadith tradition tracing back to his wife 'Aisha. In addition to Muhammad, the actions of his close companions Abu Bakr (c. 573–634) and 'Umar (c. 584–644) as well as his cousin 'Ali (c. 599–661) figure prominently into these stories. One commonly referenced story refers to an event where 'Aisha was listening to a female slave sing:

'Aisha said: one of the slaves was a singer and she sang something before me and the Prophet came. He was in such a state of ecstasy (*ḥāl*) and he sang too. Later 'Umar came. That slave fled. The Prophet smiled. 'Umar said, "Oh Prophet what has made you smile?" The Prophet told him of the ecstasy. 'Umar said, "I will not leave this house until I have heard everything the Prophet heard." The Prophet of God ordered that slave to come and sing something and 'Umar heard [her].⁷

Another similar story from 'Aisha shows Abu Bakr having a very different reaction to a similar situation:

It is known that the Prophet was in the house of 'Aisha. Two slave girls were there singing something and he did not stop them. . . . Abu Bakr said two times, "Instruments (*mizmār*) of Satan in the house of the Prophet!" The Prophet said, "Calm down Abu Bakr! Every group (*qawm*) has a holiday and our holiday is today."⁸

Both of these stories specifically described Muhammad listening to singing and poetry and approving of it even when performers and other listeners demonstrate a certain amount of shame in it. Another hadith commonly cited to demonstrate Muhammad's general approval of recreational viewing of performance included a narration from 'Aisha where she recounted watching several Ethiopians (*zangīyān*) engaging in either war games or singing, playing drums and stomping their feet near a mosque. In recounting this event, 'Aisha was quoted as saying that Muhammad specifically asked her if she would like to watch the Ethiopians, and when she told him that she did, they both watched until she has seen enough.⁹

Though these were some of the most common stories about Muhammad in reference to his approval of music, Sufi authors also cited other stories about the Prophet, many of which specifically associated Muhammad with the Sufi ritual of sama'. 'Abd al-Mafakhir Yahya Bakharzi (d. 1324) recounted the story of a cleric who prohibited sama' but then saw Muhammad doing the Sufi ritual in a mosque:

The cleric said: one day I was in the mosque sitting in the corner. A group came and sat in the corner and they spoke and sang (*qawl*) and did sama'. I in my heart opposed it, that in the house of God they would say poems and sing. When the night came I saw the Prophet sit in the same area of the mosque and Abu Bakr sat in front of him and sang (*qawl*) and the Prophet put his celebrated hand on his chest in the same way as a person that is in spiritual ecstasy (*wajd*). I said to myself, "The Prophet is hearing sama'. This group, why did I oppose them? The Prophet came to my side and said, "This truth is from God" (*hathā ḥaq min ḥaq*).¹⁰

Other Sufi authors spoke of Muhammad appearing to people in dreams and stating that the sama' ritual of the Sufis was permissible but that the Qur'an must had to be read before it began and after it ended.¹¹ Several Sufi authors also stated that Muhammad said there would be sama' in heaven.¹² Yet other Sufi authors legitimated the Sufi practice of sama' by recounting how Muhammad recited poetry out of joy after the angel Gabriel told him that the pious Muslims would enter heaven five hundred years before worldly people.¹³

Though Sufi authors were familiar with a wide variety of lore concerning the Prophet Muhammad's approval of musical expression with the voice and sama', some authors did cite examples of the Prophet and his companions speaking ill of formal musical practice, *ghinā'*. One Sufi author quoted Muhammad as saying "Music (*ghinā'*) cultivates disharmony as water cultivates seeds."¹⁴ Yet another stated, "'Ali disavowed Mu'awiyah because he had female slaves that sang. And he looked at the Ethiopian woman singing and he said she was associated with Satan and those like Satan; and also they said that this is the primary reason we hate music (*ghinā'*)."¹⁵ In addition to these outright admonitions of music, several Sufi texts also noted an incident in the life of Muhammad where the Prophet put his fingers in his ears upon hearing some kind of music being played. Though the citation of this story suggests that it would be used to demonstrate the impermissibility of music, texts that recount this tale often did so in order to explain that it did not signal Muhammad's aversion to music, citing the lack of information about the intention of his action.¹⁶

Some Sufi authors looked to later Muslim leaders to consider the permissibility of sama'. One common story recounted someone asking a later Muslim leader, usually ibn Jarir al-Tabari (839–923), whether or not sama' would be in heaven or hell on the Day of Judgment. He replied that it would not go to heaven, but it would also not go to hell.¹⁷

Hence, the varying ideas any given author discussed about the actions and statements of Muhammad, his companions, and other early Muslim leaders formed a basis for the different perspectives on music and the moral validity of *sama'*. Music, however, was not the only practice under moral scrutiny in these discussions. Indeed, some Sufi authors dedicated most of their defense of *sama'* to the defense of poetry, treating poetry as having the most misunderstood moral standing. Despite this defense, Sufi authors also designated certain types of poetry as immoral.¹⁸ Thus, Ghazzali declared *sama'* impermissible if it used poetry containing cursing and text that glorified drunkenness, despite his overall defense of poetry as moral. A more common issue related to poetry's permissibility discussed by Sufi authors was the immorality of verbal trickery, referred to as *lahū al-ḥadīth*. Some of the criticism of music addressed by Sufi authors came from the classification of music as *lahū al-ḥadīth*. Yet Sufi authors pointed out that music was not in fact verbal trickery and that this classification is reserved for speech that is meant to deceive and lead one astray. Still, Ghazzali specifically designated the poetry of unbelievers as *lahū al-ḥadīth*, as well as the Persian literary tradition of the *Shāhnāmeḥ*, which included glorification pre-Islamic Persian kings who were unbelievers.¹⁹ One author writing during the reign of Shah Solomon Safavid (r. 1666–1692) spoke especially harshly of this genre, noting that “They read the poem of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* that is mostly stories about *Fars* and their explanation; and the verses of it are many and yet that which is mentioned in the *Shāhnāmeḥ* is mostly lies and exaggerations of the poetic tongue from the types of lies and exaggerations of the devil.”²⁰

With so much focus on the morality of specific texts, music as a general practice or concept was not often treated as morally questionable as an independent phenomenon, but rather as a question of context. Texts used in song were one factor, the nature of performance settings was another. While musical instruments in general were occasionally singled out as immoral, Ghazzali actually declared music played with certain specific musical instruments to be forbidden: the *rebāb*, *chang*, *barbad*, *rūd*, and *nāy-i 'irāqī*. Ghazzali conceded there was nothing wrong with the instruments themselves; however, because they were associated with wine drinkers they were forbidden.²¹ Muhammad Bin Jalal Razavi, writing later in the seventeenth century, confirmed a general association between musical instruments and drunkenness, noting that jurists said that musical instruments were forbidden, while also noting their association with wine drinkers.²²

These statements related to earlier ideas expressed in Arabic writings not translated into Persian. Thus ibn Abi al-Dunya (823–894) specifically associated musical instruments with “singing girls” (*qīnāt*), immorality (*zinā'*), the drinking of wine (*shurb al-khamr*), and the wearing of silk (*lubs al-ḥarīr*).²³ This combination of factors associated musical instruments not just with wine drinking, but with a specific lifestyle that was generally quite lavish. Sufi authors occasionally attributed immorality to the lavishness of the rich explicitly. In addition to Ghazzali's com-

ments another statement found in other texts noted that while certain Sufi sects may or may not use musical instruments, Muhammad generally warned against the immorality of spending time with rich people and the king.²⁴

The overall focus on satisfying physical desires and wants was a key aspect of the context in which music could be immoral. Ibn Mutaḥhar (1049–1141) described a type of forbidden samaʿ he referred to as physical samaʿ (*samaʿ-ī ṭabʿī*), in which “they play instruments (*mizmār*) and they sing songs and poems and the desire of enchantment (*lahū-ī ṭarab*) comes around and that is a sin and it is forbidden (*ḥarām*).”²⁵ Yet the idea that music’s immoral position was largely a question of its context rather than its actual nature is confirmed in the *Kashf al-maḥjūb*, where Hujviri stated:

Anyone who says that he does not like melody (*laḥn*) and voices (*aṣvāt*) and musical instruments is lying, or making hypocrisy or he is not in his right mind or beyond the known classifications of man or animal. They prohibit [these things] in order to observe the law of God but the jurists agree that when musical instruments are not used to find debauchery in the heart through hearing they are allowed (*mobāḥ*).²⁶

THE POWER OF MUSIC AND SOUND

The extensive consideration of the morality of deliberate listening extended from the considerable power of music and words over the human condition. The twelve-maqam system could be used to create music that appealed directly to the physical realities of the human condition, and skilled musicians could play in such a way as to manipulate listeners’ bodies. Divine messages came via words. The Qurʾan was the word of God, delivered to Muhammad via the voice of the angel Gabriel. These two realms of sound held enough power over the human condition that they required much thought in considering how to encounter such power via listening. Writings about samaʿ discussed extensively how hearing things—be they music, or poetry, or something specifically spiritual such as the Qurʾan—could be a powerful and dangerous occurrence. Hujviri described how the ‘Abbasid musician Isaac Musli walked through a garden singing, which caused a bird to die and fall out of a tree.²⁷ Bakharzi described how the prophet David “Sang on his breath and chanted psalms in a beautiful voice to such an extent that fairies, people and birds gathered to hear his singing and from his assemblies several hundred corpses were removed.”²⁸ Qushayri recounted a longer tale of death via sound, which he attributed to someone named Daraj:

We . . . were walking by the shore of the Tigris between Basra and Oboleh. I saw a beautiful palace. There was a tower in that palace. There was a man in that tower and a female slave in front of him. She sang this verse:

The path to God is a love that is given from me to you
Everyday the color is changing however it is made more beautiful by you.

I saw a young man standing below the tower and his hands were cupped in prayer. He tore his clothes as he listened and said, "Oh, slave, by the life of your master repeat [this line]: 'Every day you change your color, but this one is the most beautiful on you.'" That master said to her, "Sing that which he wants." The slave girl sang and the young man said, "Allah who is God is with me in this very same way so that every day it is a different color." He then let out a yell and died. The master of the palace said to the slave girl, "I set you free for God" and the residents of Basra came out and they buried him (the dead man). The master of the palace stood and said, "You do not know me and I do not know you. I called you to witness everything; so everything that is mine I give away for God's sake and I set every slave free." And he tied a piece of fine linen around his waste (*izār*), threw another one on his shoulder, and went away and they never saw or heard from him again.²⁹

Descriptions of words and melody killing people who heard them—or otherwise harming them when they were heard—are a key theme in writings about *sama'*. There were tales of how verses of the Qur'an as well as prayers could have the same affect as music and poetry. Thus, Hujviri recounted a series of annihilations coming from such Islamic texts:

One of the main companions of the Prophet recited a verse of the Qur'an while he was presiding over public worship, let out a cry, and died. Abu Jafar Juhani, a distinguished follower, upon hearing a verse that Salih Murri read to him, let out a loud groan and left this world. Ibrahim Bakha'i states that while he was passing through a village in the neighborhood of Kufa he saw an old woman praying. As the signs of holiness were visible on her visage, he waited until she finished praying and then addressed her in hopes of obtaining a blessing. She said to him, "Do you know the Qur'an?" He said yes. She said a verse at which point she cried out and sent her soul forth to meet God.³⁰

When writings described such dramatic deaths happening to Sufis, it was treated as an aspect of weakness on the part of the Sufi, or some other imperfection in their execution of *sama'*. In a commonly recounted story of a young inexperienced Sufi disciple (*murīd*), his inability to control his response to the Sufi incantation of prayers and remembrance of holy figures (*zīkr*) cost him his life:

A young man was in companionship with Junayd and every time he heard something from the *zīkr* he would yell. One day Junayd said, "If you do this again my companionship will become forbidden to you." So from that time when he heard something he would not move and a visible transformation came about in him and from the root of every hair ran drops of perspiration. One day he (Junayd) recited something, [and the young man] cried out and died.³¹

Not all of these types of stories ended in death, nor was inexperience always the cause of difficulty in *sama'*. Some stories recounted how mystics who showed no affect during *sama'* at a younger age could have dangerous overreactions to it in old age.³² Physical weakness and mental weakness were the shared features of

those who were overcome in sama' to the point of death. Absence such weakness, Sufis who properly conducted sama' could experience superhuman abilities with no threat of death. Suhrawardi (c. 1145–1234) described various situations where people in sama' did amazing things:

It has been stated by some of the sheikhs who say that "We saw groups walking on water, and they did sama' on the water in extreme stupefaction and wonder. And there was a group that did sama' in the fire and did not know the heat of the fire." And a great man said, "I saw a person that in the time of sama' took the flames of a candle and put them in his eye. I went close to his eye; the fire and the light came out from his eye."³³

Such stories where people accomplished amazing physical feats were common demonstrations of the power of sama' in the presence of someone who was strong enough to withstand the power of what was being heard.³⁴ Ultimately, these types of stories highlight the volatility of organized sound and how people perceived it as a powerful cosmological medium. Regardless of whether or not the sound was music or poetry, or something more explicitly spiritual such as the Qur'an or a blessing, it had the real ability to drive a human being to the physical extreme of death or even beyond such extremes into the realm of capabilities beyond the human body's known capacity. Under these circumstances, music was something akin to dynamite: a very powerful substance that could come to great ends if used properly, or could easily result in death if used improperly.

Despite these concerns, authors made conflicting statements about the role of the listener in determining the impact of sama' on a person's moral being. The condition of the listener was often considered a primary factor in whether or not sama' would be beneficial or detrimental, either physically or spiritually. In the text titled *Miṣbāḥ al-hidāyah wa miftāḥ al-kifāyah* by 'Izz al-Din Kashani (c. 1250–1334), the author states that "The virtue of sama' is that it strengthens everything that reigns in the kingdom of humanity and makes it better. Hence, within the reality of a group that is doing [it] and belonging to their transmission of love and devotion of truth, sama' promotes and assists in the search for perfection. And in the reality of some for whom their hearts are empty it is the cause of ruin and trouble."³⁵ Hujviri further described sama' as "like the sun, which shines on all things but affects them differently according to their degree. It burns or illumines, dissolves or nurtures." He also stated that "Sama' is calamitous and a source of evil to anyone whose whole heart is not absorbed in the thought of God."³⁶

This notion that the value of sama' was delimited by the nature of the person listening stood in conflict with the most significant spiritual by-product of sama': wajd (*wajd*). The purpose of doing sama' was to produce actual contact between an individual and God, resulting in an ecstatic euphoric state referred to as wajd. Texts described wajd as something that occurred spontaneously in the course of sama', and while an individual doing sama' could prepare for it to occur, indi-

viduals could not actually make it occur. Indeed, it was possible for wajd to come upon a person who was neither seeking it nor prepared to experience it. This is the primary significance of the many stories authors tell about people being killed by hearing something: in an instant they had direct contact with the truth of God, were overwhelmed by it, and died.

For Sufis who specifically sought the presence of God through sound, wajd was described as causing an immense euphoria that often provoked movement in the body. Some authors referred to this movement as dance (*raqs*); others distinguished it as something quite different from dance. In all cases the movement was spontaneous and beyond the control of the person experiencing it. It could cause the person to tear their cloths apart, and for this reason Sufi discussions of sama' sometimes included a discussion about the protocols surrounding the tearing apart of ones robes. Additionally, people experiencing wajd could be capable of doing things that were considered physically impossible, hence the descriptions of Sufis walking on water, standing in fire, and putting the candle's flame in their eyes without hurting themselves. Bakharzi cited a description of wajd stating, "The condition of a person experiencing wajd is as such that at the time of wajd . . . they could drive a sword into his face and he would not experience the perfunctory pain of it."³⁷ He also remarked, "[For] the person who experiences the wajd of sama' it is . . . a substitute for food and from it they get the same nourishment that is from food. The dear ones break fast once in two or three days because their soul (*nafs*) gets the joy of food and its nourishment. If they hear sama' they come into wajd. To them it is the equivalent of food."³⁸

There was some debate among Sufi authors about whether sama' could be a truly systematic practice done to achieve wajd via specified methods, or if wajd had to be a more spontaneous experience in the midst of listening. In one of the earliest Sufi texts written in Persian, Mustamli Bakharzi (d. 1042) asserted that sama' should only involve sudden inspiration (*ḥāl*) and it was illegitimate to approach sama' as a cognizant realm of knowledge with aims and goals that could be systematically achieved (*'ilm*).³⁹ Bakharzi further asserted that sama' was completely spontaneous and could not be done at a set time because one did not know when or how the inspiration for sama' would come.⁴⁰ Despite this emphasis on spontaneity, many authors agreed that while sama' could strictly involve *ḥāl*, it also had the potential to be an *'ilm* in which one could know how to predispose oneself to achieve wajd via sama' and take systematic steps toward achieving wajd when listening.⁴¹ For this reason, many Sufi discussions of sama' included a section on the decorum of sama' that addressed the proper way to prepare oneself in order to achieve wajd and how to conduct oneself in the presence of those experiencing wajd.

This debate about *ḥāl* versus *'ilm* extended into discussions about the content of what one hears during sama'. Many texts about sama' asserted that there was a relationship between what a listener hears and their ability to achieve wajd by

hearing it. Many texts on sama' also attributed a special power to music in the production of wajd. Qushayri noted, "No one can disavow enjoying a nice melody and finding repose in it because children become calm from a nice melody and the camels haul difficult heavy loads in the desert over long and hot distances to the nice melody of the camel herder."⁴² Kashani stated, "Anyone who is not able to find pleasure in a nice melody shows that his heart is dead or the hearing of his interior self is ruined."⁴³ Another anonymous text noted, "In all of the notes from the melodies of music is the secret of the divine secrets."⁴⁴ Ghazzali took this assertion somewhat further, positioning music as the most significant inspirational force in sama'. Indeed, Ghazzali insisted that hearing music was actually more powerful than hearing the Qur'an. One of the reasons he gave for making this assertion was that some sections of the Qur'an were dedicated to specific questions of law and living. These sections were intended to simply convey specific information rather than to inspire a direct experience of God's presence. Another reason he gave for privileging music over the Qur'an in sama' was that the Qur'an had to always be the same and it could not and should not be altered. By contrast music was free to explore all kinds of variety and to adjust to the mood and taste of the listener.⁴⁵

Despite all of this attention to what kinds of sounds were appropriate for sama' and the creation of wajd, authors of sama' texts also asserted that it was possible for anything, even something nonsensical or perhaps even immoral, to be useful and good for sama'. Examples authors cited of the latter phenomenon included people finding inspiration in the squeaking of a water wheel, the ringing of a gong, and the yelling of merchants in the market.⁴⁶ The infinite nature of God implied that divinity existed anywhere and everywhere. This meant that it was possible to perceive the presence of God in even the most mundane sounds of everyday life.

Additionally, Ghazzali noted that Sufis and other people focused on God could listen to immoral forbidden things and not be harmed by them.⁴⁷ One story commonly recounted by Sufi authors described a great Sufi master entering a room where beginners learning how to do sama' were practicing. Fearing the imperfections of their practice could affect the great master, the students stopped. However, the great master informed them that they could continue, because he was in such a spiritually high place that no profane sounds could affect him.⁴⁸

THE PROBLEMS OF FALLIBILITY AND IMPERFECTION WITHIN THE HUMAN CONDITION

In describing the various things one should do in sama' to find wajd and perhaps even complete communion with God via the removal of the self (*fanā'*), several problems consistently arose. One issue related to faking wajd and generally pretending to participate fully in sama' when in fact the listener was not fully engaged in the process. Authors of sama' texts occasionally endorsed a "fake-it-until-you-

make-it” approach to learning how to properly do sama’. Conversely, the act of faking sama’ and pretending to focus on God when in fact the listener was focused on something else was considered heresy and blasphemy. Sufi authors discussed this at length: to do sama’ without devotion was a sin that one could easily commit without intending to do so. Authors stressed that people doing sama’ should hold themselves back from the bodily movement *wajd* caused, only moving when they simply could not stop themselves from doing so. This would avoid the possibility of going through the motions before achieving *wajd*, which would result in pretending to have the experience and generally misrepresenting one’s relationship with God. While it was possible to move truthfully in agreement with another person’s *wajd*, it was equally possible to move falsely and sinfully in pure imitation, acting as if you had found connection with God rather than actually experiencing any true connection.⁴⁹

This was an important issue in discussions of sama’. In a common example of how sinful it was to fake sama’, Bakharzi recounted how people reacted to a sheikh who was fond of doing sama’:

[He] did sama’ often. They said to him, “You are being excessive with sama’.” He said, “In gatherings we are busy with sama’. It is better than those who sit and make gossip.” His retort was heard by another sheikh. He said, “Alas . . . one sin in sama’ is worse than many years of gossiping.”⁵⁰

The point of this exchange was that committing a sin in sama’ necessarily meant committing a sin directly against God. If people pretended to do sama’ they were in affect lying to God and the chances of this occurring increased the more one did sama’. By contrast, gossiping was a lesser evil. Even though it was a sin, it was a sin against humanity rather than against God.

This point was reinforced by another story involving a man in *wajd* admonishing another man who was faking *wajd* in his midst:

Zu al-Nun Mesri came to Baghdad with his singer (*qawāl*) and a group sought permission for him to sing something. The sheikh gave his permission and the singer started [to sing]. . . . The heart of Zu al-Nun became happy and he rose and came into *wajd* and he fell and destroyed his forehead and blood poured from it and he fell to the ground. And from that group one rose as if he was in the sama’. Zu al-Nun looked at him . . . and that person sat down and this sitting down was from the fact that the person knew that he did not have truth and good intentions and he must not be in *wajd*.⁵¹

In this story the true believer was able to identify and scorn the pretense of someone faking *wajd*, even as his own true experience of *wajd* left him injured. Thus, even as *wajd* lifted one believer up, human behavior and bad intentions made another participant a hypocrite. This type of hypocrisy was of great concern, with much space in writings about sama’ dedicated to discussing the intentional faking of *wajd*.

The bad intentions of a given individual were, however, not the only hindrance to achieving union with the divine through sama'. Another issue presented by the human condition was the worldly aspect of the soul. Some writings about sama' described the soul as a single entity, referring to it as either *nafs* (*nafs*) or *ruh* (*rūh*). Others confront the divided soul of Islamic thought, which had two parts: the soul's worldly aspect (*nafs*) and the soul's spiritual aspect (*rūh*). In this model of the soul, the *ruh* consistently functioned as a person's connection to God, while the *nafs* occupied a significantly more complicated position. Though it could function as an evil spiritual force driving people toward worldly things, it could also function as an entry point for worldly things to join with the spiritual world. It could also function as a subsidiary of the *ruh* that was necessarily involved in the worldly state of an individual but was nevertheless controlled by the *ruh*. In relation to sama', sound had an allure for both aspects of the soul, and music specifically had functions in the spiritual realm that directly involved the soul. Depending on the spiritual state of the person listening, music could have an affect on the *ruh* or the *nafs* with the former generally treated as a positive and spiritual experience and the latter generally treated as a worldly experience that could have negative implications. Qushayri stated that

The effect of *wajd* in sama' is due to the good melodies and the measured voices, and pleasure in those things is the providence of the *ruh* and only that. Or the bringing together of voices with the meaning of poetic verses and the relishing of that which is held in common between the *ruh* and the heart in the truth of those seeking God and between the *ruh* and the *nafs* (*nufūs*) in the truth of ruined people.⁵²

Under this scenario, listening to music could be spiritually positive or spiritually negative, just depending on which aspect of the soul it touched. Hence, Bakharzi stated, "Every person that hears sama' in truth becomes a truthful person and every person that listens with the *nafs* becomes an atheist" and "[For] every person that hears sama' from the greed of the *nafs* the hearing of it is forbidden (*ḥarām*)."⁵³ Ibn Mutaḥhar described three categories of sama': general (*'ām*), special (*khāṣ*), and most special (*akḥaṣ*). While the special and most special sama' involved lesser and greater degrees of spiritual listening, when ibn Mutaḥhar described general sama' he stated that it "is heard with the *nafs* and it brings [moral] bankruptcy."⁵⁴ This ability for the *nafs* to respond to music and turn the hearing of music into something evil even led various authors to state that sama' could only be beneficial to individuals in which "the heart is alive and the *nafs* is dead."⁵⁵ Even with this negative view of the *nafs*, there was not complete unanimity on the idea that the *nafs* would cause a negative reaction with music if present. Bakharzi noted, "when the *ruh* gets enjoyment from melodies (*naghmāt*) the *nafs* that is evil (*ḥavā'i*) is weakened."⁵⁶

In addition to the issues presented by the worldliness of the *nafs*, authors of texts about sama' also described various other imperfections of the human con-

dition as a major hurdle in attempting to use music and sound to find communion with God. While sama' in theory could put one in direct contact with God, authors often described the Sufi practice of sama' as having become nothing more than a social gathering with all kinds of moral pitfalls. Thus Kashani states:

Most of the crowds that are present in this time base it (sama') on sensual desire and physical enjoyment, not on the rule of truth and devotion and the search for increasing hal that the position of this method was originally based on. And the cause of the presence of groups in the assembly of sama', the motive, is consuming food so that in the assembly it is expected; and [it is for] the group preferring dance and lust (*lawu*) and enchantment (*tarab*) and social delight (*'asharat*) and groups desiring to witness prohibited things and morally questionable (*makrūh*) things and groups that summon worldly aspects.⁵⁷

Another common complaint about sama' in practice was the concern that common people (*'avvām*) would participate in it. This concern was based on the belief that the vulgar masses were spiritually lacking to such an extent that hearing music could only act on their nafs and thus be spiritually harmful. Qushayri stated, "I heard that sama' is forbidden for the common people because they still have nafs."⁵⁸ He also quoted the early Islamic jurist Shafi (767–820) as saying that "[Sama'] is not forbidden, but for the common people it is morally questionable such that if a person makes it his profession his witness is rejected [at court]."⁵⁹ Ghazzali took a slightly different view noting that a common person who does sama' "is allowed because enjoyment of any kind is allowed, except if he builds his custom and character [on it] and most of his time is made for the purpose of it. This is the same stupid person whose witness is refused."⁶⁰ There is a certain contradiction in how often guidelines for commoners must be discussed and how often they are barred from sama'. Bakharzi actually gave the protocols for what to do when the Sufis' sama' was with a singer who was a commoner. Yet he also suggested that sama' should always be done at night so that the common people did not know about it.⁶¹

Ultimately, what authors who discuss sama' were attempting to work out were the difficulties involved in bridging the divide between the imperfection of humanity and the perfection of God. The goal of sama' was to bring one into contact with God, however the various imperfections and intricacies of the human condition inevitably entered the picture and hindered this goal. In embodying both human and divine elements, music necessarily became part of this ongoing negotiation between the worldly imperfection of humanity and the ultimate perfection of God. On one hand, music was a cosmic force that could be produced systematically by humanity and thus had the potential to provide a bridge into the spiritual realm. On the other hand, music in the hands of humanity's imperfection could not guarantee the right spiritual outcome. This situation necessarily precluded the possibility that music and sama' could ever be consistently treated

as a wholly moral practice for human beings, who were inherently fallible, even in their search for God.

CONCLUSION

Problems presented by musical forms of listening have four different sources. Initially, there was no clarity in the Islamic historical or religious record regarding how music and *sama'* should be regarded. Though sound could be organized in a way to affect humanity's spirituality, the Qur'an was silent on the issue, while the hadith and other stories about early Muslims contradicted one another. Yet musical forms of expression could possess extreme power over the human condition. Anything that could manipulate the human body and mind to the point of causing physically impossible feats and even sudden death could hardly be considered insignificant to humanity's well-being. Conversely, writings about *sama'* confront the reality that musical expression was quite common. The sound of music was powerful but it was also everywhere, often beyond the control of the wise and powerful and in the hands of the ignorant. The source of music's power was also unknown: it derived from the cosmos but its ultimate source was obscured by the limits of human understanding.

Authors of texts both on *sama'* and on the twelve-maqam system document a wide variety of contexts where music had a role to play. Music existed in the grandeur and legitimacy of the dynastic court, yet the court was not wholly responsible for maintaining spiritual mores, and courtly gatherings for entertainment had the potential to be debauchorous and counter to greater unity with God. People also used melody to make the camels go and to help children go to sleep. Musical expression happened in the house of the Prophet and in heaven. Both those seeking unity with God and those seeking to indulge their evil sense-pleasures performed and listened to music. Music could bring one closer to God, or it could make them forget about God altogether. It could speak to the *nafs* and destroy someone, or it could speak to the *ruh* and facilitate a connection to God. Music could move the body and bring one to God without the individual's intent or even consent. Likewise, an individual's intent could intervene and turn music and *sama'* toward less desirable designs.

This diversity of moral contexts existed at the convergence of music's cosmic power and humanity's inherent imperfection. For all of the unity of the cosmos, the practice of *sama'* embodied the notion of humanity's separation from God and longing to find unity with a divine source apart from itself. The twelve-maqam system aligned with the logic of the cosmos, yet it existed in the hands of humanity. Music's dual reality as an expression inherent in God's creation and an expression of humanity made on human terms raised questions about the source and use of its power. A wholly cosmic expression could create inherently good empowerment for humanity in its pursuit of the divine. Human intervention in cosmic expres-

sion, however, could introduce imperfections that turned the power of music toward something more sinister.

Discussions about musical instruments in writings about sama' highlight the issue of music's cosmic/human predicament. The human voice could be used to sing without any deliberate modification: God created the human voice in such a way that it could sing. The ability to include words and melody together in song also gave specific moral clarity to musical content. By contrast, musical instruments took God's creation—trees, plants, and metals—and turned it into objects that were products that changed the creation of God into something much more explicitly human. While a reed flute could be simple enough to evoke its original form as a plant among the creations of God, the more complex and sophisticated stringed instruments relied on so much worldly input from human sources that the form of their original materials in nature was unrecognizable. Additionally, their voices lacked words as a tangible source of moral definition. In a real way, musical instruments were less godly than the human voice. For such completely human constructs to be able to manipulate people's mental, spiritual, and physical condition in such a profound and abstract way could easily suggest that something or someone other than God was doing the manipulation. When made using instruments, music's ability to affect humanity was profound but the source of its power was ambiguous even as its voice was undefined.

Writings about sama' place the power of the twelve-maqam system within the perspective of humanity's ongoing challenges in achieving greater unity with God, even while inhabiting a deeply fallible human body, mind, and soul. Certain people could achieve great wisdom to overcome this fallibility, and writings about the twelve-maqam system emphasize wisdom and knowledge as a matter of establishing music's legitimacy, both within the broader cosmos and in relation to the human experience. Texts about the twelve-maqam system describe music as having power too strong to be a neutral phenomenon among humanity. Without any specific explanation for music's power in relation to God, music came with no specific information on which "other world" it served. The power had to be used wisely. Like the structures and application of the twelve-maqam system, listening to music required an adherence to objective standards of wisdom that related to the nature of the cosmos and humanity at large.