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Vernon J. Schubel's primary research interest is Islam in Central and South Asia. He spent seven months as a Fulbright scholar in Multan, Pakistan, in 1989, where he conducted research on centers of Sufi pilgrimage. His book, Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam, was published by the University of South Carolina Press in 1993. In 1996, he traveled to Uzbekistan to conduct research on the reemergence of the Sufi tradition in the former Soviet Union. He is currently working on aspects of the Alevi-Bektashi tradition in Turkey.

It sometimes comes as a surprise to my students and colleagues that music plays such a central role in my classes on Islam. After all, there is a popular school of thought which presents Islam as a religious tradition that opposes music. From this perspective, the music one finds in abundance in the Islamic world is not truly Islamic. Music is rendered peripheral — an aberrant form of religious innovation (*bida*). This view is reaffirmed by such anecdotal evidence as the initial public rejection of music by Yusuf Islam, the former Cat Stevens, following his conversion to Islam. (Of course, there are Western musicians who have converted to Islam and continue to perform — for example Richard Thompson and Peter Murphy). For many people, the notion of music in Islam — and particularly sacred music in Islam — seems out of place. 'Islamic music' is an oxymoron.

Perhaps because of my own personal history, I give a prominent place to music in my classes. Before I became an academic, I was a musician and I continue to play electric guitar in a local blues band. Coming of age in the late '60s, my interest in Islam arose in the context of a general interest in Asian religions, fueled in part by the music of the period. For many of my generation, our first awareness of Hinduism came through the Beatles' association with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and our first exposure to Indian classical music came through George Harrison's connection with Ravi Shankar. Like millions of other Americans, I first became aware of the Bauls of Bengal when they appeared on the cover of Dylan's *John Wesley Harding*, and only later became aware of the sacred musical tradition they represented. As my interest in the religions of Asia focused more specifically on Islam, I was predisposed to seek out its musical traditions. In fact, part of my attraction to the study of Islam was its remarkable musical heritage.

The interest in Asia and African music that began in the 1960s continues today as a sub-current among a substantial segment of our students. There is a strong interest in so-called 'world

music' — especially among students adventurous enough to take courses on Islam and Asian religions. For example, I find that many of my students are familiar with the music of the late qawwali master, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, through his associations with Peter Gabriel, Eddy Vedder and Joan Osborne.

Teaching at Kenyon College, I have few Muslim students in my classes. For the great majority of my students, Islam is something initially alien. Thus my courses are designed to introduce non-Muslim students to an unfamiliar tradition. These students typically maintain a variety of stereotypes and preconceptions about Islam. Among the most negative of these is the notion that Islam forbids music. For today's students, who habitually carry portable CD and cassette players everywhere they go, how much more alien and unappealing can a religious tradition be than one without music?

Of course, the reality does not fit the stereotype. Music is a vital and vibrant art form within Muslim cultures. Varieties of music — sacred and secular, courtly and folk — exist in every part of the Islamic world. While it is true that certain *culama* have argued against the permissibility of music, they have never been successful in abolishing it. I have never traveled to the Muslim world without returning with cassettes, compact discs or musical instruments. Much of this music has a religious content. Interestingly, my students generally find this music remarkably accessible. One reason for this is that they were raised on the African-American traditions of the blues and rock and roll, whose aesthetic sensibilities share remarkable similarities with Islamic music, particularly the folk traditions. In both there is an emphasis on improvisation. Both rely heavily on lyrics that express separation, loss and longing. Many of these traditions rely on stringed instruments played rhythmically and emotively. These similarities are not mere coincidences. They are, in fact, the result of complex historical connections between the Muslim world and North America.

The central instrument of both the blues and rock and roll, the guitar — like all of the 'tar' instruments of Eurasia — is the direct descendant of the elementary stringed instruments of Central Asia such as the *dutar* and the *dombra*. African-Americans adapted the guitar and used it to transform their own musical traditions, which had roots in the musical traditions of West Africa which were themselves connected to the larger Muslim world. If one listens in sequence to examples of the music of Central Asian folk musicians, Anatolian

ashiks

, Spanish Flamenco guitarists,

gnawa

singers,

kora

players, delta blues players, and post war electric blues players, the aesthetic similarities between these genres is astonishing. It is clear that the popular music of our North American

students would not have come into existence in its current form except for its historical connections to the Islamicate world. By demonstrating these similarities and connections between African-American Music (which is the popular American musical tradition) and Islamic music, the specific musical heritage of Islam becomes recognizable as a part of our students' larger human heritage. And, Islam itself becomes less alien.

A good place to begin discussions of Islamicate music is with examples of Central Asian *dutar* music. There are clear similarities and resonances between Central Asian music and acoustic blues music. This connection has recently been documented in the award winning film *Genghis Blues*

, which chronicles the journey of the blind African-American blues singer Paul Pena to Tuva, where he performed with Central Asian musicians. Although the Tuvans are not Muslims, the common origins of their music and that of Muslim Central Asians are unmistakable. A particularly good piece for introducing students to the *dutar*

is "Qara Koz" performed by Abdarrahim Hamidov on the 1993 CD, Central Asia: *The Masters of the Dutar*

(AIMP & VDE-GALLO) This piece demonstrates an astonishing level of technique and richness of sound, especially considering that it is rendered on a simple 2-stringed instrument. My students see immediate comparisons with Hendrix and Clapton, and other familiar guitar virtuosos. This music, performed by a Central Asian Muslim, resonates with the students in a way which renders it accessible and familiar, rather than alien and exotic. While this music is not religious in its content, its form is similar to explicitly sacred music such as the *nefes* tradition of Anatolia.

The Alevi-Bektashi music of Anatolia, called *nefes*, has its roots in the nomadic musical traditions of Central Asia. Its primary instrument is the *baglama*

, a seven-stringed long-necked lute, which takes on a nearly sacred status. At the center of the Alevi tradition is the figure of the *ashik*

(lover) who wanders composing songs of devotion for God, the Friend (*Dost*

). The tradition's great pirs, such as Pir Sultan Abdal, were also *ashiks*

. Depicted pictorially with his *baglama* over his head in a defiant image of resistance, Pir Sultan Abdal is a hero not only to Alevis but also to the secular Left who see him as a defender of the poor and oppressed. Although

nefes

is a sacred musical tradition used in *zikir*

, it has a huge following in Turkey which extends beyond the Alevi community.

There are clear resonances between the *nefes* tradition and African-American music. These are evident in the work of the young performer of *nefes*

Ulas Ozdemir, who also records with the blues band, Istanbul Blues Kumpanyasi, which incorporates Turkish instruments into their music. On the eve of his concert in Istanbul, a newspaper article about the American blues singer Ben Harper referred to him as an American *ashik*

. (Ben Harper, has in fact studied Turkish music and uses imagery from the story of Pir Sultan Abdal's martyrdom in his song "Rose from a Friend").

Like the guitar, the *baglama* is relatively easy to learn to play. Ordinary people can quickly learn to accompany themselves on folk songs in order to perform in households or small gatherings. Like the guitar, however, in the hands of a master it becomes a vehicle for great technical artistry I have found the performances of artists like Arif Sag, Erdal Erzincan, and Musa Eroglu make a powerful impression on students. Erdal Erzincan's CD, *Gurbet Yollarinda*

, is particularly useful in this regard. Not only is the music of exceptionally high caliber, but the Sufi and Shici imagery of the poetry provides a forum for discussing the intimate connections between mysticism, poetry, and music within Islam. The Alevi-Bektashi *nefes*

tradition, which functions both as a form of popular music and as music used in *semah*

, is an exquisite example of the interpenetration in Islam between so-called 'high traditions' and 'popular traditions,' challenging the artificial distinction between textual and popular' Islam.

Musical traditions like

nefes

demonstrate the ways in which even non-literate people gain access to profound spiritual ideas through the medium of music. Despite its relatively simple musical structure the

nefes

facilitates the transmission of poetry that carries deep and multivocal ideas. As in the blues, whose relatively simple form masks a deep subtlety which allows it to carry profound and ambiguous messages,

nefes

, like other folk music traditions in the Islamic world, operates on numerous levels and communicates, among other things, deeply esoteric notions of

tauhid

Of course, *nefes* is only one example of Islamic sacred music existing both in the context of *zikr* and as a popular musical form. Two other examples are the aforementioned *qa*

wwali

tradition of South Asia and the

inshad

tradition of Egypt. For the former, CDs and videos by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and the Sabri brothers are particularly useful. The prominence of rhythm and the call-and-response patterns in the singing are particularly attractive to students. In lectures on Sufism, I have made fruitful use of video of a

mehfil-i samah

, which I filmed in Multan, and which shows

qawwals

facilitating a state of

wajd

in a visiting

pir

. Similarly, Valerie J. Hofman's recent video documenting the

inshad

tradition in Egypt shows the importance of music in the North African Sufi tradition. These provide powerful examples of the ways in which Sufi ideas penetrate into Islamic culture at the popular level through music.

Exposing students to the music of Islam makes the religion less exotic and foreboding. Seldom have I played music for my students without them asking where they can purchase the CDs. Over time, they begin to appreciate this music not as a curiosity but as something that speaks to them as a part of their common human musical heritage. In so doing, the larger world of Islam becomes a part of their world as well.

Resources

A wide variety of CDs and cassettes by Turkish artists is available from the Turkish Music Club at www.turkishmusic.com. Along with the Erdal Erzincan CD mentioned above, I recommend Arif Sag,

Umut, and Musa Eroglu's *Bin Yillik Yuruyus* (Volume 1 or 2)

Valerie J. Hofman's video is called

Celebrating the Prophet in the Remembrance of God

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Sufi Dhikr in Egypt

, available from Educational Technologies Assistance Group.

Genghis Blues

is available on DVD, video and CD through the Tuva Trader at

www.TuvaTrader.com

. A particularly good sampler of various 'tar' instruments, which includes a recording of "Qara Koz," is

Asya Iclerinden Balkanlara Saz

, available from Kalan Music, a truly remarkable resource located at

www.kalan.com

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