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Seeing with the Ear, Recognizing with the Heart: Rethinking the Ontology of the Mimetic Arts in Islam

Wendy M. K. Shaw

The more one looks at the painting of *Plato at the Organ*, attributed to Madhu Khazanad in a late-sixteenth-century Mughal manuscript of the Book of Alexander (*Iskandarnamēh*, 1194) of Nizami of Ganj (1141–1207 CE), the stranger it gets (Koch 2010: 286) (Figure 2.1). In a layered anachronism, a twelfth-century Persian poetic depiction of the ancient Greek sage Plato (428–348 BCE) plays a European organ, probably one of the earliest organs collected by ambassadors of the court of Akbar in the Portuguese colony in Goa in 1581. Scattered around him, animals lie belly up, tongues hanging out, in a sleep so deep they have been mistaken for dead (Wade 1998: 153). Illustrating, and thereby emphasizing, this tale from Nizami's rendition of the Alexander romance, this painting examines a relationship between painting and music central to aesthetic concerns in Islam processed through new European encounters. The painting thus engages one of the most ubiquitous questions of contemporary understandings of Islam: Does Islam prohibit the image? And who has the right to decide?

Despite frequent discussions of the Islamic image through the framework of 'prohibition', innumerable secular and religious visual representations reflect the absence of any overarching ban. Almost no discussions of the image emerge until the thirteenth century. In contrast, treatises about music abound. The modern emphasis on the visual over the musical arts reflects different relationships with the late-antique concept of mimesis as it laid the groundwork for both European and Islamic artistic practice. Islam emerged through engagement with the late-antique culture into which it was born and with the translation of ancient philosophy with which it was fed. Reflecting multiple sources, Nizami's poem consolidates a vast literature on musical aesthetics. Its painted interpretation four centuries later reflects an evaluation of European visual practices through the lens of established Islamic mimetic norms. Interpretation of poem and painting as a theorization of mimesis suggests that, in placing emphasis on the image, modern Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike miss the important role of sound as a means of apprehending the divine in premodern Islamic thought and cultures.

Figure 2.1 Madhu Khazanad, ‘Plato puts the animals to sleep with the music of the spheres’, from a 1593–5 manuscript of the *Iskandarnameh* (1194) from the *Khamasa* by Nizami of Ganj. © The British Library Board, OR 12208, f. 298r.

Islam is not characterized by an image prohibition

The association between Islam and a dogmatic prohibition of images emerged in nineteenth-century Europe in an effort to define Islam coherently. This often coincides with modern puritanical interpretations of Islam claiming authority from the first thirty years of Islamic practice. Despite confirmation by these apparent antagonists, the rich

legacy of images populating the lived history of Islam contradicts this assertion. More interesting than the binary distinction between permissibility and sanction, however, is the fact that the image in early Islam was understood through a broader category that included music and which was informed by late-antique concepts of mimesis. Modern European oculocentric understandings of aesthetics lose this sonic aspect of mimesis. This disjunction, along with the conflation of presumed Judaic and Byzantine iconoclasms, lies at the root of the assertion of an image prohibition in Islam.

The persistence of the trope of prohibition emerges from the direct interpretation of sources without attention to their historiographic interpretive utilization. The Qur'an warns against idolatry, but does not mention images as such. Rather than looking at the history of images in the Islamic world, modern scholarship on the image in Islam generally cites the record (Hadith) of sayings and deeds (*sunnah*) of the Prophet Muhammad as establishing a normative prohibition (Lavoix 1859; Arnold 1928; Creswell 1946; Paret 1976/7; Naef 2003; Ibric 2006; Watt 2002). Several Hadith underscore the effect of the image on an individual engaged in prayer, indicating no restriction outside of sacred space. Another oft-cited Hadith accuses the artist of the sin of *shirk*, placing another in the place of God. Here, however, the replacement is not the idol, but the artist who makes the claim of creating, one of the powers understood as unique to God.

These sources suggest concern about images which cannot amount to a prohibition without the intervention of law. Islam does not consist merely of foundational texts. Rather, it emerged historically across centuries of interpretation. The scholarly use of 'scripture' as directly establishing norms overrides this historical process. It presumes a relationship with the historical legacies of the prophet analogous to the premise of *sola scriptura* in Protestant thought, and ignores the historical nature of Islamic discourse as differentially integrated into practice (Fudge 2006).

Islam can be traced to the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632 CE) who initiated the religion through Qur'anic revelation, but the social praxis of Islam depends on historical processes. The Qur'an was first compiled in 653 CE, and was not reduced to a single canonical form until the late eighth century (Neuwirth 2003). Additional components of Islamic law developed in the ninth century: the compilation of widely accepted Hadith compilations; legal procedures governing the evaluation and interpretation of Qur'an and Hadith in light of precedent and contemporary conditions; and the proliferation and then reduction of schools of law legitimated under competing Islamic caliphates, resulting in four dominant Sunni rites as well as diverse (minoritarian) Shiite rites. During the same period, mystics began to draw on the visionary aspect of Muhammad's revelation as an example for mystical approaches to faith. Often grouped under the label 'Sufism' (*tasavvuf*) these practices offered multiple regulated intrinsic approaches to spirituality, practised thought and ritual, which served as an everyday interpretive medium between the Qur'an and the world. By the twelfth century, Sufi leaders emerged at the core of powerful public foundations which gathered the faithful in spiritual practice, became linked with guilds, and created networked structures of knowledge and power that at times coincided and at other times collided with state power. By the thirteenth century, Islam functioned as a complex system of mutually recognizable, interconnected and yet distinct systems

of interpretation that traversed a vast geography from Andalusia to Central Asia, incorporating numerous systems of power, ethnicities and languages, and in close and generally peaceable contact with numerous religious groups living under Islamic suzerainty. Then came the Mongol invasions.

Mongol tribes who challenged the Abbasid Caliphate in the thirteenth century undermined existing systems of power. Their alliance with Persian lords, some of whom were Shiite, led to new systems of governance. For traditionalists, this was a disaster. Yet new rulers brought new practices, fostering the rise of figural painting not only on walls (common under the Umayyad, Abbasid and Fatimid Caliphates), but also in books. The earliest manuscript paintings to survive include a thirteenth-century illustrated volume of the Arabic translation of Dioscorides's 'On Pharmacy and Medicine' and 'The Assemblies of al-Hariri' by Yahya ibn Mahmoud al-Wasiti.

The earliest injunction against painting in Islam occurs in this context, in the *Riyadh al-Salihin* of al-Nawawi (1234–78), a follower of the Shafi'i legal rite. He says,

The authorities of our school and others hold that the making of a picture of any living thing is strictly forbidden and that it is one of the great sins because it is specifically threatened with the grievous punishment mentioned in the Hadith. [...] The crafting of it is forbidden under every circumstance, because it imitates the creative activity of God. (Ahmed 2015: 49–50)

He uses the following Hadith from the compilation of al-Bukhari to support his assertion:

The image-makers will be punished on the Day of Resurrection and will be told, 'Give life to that which you have created'. (Hadith 2151; www.ahadith.com)

Al-Nawawi's interpretation contrasts that of the ninth-century Persian scholar al-Tabari, who interpreted the same hadith as referring to objects that 'one consciously worships instead of God, which makes one an unbeliever' (Ahmad and Glidden 1968: 254). Al-Nawawi further indicates that a sign or image of an object without the breath of life (*ruh*) cannot in any case be embodied, and is therefore sanctioned; a sign of an object with *ruh* can only be sanctioned if it clearly cannot be embodied.

Although al-Nawawi's interpretation became widespread following modern publication of his text, it seems not to have been widely influential in his own or subsequent eras. The implementation of scholarly *fatwas* depended on state enforcement. Although like him, both the Great Seljuk Empire and Mamluk Sultanate at times gave precedence to Shafi'i interpretation, they patronized figural sculpture. Painting flourished in Timurid and post-Timurid states, including those of the Safavids, Ottomans and Mughals, all of which favoured the Hanafi rite (Gruber 2009; Gruber and Shalem 2014).

If al-Nawawi's denigration of the image had been widespread, it might have been corroborated by the other great naysayer of the era, Ibn Taymiyyah (1263–1328), a follower of the Hanbali rite, who wrote while under house arrest in Damascus following the Mongol invasions. Although not influential in his own era, his argument

against Sufism proved inspirational for Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1702–92), who inspired many modern puritanical Sunni movements (el-Rouayheb 2010). Yet Ibn Taymiyyah's interpretation resembles that of al-Tabari. The compilation of his judgements (*Majmu al-Fatawa*) relates that he commanded the destruction of 'two types of images: images which represent the deceased person, and images which are placed on top of graves – because *shirk* may come about from both types' (Ibn Taymiyyah). Even the contemporary Salafi scholar Sayyid Sabiq, an ardent follower of Ibn Taymiyyah, points out that if images were unlawful, the Prophet would have explicitly forbidden them (Kabbani 1995: 19).

This is not to say that Islamic contexts never restricted images. The earliest acts of idol destruction at the time of transition from Arabian polytheism to the monotheism of Islam were not repeated after the era of conversion. In many ways, these performances of destruction resemble Christian desecration of pagan images in ancient Rome. During the Umayyad period, doctrinal concerns rendered the display of the cross far more problematic than representational imagery, which at the time was no longer normative as many Christian sects took on varying degrees of iconoclasm (King 1985). Destruction often signalled conquest more than iconoclasm, befalling disputed Islamic texts as readily as Hindu idols (Flood 2009: 32–4). Image destruction, including cutting the throats of illustrated figures, occurred as discrete events, which reflect a concern with disempowering the image, but did not constitute a universal cultural norm (Flood 2002). As Isa points out, 'If the question of *taswir* had been as important as other problems, such as those of strong drink, marriage, divorce and inheritance, the Qur'an certainly would have dealt with it explicitly, as it did with other problems of conduct and worship' (Ahmad and Glidden 1968: 252). More than prohibiting images, it seems that most Islamic scholars simply did not care about them.

To say that Islamic cultures periodically considered the power of images is very different from asserting an overarching prohibition of the image in Islam. If the only overt rule against images emerged in the thirteenth century, are we to say that Islam did not precede this rule? Are we to say that the proliferation of images after this ruling was therefore not Islamic? Does Islam emerge only in the modern application of a thirteenth-century rule that makes a claim on the undocumented truth of the seventh century? The problem may be that we are asking for a ruling about something that *did not even exist as we know it*. In emphasizing the modern European norm of the representational image, we neglect the discourse of mimesis that did emerge in early Islamic discourses, not in relation to visual but in terms of musical representation.

The normative idea of the image requires a signifier (the image) which makes present the signified (something that is absent). The vehicle for this semiotic representation has been visual verisimilitude: the representation of an object through devices that fool the eye into believing that something is there when it isn't. Many of these devices, including foreshortening, modelling and perspectival spatial construction, developed during fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Italy and, in subsequent centuries, came to define the image across Europe. They were still relatively new devices when artists in late-sixteenth-century India encountered them through images propagated by proto-colonial Catholic missionaries expanding the power of the Church through global outreach (Subrahmanyam 2010).

Coming at this moment of encounter, the unprecedented illustration of the poetic trope of Plato at the organ suggests a critical evaluation of European claims of the proselytizing power of the visual mimetic image. It sets these claims in comparison with a different mimetic norm pervading Islamic discourses, expressed through the emphasis on music and inherited from antiquity. In his examination of late-antique aesthetics, Stephen Halliwell proposes that the ancient concept of mimesis emerged in relation to the musico-poetic arts and only later became applied to visual arts. Mimetic representation thus suggests a family of concepts of representation using any artistic intermediary – words, sounds, physical images – to signify and communicate realities beyond our physical experience, what Plato calls the Real or Kant refers to as the Numen. He points out that the Greek tradition emphasizes the effects of mimetic artworks on their viewers or hearers and frequently ‘characterizes and evaluates the kinds of recognition, understanding, emotional response and evaluation that such artworks can or should elicit in their audiences’ (Halliwell 2002: 16–19).

The history of mimesis is the record of a set of debates that form themselves around a polarity between two ways of thinking about representational art. The first of these places central emphasis on the ‘outward-looking’ relationship between the artistic work or performance and reality (‘nature’, as it is often though problematically termed in the mimeticist tradition), whereas the other gives priority to the internal organization and fictive properties of the mimetic object or act itself [...] encapsulating a difference between a ‘world-reflecting’ model (for which the ‘mirror’ has been a common though far from straightforward metaphorical emblem), and, on the other side, a ‘world-simulating’ or ‘world-creating’ conception of artistic representation. (Halliwell 2002: 23)

Whereas we, as modern subjects considering Islam, only recognize the first, ‘outward-looking’ aspect of mimetic practice, premodern Islamic commentators and theorists focused largely on the latter. This emerges less in discourses concerning the image than in the extensive discussions of the role of sound, particularly music, which transpire from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries and spiral into an episteme of mimetic representation underlying normative transmedial artistic expressions, spiritual and secular, across the Islamic world.

Modern considerations of this tradition tend to treat it as a secular practice outside of theologically guided Islam, asserting a deeply anachronistic distinction. For example, introducing his summary of Islamic thinkers on music, Fadlou Shehadi distinguishes between the Greek and Islamic traditions, saying, ‘[...] there is a mastery in the restatement of Greek thought, and much elaboration and refinement, but one still feels almost entirely in a Greek world. When Muslim thinkers concern themselves with the integrity of Islam, a different breeze is blowing’ (Shehadi 1995: 2). Why presume a conflict if this was the very intellectual environment in which Islam developed? Recognizing that the Islamic philosopher al-Kindi (801–73) wrote during the same era that al-Bukhari initiated the arduous process of authenticating and compiling the Hadith which would become the foundation of a yet nascent practice of Islamic law, how can we consider that practice more authentically Islamic than the integration of

Greek philosophy into emerging practices of Islam? To do so would be as anachronistic as to argue that Mathias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* is secular because it was not part of the world of the twelve apostles.

While modern puritan (*Salafi*) Muslims argue along such lines that an authentic Islam must be derived from the experience of the first thirty years of Islam and that subsequent practice constitutes inauthentic innovation, this mode of understanding Islam would have been unrecognizable to almost all Muslims before the twentieth century (Abou el Fadl 2007: 18). The coincidence between this puritan perspective and the orientalist drive to define an authentic Islam based on its scriptural sources, exemplified in the definition of an 'Islamic image prohibition' through direct recourse to the Qur'an and the Hadith rather than through Islamic discursive practice, has led to an understanding of mainstream, widespread Islamic practices that conceive of mimetic representation integrating audition (including music and dance) as heterodox to a presumed narrow orthodoxy which never existed until it was 're'-constructed in the contemporary era (Ahmed 2015: 73–97).

Music as mimetic representation in Islamic discourses

Although early Islamic writers never developed discussions of the image, they wrote extensively about music. Rather than providing a mimetic iconography in which visual images represent a reality beyond perception, as in our modern 'outward-looking' understanding of mimesis, Islamic discourses of music offer a detailed taxonomy of meaning grounded in reception – in the perception of a world through interiorization. This taxonomy of meaning can be understood as a semiotic process parallel to the type of meaning art history expects to glean from the iconographic analysis of the visual. Taxonomies of sound developed discursively across the writings of multiple thinkers and encompassed a wide range of experience. While these take form in a cosmology based on similitude, their effects encompass the therapeutic, spiritual, sinful, divine, rational and irrational. This baseline of meaningfulness pervades the thought both of proponents of music and of detractors. This basic understanding of the practice reflects an aesthetic culture exceeding the auditory. It suggests a mode of apprehending the world analogous to, but distinct from, the modern visually centred paradigm.

In a discourse initiated with al-Kindi's distinction between *musiqi* as theory and *ghina* as performance, ninth- to tenth-century discussions of *musiqi* developed a cosmology in which the strings of an instrument and eventually the musical modes played on it came to represent the temperaments and humours of the body, the four elements, the planets and the zodiac. Pythagorean in his understanding of music as analogous to the cosmos, al-Kindi stops short of his understanding of arithmetic as the universal principle. Rather, he understands the universe as stacked with theoretically significant correlations which the philosopher uncovers.

[...] the *falak* is the proximate efficient cause of change in the sensible world. It affects the seasons, generation and corruption, the distribution and the combining of hot-cold, dry-moist. The last are related to the four elements: fire – hot and dry;

air – warm and moist; water – cold and moist, earth – cold and dry. In so far as the celestial sphere affects the epochs and seasons which in turn affect the character and mores of peoples. (Shehadi 1995: 26)

Musical therapy consisted of using select sounds to realign bodily humours in relation to celestial patterns. As discourses on music proliferated in the Islamic world, the understanding of music through layers of cosmic similitude prevailed even when writers disagreed concerning the details of analogies (Shehadi 1995: 63).

In his *Great Book of Music*, al-Farabi (c. 872–950) identifies three kinds of music as affecting the listener in varying proportions. Rather than imagining an iconography of representation of an object made present in the artwork, we can instead imagine sonic art that produces its meaning in the recipient. The most basic level of meaning induces pleasure, as in popular song. The second evokes images in the mind in a manner akin to poetry. Al-Farabi compares this with statues, which may simply be suffused with visual elegance or may also represent in the soul of the viewer the appearances of things, and their dispositions and character traits, much as the statues of ancient Greece and India did for the heroes they adulated and the gods they worshipped. In the case of melodies, the images suggested and the representations evoked in the listener are a function of the poetic power of words as married to the appropriate musical idiom which in turn enhances the effectiveness of the words. Thirdly, he describes the affective dimension of music beyond semiotic expression, which, applying to both humans and animals, can express delight, sadness, fear or anger (Shehadi 1995: 63). For al-Farabi, the essence of meaning does not emerge through the semantic interpretation of music unique to humans, but through an affectivity that acknowledges the intimate relationship between human beings and animals based on the possession of a similar soul.

This musical affectivity is underscored by an apocryphal anecdote related by biographers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Guytas 1999). They relate that near the end of his life, al-Farabi came to the court of the Shiite ruler Sayf al-Dawla (r. 945–67). When he arrived at the court, the ruler was sitting with religious scholars (*ulema*).

Then he said to him, ‘Would you like to eat?’ Al Farabi said, ‘No.’ So he said to him, ‘Would you like to drink?’ Al-Farabi said, ‘No.’ So he said to him, would you like to listen [to some music]?’ Al-Farabi said, ‘Yes.’ So Sayf al-Dawla gave orders for the singers to be brought in and each expert in this art came in with a variety of musical instruments. But each time one of them played on his instrument, al-Farabi found fault with him, saying, ‘You have made a mistake!’ Then Sayf al-Dawla said to him, ‘Have you any proficiency in this art?’ Al Farabi said, ‘Yes.’ He then drew from his waist a leather bag, opened it, and drew from it some reeds, which he put together. Then he played on them, whereupon all who were at the *majlis* laughed. Then he took them to pieces and put them together another way, and when he played on them, everyone in the *majlis* cried. Then he took them to pieces [yet] again, put them together differently, played on them and everyone in the *majlis*, even the doorkeeper, fell asleep. And al-Farabi went out. (Netton 1992: 6)

Al-Farabi becomes a mythico-historical character who conveys the meaning of music not as pleasure, but as an organizational principle resonating with the seat of emotions. The story describes how representation touches the auditor not through remote transmission of an external ideal, but by transposing the external ideal into the recipient of the art.

The fifth epistle of the Brethren of Purity, a semi-secret organization promoting spiritual knowledge in tenth-century Basra and Baghdad, shifts the emphasis of music theory from cosmology to theology. It categorizes sound, particularly music, as a direct spiritual mimetic language because it obviates the use of matter in its expression.

[...] in every manual craft the matter dealt with consists of naturally occurring material, and that all its products are physical forms. The exception is music, for the 'matter' it deals with consists entirely of spiritual substances, namely, the souls of those who listen to it. The effects it has on them are also entirely spiritual, for melodies, consisting of rhythms and tones, have effects on the soul analogous to the effects of the art of those who work with the particular material associated with their crafts. (Wright 2010: 76–7)

This statement embodies precisely the type of world-constructing mimetic representation lost in the modern tradition, but fully at home within the Platonic and Neoplatonic realms of mimesis. For them this was indissoluble from practices of faith.

With regard to the use of music by the custodians of divine ordinances in temples and places of worship, when reciting during ritual prayer, at sacrifices, when praying, supplicating, and lamenting, as the prophet David used to do when reciting his psalms, and as the Christians now do in their churches and the Muslims in their mosques, with sweetness of tone and a melodic form of recitation – all that is used for hearts to be softened and souls to be humble, submissive, and obedient to the commands and prohibitions of God almighty [...]. (Wright 2010: 82)

Rather than considering an iconography between the signifying artistic object and the signified event or object indicated in painting, such as that emphasized in European art history, the Brethren develop an iconography of affects from the music to the recipient in which the proportions of strings on an oud correspond to the rhythms of poetry, the forms of calligraphy and the proportions of the body. 'The attacks on these strings then have the status of pens; the ensuing high notes, that of letters; the rhythmic melodies, that of words; song, that of utterances; and the air conveying them, that of parchment' (Wright 2010: 117). Music takes on the role of both text and image in representing not only the human body but the human in relation to capacities beyond the human. The Brethren describe the proportions of the child by saying, 'it opens its hands and stretches [its arms] right and left like a bird stretching its wings' (Wright 2010: 146). The ideal measure of the human relation to music becomes equivalent to the animal whose capacities of flight and song exceed that of the human. Echoing the Vitruvian model taken up by Leonardo da Vinci in his famous drawing of man at the centre of the squared circle, the arm/wing soon becomes geometric ('when it stretches its hand

out above its head, and a pair of compasses with one point on its navel is extended to its fingertips [...]’ (Wright 2010: 146)). These in turn become a model for the distances between the stars and the planets, ultimately comparing God to ‘a creator who has made them [the stars and the strings of the lute] and a skilled artificer who has constructed them and a benign composer who has organized them’ (Wright 2010: 147). Similarly underscoring music as conveying emotions in the hearer, the eleventh-century theoretician of music al-Hasan al-Katib suggests that ‘the meaning of the melody is the goal of the composer [...] just as with the speaker (of a language), these must resemble the various states and circumstances (of the soul)’ (Shehadi 1995: 87).

Similarly, *Lightening Flashes Concerning the Refutation of Those Who Declare That Music Is Forbidden* by Ahmad al-Ghazali (1061–1123 or 1126) distinguishes between music for entertainment and that enabling proximity to the divine. While he emphasizes audition in a context of the correct time, the place, and companions he also notes that audition must be open not only to those already pursuing the path of knowledge, but also to those who might discover it by encountering audition (Robson 1938: 72). Just as one who is not yet pure can go into a mosque to seek purity, so can he who ‘desires the purity of his soul, the cleansing of his heart and the serenity of his spirit by listening to wonderful things in speech and comprehending delicate things in poems which uphold the establishment of his relationship to the angels and the cutting off of his relationship to the devils’ (Robson 1938: 73).

He describes audition as a mode of mimetic representation in which the divine becomes articulated in its recipient. Representation does not take place in a relationship where the other world is necessarily absent, but through the experience of audition across time which engenders divine presence in the perception of the listener.

The audition of this party is a reference to the observation of strange secrets in the delicate poems which the *qawwal* recites while joined to the ecstasy which arises in the heart of the gnostic who works and the novice who is perfect. It induces them to put off resistance, to be drawn to the presence of the One, the Powerful and to ponder delicate things and secrets. And for the removal of these veils they have chosen audition with beautiful voices. [...] Then when there arises in him increase of arrangements of notes and spiritual analogies which are called music, [man’s nature] prefers them to everything else. So when a person hears the analogies which pertain to notes which include the realities which pertain to taste and the truths which pertain to the Unity, the being inclines to all those, and every bodily member receives its portion separately. The hearing receives the things of the unrestrained analogies; the sight, the analogies of the movements; the heart, the delicate things of the realities; and the intellect, the inner consciousness of the unrestrained analogies. (Robson 1938: 71–3)

Engagement with the divine presence thus transpires not through the ear, but through the apprehension of sound as it enters the heart and transforms into the movement that often accompanies the practice of remembrance (*zikr*) undertaken in Sufi brotherhoods devoted to intrinsic rituals of worship. He offers a further iconography through the symbolism of the instruments in their relationship of similitudes.

The [form of] the tambourine is a reference to the cycle of existing things; the skin which is fitted on to it is a reference to general existence, the striking which takes place on the tambourine is a reference to the descent of the divine visitations from the innermost arcana upon general existence to bring forth the things pertaining to the essence from the interior to the exterior, the five small bells are a reference to the prophetic ranks, the saintly ranks, the apostolic ranks, the khalifate ranks, and the Imamate ranks, and their combined sound is a reference to the appearance of the divine revelations and unrestricted knowledge by means of these realities in the hearts of the saints and the people of perfection. And the soul of the reality is the form of the rank of the Truth, since it is He who sets the things in motion, brings them into existence, and enriches them. And the voice of the singer is a reference to the divine life which comes down from the innermost arcana to the levels of the spirits, the hearts and the consciences. The flute is a reference to the human essence, and the nine holes are a reference to the openings in the outer frame. [...] And the breath which penetrates the flute is a reference to the light of Allah penetrating the reed of man's essence. And their being moved in audition is a reference to the bird of human reality in the station of the eternal address, 'Am I not your Lord?' and to the excitement of the spirit on account of the cage of the body being broken and its return to the true home. [...] And the dancing is a reference to the circling of the spirit round the cycle of existing things on account of receiving the effects of the unveilings and revelations; and this is the state of the gnostic. The whirling is a reference to the spirit's standing with Allah in its inner nature and being, the circling of its look and thought, and its penetrating the ranks of existing things; and this is the state of the assured one. (Robson 1938: 98–100)

This iconography persists in the poetic imagery of the introductory lines of the *Mesnevi* of Jelal ad-Din Rumi (1207–73):

Listen to this reed flute as it tells its tales
 Complaining of separations as it wails:
 'Since they cut my stalk away from the reed bed
 My outcry has made men and women lament
 I seek a breast that is torn to shreds by loss
 So that I may explicate the pain of want
 Everyone who's far from his own origin
 Seeks to be united with it once again. [...]' (Holbrook 2011)

Like the Brethren of Purity, who emphasize the intimate relationship between the proportions of music and calligraphic script, Jelal ad-Din Rumi uses the trope of the reed – raw material of both flute and pen – to indicate the conceptual indivisibility between sound and writing. This similitude emerges through the Qur'an, which describes itself as both spoken to the Prophet through the angel (Gabriel; Q 96.1) and written by the reed pen (Q 68.1-3). Signification does not rely on semiotic indivisibility between the signifier and the signified, described as the two sides of a leaf in the thought

of Ferdinand de Saussure, instigator of modern linguistics. Rather than indicating an invisible signified, the sonic signifier functions as an expressive agent (de Saussure 1976: 30). The Brethren refer to this relationship also as an image, saying,

when the meanings conveyed by melody and rhythm reach the mind via hearing, so that an image is formed there of the ideas that were contained within those rhythms and melodies, their existence [as vibrations] in the air can be dispensed with, just as writing on tablets can be dispensed with once the ideas written on them are understood and memorized. (Wright 2010: 126)

Here, mimesis does not transpire between the signifier and the signified, but through the direct incorporation of the signified by the subject through the vehicle of the signifier.

Critics of music share the same understanding of music expressed by its proponents. The preservation of Ibn al-Dunya's *Censure of the Instruments of Diversion* and Ibn Taymiyyah's *Letter on Audition, Dancing, Shouting, and Listening to the Recitation of Poetry* in a single 1391 manuscript suggests their limited circulation. Influential as the teacher of two Abbasid Caliphs as well as Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn al-Dunya found music guilty by association with forbidden practices such as drinking, gambling and fornication (el-Rouayheb 2010). Ibn Taymiyyah finds music acceptable as entertainment for the young (as the Prophet allowed for his young wife Aisha), but censors pleasure-inducing music as increasing sensual appetites culminating with drinking and sexual intercourse. Ibn Taymiyyah uses the partial homology of *al-ghina* (song/entertainment music) and *al-zina* (fornication) to liken them as pleasures in the absence of reason, akin to drunkenness. Wine, music and the image similarly induce a state of drunkenness. He similarly condemns meditative audition practised by Sufis: the ecstatic state induced by music does nothing more than replace one passion with another, equally detracting from the meditation on God enabled through the Qur'an. Thus a taste for poetry and music would detract from the pleasures of the Qur'an, the only audition that clearly exemplified the Prophet (Shehadi 1995: 95–9).

Music's proponents acknowledged these dangers. The Brethren of Purity write, 'The reason why music has been proscribed in some of the prophetic laws is that people have made use of it in a way different to that of the sages, in fact, for idle entertainment, and to incite a craving for the pleasures of this world and its deceptive desires' (Wright 2010: 124–5). Although at the end of his treatise, Ahmad al-Ghazali (1061–c. 1123) notes that 'by common consent', instruments of diversion including the viol, lute (oud), Persian lute (*barbad*), reed pipe, except the tambourine, are prohibited, he initiates his discussions of the metaphysical benefits of audition by equating an absolute prohibition with blasphemous disrespect for the example of the Prophet. Noting those Hadith where the Prophet is said to have listened to music, he explains,

He who says that audition is absolutely forbidden must acknowledge that the Prophet did what is forbidden, looked at what is forbidden, and confirmed others in what is forbidden. If that flutters in anyone's mind, he is an infidel by general consent, and the paths of the favours and the indication are closed to him. (Robson 1938: 70)

Despite their different evaluations, what becomes clear in comparing the discourse of the proponents and detractors of music is that music was understood as mimetic not in that it describes a world outside itself, as in our common understanding of mimesis (as outward-looking), but in terms of the effects it engenders in the auditor. Regarding music as mimetic combines the immaterialism of the thought of Plotinus with the idea of music as an affective agent permeating the thought of Aristotle. As Halliwell explains, in the writings of Aristotle, musical mimesis emerges as

an intrinsic capacity of musically organized sound to present and convey (affective) aspects of character; the patterns of music have properties 'like' the emotional states that can, for that reason, be the objects of their mimesis. As evidence for this view, Aristotle cites music's power to put its audiences into states of mind or feeling that contain, or are characterized by, these same emotions, so that musical mimesis seems to be a case that covers what might now be distinguished, by some philosophers, as representation and expression [...] mimesis registers itself in its directness of effect upon listeners: 'our souls are changed [...]'. (Halliwell 2002: 159–60)

Rather than imagining direct lineages between these traditions, such resonances suggest a world view where scholars were simultaneously steeped in normative Islamic monotheism and truths offered in philosophy perceived as absolute that became integrated into the ritual practice and theorization of intrinsic approaches to Islamic faith.

From theology to poetry: Plato as musician in the *Iskandarnameh* of Nizami of Ganj

The 1194 *Iskandarnameh* of Nizami of Ganj (1141–1207 CE) incorporates the Alexandrian legacy into the Islamic sphere. It addresses the relationship between music and philosophy as it pertains to the wisdom of the ideal ruler in a story in the second part of the book, the *Iqbalnameh* (Book of Wisdom), which stages a row of poets sitting before Alexander. Soon Aristotle announces that he is the pathfinder for all rational knowledge, and all praise him, except Plato, 'the master of all arts', who goes out to contemplate hidden wisdom. The poem (rendered in translated prose) continues,

[...] And as the star-watcher took his place in the cask (*Khom*) and followed the traces of the spheres and the ways of the stars, he made a model of the sound of the harmonies that he found there. As he discovered the proportions for each sound on his lute, he began in his hiding place to weave the lute. For singing he laid the leather over the gourd and unharnessed the strings, and after he had rubbed the gazelle skin with musk, he brought wet sound out of the dry wood.

And so from his imagination and drafts did he create a form of organ [...]

Plato had discovered a music, that nobody other than him knew. From dry wood he elicits sounds that attract the spheres with their moisture.

When he moves his finger in one mode, all the animals fall immediately asleep.
 When he then plays another mode, he brings them from sleep to wakefulness [...].
 (Nizami and Bürgel 1991: 433–4, translation from German by the author)

Plato presents this music at the court. There, Alexander recognizes its superiority because it encompasses and yet also transcends the forms of knowledge that he offers. Alexander rewards Plato with a higher rank than that of Aristotle.

This emphasis on the organ contrasts the discussion of instruments like oud and reed flute dominating earlier musical treatises. This may allude to a wind instrument called an *urganon* referenced by al-Farabi. Alternatively, it may play upon the homologous collective name of Aristotle's six works on logic, the *Organon*. Anachronistically playing on Aristotelian logic transformed, as in a dream, into an instrument, Plato inverts it by engaging the emotions of the pure at heart, represented by the animals.

The story condenses numerous elements of the mystical descriptions of Neoplatonism expounded in earlier Islamic works with the Pythagorean equation of music with philosophy. This equation features in Plato's *Phaedo* where Socrates deems philosophy 'the noblest and best art' and is thereby inspired in a dream to make music immediately before his execution. In Nizami, Plato enters into a meditative state by seeking solitude in a wine flask, merging inspiration with drinking. The association with Socrates's death by poison recalls an analogy drawn by al-Ghazali, in which he explains that the consonants establishing the root form of the word for audition, *sama*, the letters *sin* and *mim*,

indicate poison (*samm*) meaning that the inner nature of audition is like poison which causes one to die to the attachments of things which are other than Allah and causes one to reach the unseen stations. (Robson 1938: 103)

In Nizami, drinking and music, both poisons, function through their capacity to destroy reason, the logical discursivity of analytical thought. This destructive capacity enables presence of the divine.

Through the heightened state enabled through the poison/cure of the wine, Plato becomes able to hear the music of the spheres and, like the sages praised by Islamic philosophers, invents an instrument analogous not only through the sounds it produces but in the balancing of elements such as dryness and moisture. The resulting instrument affects the emotions so deeply that, like the reed flute supposedly played by al-Farabi at the court of Sayf al-Dawla, it puts not only humans but animals to sleep, addressing the most basic elements of the resonance between the cosmos and our sphere of life, echoing al-Farabi's emphasis on the highest, affective nature of music shared by man and animals (Shehadi 1995: 62).

The music Plato produces – representing philosophy itself – fulfils the role of the musician set out by the Brethren of Purity, who state,

It is also part of the musician's skill to use the rhythms corresponding to [various] moments according to the [different] moods that correspond to them, that is, to begin at social invitations, feasts, and drinking parties with rhythms that reinforce

the moral qualities of generosity, nobility, and liberality, such as the first heavy and the like, and then afterwards to perform joyful, gay rhythms [...] and when there is dancing and ensemble-dancing. [...] At the end of the session, if he is afraid that those who are drunk might be noisy, rowdy, and quarrelsome, he should use slow, calm, and sad rhythms that quieten people down and send them to sleep. (Wright 2010: 161)

This picks up on Plotinus's description of such sleep as a form of waking from the delusion of materiality in which the body is normally stuck.

Thus far we have been meeting those who, on the evidence of thrust and resistance, identify body with real being and find assurance of truth in the phantasms that reach us through the senses, those, in a word, who, like dreamers, take for actualities the figments of their sleeping vision. The sphere of sense, the Soul in its slumber; for all of the Soul that is in body is asleep and the true getting up is not bodily but from the body: in any movement that takes the body with it there is no more than a passage from sleep to sleep, from bed to bed; the veritable waking or rising is from corporeal things, for these, belonging to the Kind directly opposed to the Soul, present to it what is directly opposed to its essential existence. (Plotinus and Mackenna 1991: 196)

Both al-Ghazali and the Brethren indicate a similar shift from the material to the immaterial image. Thus al-Ghazali says,

If you seek to open a comprehensive gate, verify the realities of the phenomena of every place. Then divest yourself of looking at the figures [ideas] whence comes all that constitutes the purest faith. [...] The farthest point reached by earthly lovers in their deserts is but the starting-point of the lover [i.e. the mystic] and of him whom realities enclose. (Robson 1938: 100)

Similarly, the Brethren portray an imaginary assembly of philosophers at a court discussing the relative merits of sight and hearing.

When rational souls are free of the filth of bodily desires, abstain from natural pleasures, and are untarnished by materiality, they intone plaintive songs, recalling their exalted and noble spiritual world and yearning for it. But if [their instinctual] nature hears that [same] melody, it will reveal itself to the soul in the beauty of its forms and the splendour of its colours, in order to draw it back. (Wright 2010: 167)

In its ideal function, music thus affects the soul rather than simply pleasing it; it moves beyond matter to the immaterial.

This ambivalence towards materiality reflects a pervasive thread in the thought of Plato, Christianity and Islam. We see it in Book 10 of Plato's *Republic* in the description of how philosophy leads people out of their epistemic caves into the light of knowledge through material intermediaries; in the biblical injunction in the book of John often

paraphrased as 'being in the world but not of it', and in the Qur'an's recognition of materiality as a means through which we recognize the divine that should not become a value in itself (Q 3.14, 10.24, 43.33-5). This tension between the value of materiality and its utility as a ladder to immateriality informs the imagery of the image permeating much of the Persian poetic tradition (Shaw 2019).

From poetry to painting

The manuscript painting captures the story at the scene in which Plato at his instrument puts the animals to sleep. The relationship between Plato's music and the stars may be indicated by golden dots on his armpit and foot, suggestive of constellations. The dots disseminate across the sleeping animals like the music of the spheres, putting them at ease. The figure sits in a landscape painting that incorporates European perspectivalism and naturalism in the clouds, while retaining the Chinese-influenced stylizations of mountains and post-Timurid detailing of leaves. The branching river framing the musician suggests the similitude between natural sound and music. The homologies of al-Farabi's *urghanon* and Aristotle's *Organon* find a third companion in the European organ.

The composition suggests models from European prints showing animals around a central Orphic figure. The relationship with European models recurs in the paintings on the organ itself. On top, a scene of a suppliant woman holding a baby before a seated ruler suggests Solomon's wise decision not to split a baby. Underneath, a scene of Majnun (the symbolic beloved who becomes a hermit because of his separation from Leyla, but metaphorically also the divine) with the animals adds further confirmation to Koch's interpretation of the intertwined myths of Orpheus and Solomon. Yet the Orphic association with Plato cannot be reduced to a simple visual coincidence, as Pythagoreanism, and through it Platonism, finds its roots in Orphism, as discussed by Proclus, the translation of which into Arabic underscores its importance in philosophy under Islam (Brisson and Tihanyi 2004: 89–92). The incorporation of Orphic iconography inspired by European examples interprets the poem by reincorporating the Orphism of Plato, not part of the work of Nizami. This suggests an active interest in the philosophical legacy at the Mughal court beyond that filtered through historical literature.

In its sophistication, the image also offers a meditation on the relationships between image and music, as well as mysticism and philosophy emerging through increased contact with the cultures of Europe. This meditation parallels the discussion of European painting engaged by Abu'l Fazl in the 1590s in the *A'in-i Akbar* (Constitution of Akbar), comparing painting in the European tradition with writing. He says,

A picture (*surat*) leads to the form it represents [*khu davand-i khvud*, lit. its own master] and this [*leads*] to the meaning (*mam*), just as the shape of a line (*paykar-i khatti*) leads one to letters (*harf*) and words (*lafz*), and from there the sense (*mafhum*) can be found out. Although in general they make pictures (*tasvir*) of material resemblances (*ashbah-i kawnni*), the European masters (*karpardazan-i*

Firang) express with rare forms (*ba-shigirf surat-ha*) many meanings of the created world (*basa macant-i khalqi*) and [thus] they lead those who see only the outside of things (*zdhirnegahan*) to the place of real truth (*haqiqatzar*). However, lines [*khatt*, writing, calligraphy] provide us with the experiences of the ancients and thus become a means to intellectual progress. (Koch 2010: 277)¹

The painting follows the example of the Brethren of Purity, who offer a summary of the potentially deceptive nature of the mimetic image as doubly removed from reality only to follow it with meditations on the greater perceptive value of hearing. Similarly, the painting incorporates European practices of visual verisimilitude in the drawings on the organ, only to frame them in terms of a more real, affective sphere of music. It indicates that music, in taking the soul from the body, represents the divine with greater realism than that offered in the European image as recently proffered in India by Catholic missionaries.

Across from the scenes juxtaposing Solomon and Majnun, the organ offers two more: at the bottom, a Mughal artist kneeling before a European who holds his paints for him; and above, the portrait that apparently comes out of this interaction, indicated by the repetition of the same hat, this time hovering at an angle above the head of the bald and beardless European. The hat seems to allude to a common trope of those associated with the 'school of love' (*madhab-i ishq*) in which a person wearing their hat at an angle (*kajkulahi*) indicated an openness to worldly pleasures and the seduction of beauty that reflected indifference to the mere appearances of moral uprightness and public propriety. One of the most famous occurrences of this trope occurs roughly contemporaneously with this painting, in the memoirs of the Sultan Jahangir (*Tuzk-i Jahangir*, 1569–1627), in a story about the interaction between Sayyid Nizam-ud Din Awliya, patron saint of Delhi, and Amir Khusraw, whose poetry exists in Persian, Ottoman and Mughal canons, and to whom North Indian Muslims trace their musical systems.

One day, Sheykh Nizam al-Din Awliya had placed his cap to the side of his head, and was sitting on a terrace by the River Jumna observing the spectacle of the Hindu rituals and devotions. Just then, Amir Khusraw appeared. The Shaykh turned to him and said, 'Do you observe this congregation?' and this hemistich came to his tongue:

For every people: it's path, it's *din*, and its prayer-direction [*qiblah*]¹²

The Mir, without a moment's contemplation, and with all due decorum, addressed himself to the Shaykh with the completing hemistich: 'I have set my *qiblah* straight in the way of the crooked-hatted.' (Ahmed 2015: 203)

The visual application of the allusion to a European rearticulates the pairings of European and Islamic narratives of Orpheus and Plato, and Solomon and Majnun explored in the rest of the image. The application of crooked-hattedness to a European in this context underscores the incorporation of foreign practices as acceptable not simply through the toleration of the other, but its incorporation as no longer distinct

from the self. Just as crooked-hattedness suggests a wisdom to move beyond the known, its application to the European suggests that the greater wisdom is not to stick to the narrow paths of cultural habit, but to embrace difference despite the apparent danger of change. Yet in emphasizing the story of Plato and the animals through a representation suggestive of European norms as outlined by Abu'l Fazl, the artist suggests that the basic forms of knowledge enabled through music – knowledge that is crooked-hatted in relation to the straightforward representation of the image – retain a capacity beyond the rationalism attributed to Aristotle, gently critiqued through Nizami's trope of the competition.

This reassertion of the mythic and spiritual in the face of the literal takes visual form in the inclusion of the rainbow-tailed *Simurgh*, the mythical bird that inspires the mystical quest described in Farid ud-Din's *Conference of the Birds* (1177). The animals bring to mind those anthropomorphized in *Khalila wa Dhimna*, adopted from the ancient Indian *Panchatantra* and translated into Arabic in 750 and into Persian by Rudaki (858–941). Deeply entrenched in the literary canon, the Brethren cited Rudaki's work anonymously in Persian, clearly linking the affectivity of music with sleep, death and the instinctual apprehension of animals used as metaphors for humans.

The nocturnal lament of the lute string
is sweeter to my ear than [the cry of] 'God is great!'

If the plaint of the lute string – and do not think this strange –
attracts its prey from the wide plains,

With no arrow it yet from time to time
pierces its body, the dart transfixing the heart,

Now weeping, now grief-stricken,
from break of day through noon till dusk.

Although bereft of a tongue, its eloquence
can interpret the lovers' story,

Now making the madman sane,
now casting the sane under its spell. (Wright 2010: 165)

Thus the 'nocturnal lament' of the string, inducing sleep as in Nizami's poem, also parallels death through the 'dart transfixing the heart' of 'prey'. If the animals in the painting appear dead – tongues hanging out, eyes wide open, and one near the top left even with the mark of an arrow on her flank – it may be because the sleep induced by a music resonant with divine ecstasy enables knowledge of that which surpasses life. The animals, merely pacified by the Orphic song in Ovid's rendition (Book 11), here gain his ability, unique among mortals, to cross the boundary between life and death through the 'spell' of music. The link with the animals comes full circle to the image of Plato performing music parallel with the image of Socrates making music as philosophy, 'the greatest kind of music', based on the myths of Aesop, which show the same natural order as evinced in the harmonies of music and the logical systems of philosophy (Northwood 2015).

This painting provides a visual response to the new techniques of painting made available through the recent introduction of European prints circulated by missionaries. It suggests that European visual mimetic methods be subsumed into a powerful existing mimetic practice in which transmedial sensory perception, image and sound, animal and human, body and philosophy, Muslim and European coexist through their essential similitudes. In other words, it refutes the alterity ascribed to Islam through a supposed iconoclasm which has dominated modern discussions of its arts. Rather, this image suggests a cohesive world view rooted in Islam, not as something essential and isolated in unique origins, but as something dynamic, multifaceted, intertextual and transcultural.

Far from representing only a geographically and temporally bounded Mughal perspective, its expressiveness can only function from within a powerful legacy of aesthetic discourse, primarily about music and itself rooted in the antique Greek philosophical tradition that developed in concert with the discursive procedures which define juridical Islam during the ninth and tenth centuries and established the basic codes through which mimetic representation in its multiple forms – poetic, calligraphic, visual, musical, architectural and cosmological – circulated in premodern Islamic cultures. Within this panoply of mimetic practices, the image was not banned so much as it was not central. Thus, in contrast to the iconoclastic controversy in the Eastern Orthodox Church centuries earlier, it did not engender extensive discourses.

By the twentieth century, when Muhammad Abduh travelled to Sicily, he could respond to the careful preservation of artefacts from the past by applying the same analogy between poetry and painting that al-Farabi had applied between poetry and music, explaining that ‘portrayal is a kind of poetry which is seen but not heard, while poetry is a kind of picture which is heard but not seen’ (Ahmad and Glidden 1968: 263). With this rendition of Horace’s famous dictum ‘Ut picture poesis’ into Islamic culture, the incorporation of European understandings of mimetic representation initiated under the Mughals could be said to have come to full fruition. It is, of course, soon after that Western explanations of an Islamic painting prohibition coincided with the Salafi erasure of Islam as a trans-historical practice, and that an ever-shifting relationship with mimetic representation shut down under the increasing avalanche of images enabled in the twentieth century.

The sophisticated development of visual representation in the post-Timurid courts suggests that al-Nawawi’s proscription of painting was not normative. Rather, the high cost of paintings, combined with the unimportance of the image in Islamic ritual practice, led to its rarity in the everyday life of Muslims, even as it functioned as a trope common in poetry indivisible from faith, including that of Amir Khosrau, Jelaeddin Rumi and Nizami of Ganj. To the extent that music had a visual counterpart, this found form in the rhythms of geometry, understood to follow the same Neoplatonic universal essences as music. Yet the materiality upon which geometry depended rendered it a weaker representational medium than music (Necipoğlu 1995). Not only was music extensively theorized early in the development of Islam as a mimetic tool in making the divine present in the heart of the believer, it remained central to Islamic intrinsic practice as it developed in numerous Sufi orders in Central, South and Southeast Asia across Africa and retained its centrality in multiple court cultures (Harris and Stokes 2017).

Epilogue

The problem with understanding a culture conceived as other, whether by time, space, religion or culture – and I would suggest that in the case of Islam, time reduces all of us moderns, including contemporary Muslims, to foreigners – is that it never answers back to the questions that we ask it. A supposedly singular Islam cannot function as an agent to tell us if the image was prohibited or not. As Emmanuel Levinas points out, often the expressions of the culture of an Other can, at best, enter into a conversation with the culture we define as our own, thereby producing an ethical relationship through which we consider, despite the inalienable boundaries produced between the analyst and the analysand: ‘To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression. [...] It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I [...] this also means: to be taught’ (Levinas and Lingis 1969: 51, emphasis in original). If modern culture engages with Islam through the notion of the prohibition, it does so through the demand of a visual analogue for normativity presumed through European experience. Instead of the answer it waits to see, it must listen. If we are to understand Islamic art, we must learn to see with the ear and recognize with the heart.