



Music Education and Islam: Perspectives on Muslim Participation in Music Education in Ontario

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Abstract: Islamic beliefs and attitudes can complicate participation in music activities for Muslim students. The relationship between Islam and music is complex and susceptible to misunderstandings, misconceptions and confusion regarding how to address matters relating to Islamic beliefs in public school music classrooms. By sharing the experiences and perspectives of music educators, Islamic scholars, and parents with personal connections to this issue, this qualitative interview study aims to illustrate what the current situation in Ontario looks like and the factors that can complicate participation in certain music activities for Muslims. My personal interest in this topic stems from the three years I spent teaching in Kuwait and my own questions that arose while teaching music in an Islamic state. Through this study, it is my hope that music educators in Ontario will gain a deeper understanding of some of the tensions that exist between music and Islam, and will be better equipped to meet the needs of Muslim students and parents in their music classrooms and school community.

In addition to being the fastest growing religion in the world, higher birth rates, immigration, and conversion to Islam over the past 25 years have led Muslims to become the principal non-Christian religious group in Canada. Since 1991, the population of Muslims in Canada has increased by 128% - from 253,000 in 1991 to 842,000 in 2007 (Niyozov, 2010). As educators, we need to ask ourselves what impact this has in the classroom. How does this guide our instruction and the choices we make as teachers? What responsibilities do we have to understand the religious beliefs, cultural customs, and value systems of our students? How do we meet the expectations of the curriculum, while still meeting the needs of those in our classrooms? What resources and support systems are available for teachers regarding these issues?

Despite increasing numbers of Muslim students in Ontario classrooms, music educators in particular are presented with unique challenges and considerations relating to teaching Muslim students and are often not readily equipped with the knowl-

edge to address these concerns until they arise. Diane Harris (2006) articulates the need for further exploration of this issue in her book *Music Education and Muslims*:

Whilst it cannot be assumed that all Muslims have an issue with performing arts, music, dance and drama in schools, there has been sufficient unease in Muslim communities for it to merit attention. Music presents an ethical dilemma for some Muslims and this needs to be recognised. (p. 6)

Vague, overarching claims made by students or parents that musical activities are against one's religion can lead to confusion on the issue if the teacher is unfamiliar with Islamic beliefs. Problems relating to participation in music education can also arise when parents and students do not articulate their concerns due to a fear of negatively affecting grades, language barriers, or deeming certain subjects inappropriate for student-teacher or parent-teacher discussion (Halstead, 1994). Consequently, these misunderstandings can lead non-Muslim music educators to ho-

mogenize or misinterpret the Islamic position as forbidding all music in all circumstances, perpetuating misconceptions of extreme conservatism.

Music and Islam

Islam does not differentiate between religious and secular. To be a Muslim literally means to “submit to the will of Allah” and live in accordance with the teachings of the Holy Qur’an and sacred texts. Consequently, all behaviour is organized into four main categories, *halal*, *mubah*, *makruh*, and *haram*, which exist on a continuum (Harris, 2000):

Those who are devoted to their faith will choose to refrain from activities that are seen as forbidden or discouraged in Islam.

If music educators are unaware of religious or cultural beliefs, practices, and attitudes relating to Islam, music activities taught with the intention of achieving Ontario music curriculum expectations can conflict with one’s Islamic beliefs. Common concerns that may contradict Islamic practice may include issues of dancing, singing, playing instruments, listening to music with a storyline deemed immoral by Islamic law¹, listening or participating in musical activities that celebrate religions other than Islam, and/or performing with students of the opposite sex (Harris, 2000).

Issues surrounding participation in music and Islam cannot be clearly defined for music educators. Unlike actions such as praying five times daily, or refraining from gambling, it is impossible to extract an absolute Islamic stance on participation in music from the Qur’an. This leaves the debate to rely upon the interpretations of other sacred texts called *ahadith* and *sunnah*,

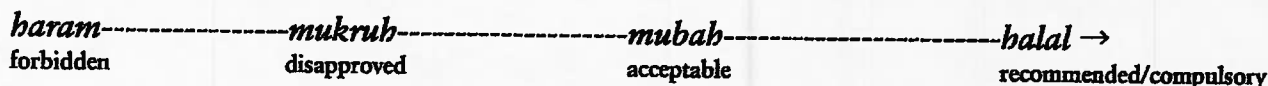
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the reported actions and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed. Within these texts verses exist that can be interpreted as being in support of music, as well as those which can be interpreted as disapproving of specific musical activities, or contexts where music is performed.

Without a definitive answer, the acceptance of music remains an on-going and somewhat futile debate amongst Islamic scholars. While conservative Muslims may use sacred texts to make a case for music being *haram*, moderate scholars may argue that it is not the music that is the problem, but its common association or reference to other clearly forbidden activities such as alcohol and sexual activity that can determine some music or musical activities to be *haram* (al Qaradawi, 1999).

Adding to the complexity, it is also important for music educators to note that outside of this debate, music also exists as an integral part of Islam. Lois al Faruqi, a leading scholar on the topic of Islam and music, defines the *sound arts*² as a unanimously promoted component of Islam including *Qira’ah* (Qur’anic chant), and *Adhan* (the call to prayer), etc. (Harris, 2000).

Outside of Islamic scholarly discussion, current research on



Appendix I:

Is listening and performing music forbidden in Islam?

Areas of agreement and disagreement amongst Muslims (Halstead, 1994):

Areas of Agreement Amongst Muslims

- ✓ = unanimously approved
- ✗ = unanimously prohibited

✓ Qur’anic chant and the call to prayer (also pilgrimage chants, eulogy chants, thanks to God, and praise of the Prophet Muhammad.

✓ *Musica* with approved *ahadith** that state/imply that the Prophet approved of them – battle songs, celebrational music (during Eid), and occupational music.

✗ Sensuous music with suggestive lyrics, songs performed in a sexually provocative manner, and songs that are performed in context with prohibited activities (e.g. gambling, drinking alcohol, mixed dancing, and illicit forms of sexual activity).

✗ Music that is specifically related to a religion other than Islam and promotes the belief in a religion other than Islam.

Areas of Disagreement Amongst Muslims (controversy exists)

Qur’an verses that speak of “idle talk” as something that distracts or diverts people from God’s path. (*Some scholars interpret this to include music, but not all*).

Qur’an verses that state that the beauty of God’s creation is to be enjoyed and that there is harm in forbidding what God himself has not forbidden. (*Some scholars interpret that this as applying to the enjoyment of music.*)

*Ahadith** exists that speaks about music directly, but different scholars question the credibility of different *ahadith* (e.g. singing girls are forbidden in one, the use of musical instruments is forbidden in another, etc.). **hadith* (*ahadith* pl.) = the reported sayings of the Prophet

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Appendix II:

Strategies for increasing participation in music education for Muslim students

Be sensitive to the diversity of the view of music in the world – Recognize that Western views of music are not shared universally.

Stress the educational value of music – To promote a less utilitarian perspective to education, emphasize the extrinsic merits of music (improves self discipline, physical development and coordination, builds cultural literacy, etc.).

Integrate music into other subject areas – By nature, music is aesthetically appealing and engaging. It can enhance the learning of other disciplines.

Incorporate intellectual study of music – Research has demonstrated that the study of music is more widely accepted than engaging in musical activity.

Avoid putting Muslim children in a position where they are expected to act against their religious convictions – Show sensitivity by using discretion when choosing content to teach the curriculum. Through knowledge of Islam, anticipate areas of difficulty. Know your students (Halstead, 1994).

Be aware of sensitive areas – Gender issues, use of musical instruments and content choice are the main areas of difficulty for some Muslims in relation to music. It is the teacher's role to anticipate problems before they occur. For example, have the students hold scarves instead of hands during movement activities such as circle dances.

Communicate goals and intentions with parents – Stress the educational value of music while being sensitive to their concerns. Make compromises where necessary. Maintaining on-going dialogue will ensure that parents feel that their concerns are heard and taken into consideration. It also aids in building a rapport with parents while helping teachers to learn first-hand about the complexities of the relationship between music and Islam.

Avoid tokenism – Music education for Muslims does not mean teaching a song for Ramadan.

the perspectives and reception of music education in schools with predominantly Muslim populations has sought to bring awareness and solutions to public education. One study reported on why some teachers in a U.K. inner city school had difficulty teaching music at a school with a high proportion of students from a Muslim background (Harris, 2002). Another study in Sweden explored how music could be used in an Islamic school to enrich Islamic faith (Berglund, 2008).

In Canada, the research conducted thus far has focused on issues relating to the increasing population of Muslim students in public education in general. Research describing the challenges faced by some Muslim students attempting to maintain their Muslim identity in urban public schools has highlighted issues of exclusion and prejudice (Zine, 1997). Other studies have focused on teacher perspectives in Toronto that reflect an effort to meet the needs of Muslim students (Niyozov, 2010). Research examining the interplay of being a minority, being North American, being multicultural, having internal diversity, and being modern challenges the need to rethink the notion of Muslim as a homogenous group and illuminates distinctly Canadian, and even Torontonians ways of being Muslim (Hussain, 2001).

There is a need to contextualize the current situation for teaching music to Muslims within Ontario public schools in order to balance the needs of students and goals of the curriculum. By sharing the experiences and perspectives of select music educators, parents, and Islamic scholars in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), this study explores teaching music to Muslims in an urban Ontario context. By examining differences that can exist in definitions of music, intentions, priorities and values amongst music educators and Muslim parents, its purpose is to help music edu-

cators in Ontario anticipate possible sensitivities and be better equipped to meet the needs of Muslim students and parents in their music classrooms and school community. Recognizing that Islam is not religiously or culturally static in any context, it also invites the opportunity for Muslims to reconsider their attitudes towards music in education and what that may look like.

What do you mean by music? Defining music

Examination of the concept of music is a necessary starting point for discussion on differing perspectives towards music and music education. In Western culture, art music is simultaneously revered as transcending the mortal process while in education remains of unequal importance to subjects such as mathematics and sciences. In Islamic cultures, music of a Western origin may be heavily associated with the explicit lyrics and sexual innuendos frequently found in today's popular music.

Mrs. Bassema³ is a mother of four school-aged children from Gujarat, India. She has lived in Southern Ontario for seventeen years. Identifying as a Sunni Muslim, she strives to apply the teachings of Islam to all areas of her life. She instils an Is-

Sheikh Ali emphasizes that before discussion on music can occur, people must ensure that they have an understanding of one another's definition of music.

Islamic way of life in her children by ensuring they pray five times daily, encouraging her daughters to wear a hijab, and bringing them to madrasa classes (Qur'an and Arabic classes) four nights per week. When asked about her interpretation of the holy Qur'an and *ahadith's* position on music, Mrs. Bassema described her understanding:

B: Actually exactly I can't interpret what it says, but it's like, totally *haram*. It's totally unacceptable in my religion. So we are not allowed to do it. No singing, no dancing, nothing is allowed in Islam. But we don't do anything, rather than school. In school they are allowed to do it – they *have* to do it sometimes so they have to do it, we don't mind. But for my own sake, at home, if they want to dance or do music with their friends and everything, I'm not allowed to let them do it. But if you want more about this, you can talk to the Imam, they will guide you.

K: Are there times during the Islamic year that you would rather your child did not participate in music?

B: Yes, like especially in Ramadan because both my older daughters they fast. So they don't do anything bad.

Mrs. Bassema feels that music should not be a part of an Islamic way of life. Though she permits her children to participate in music in school, her indication that during Ramadan her daughters do not participate in anything "bad," including music, offers insight into the negative connotations that accompany the idea of music for Mrs. Bassema, and perhaps other Muslim parents as well.

Jim, an experienced high school music teacher at a diverse secondary school in Toronto describes a situation he encountered at his school.

J: I have one kid a year who will come and say "I can't take music anymore" and I say "why not?" and they say "its against my religion." And we have a discussion about that. And I'll say, "did you ever play music in middle school?" and they'll say, "well yeah, I took violin, but my dad doesn't like me blowing the trumpet. He said I shouldn't be blowing into anything that's not right – sometimes they'll say it's not right for a girl, and other times they'll say it's not right for my religion. But I tend to have some parents who say girls shouldn't play trumpet, trombone, flute, saxophone, or clarinet. But they can play steel pan, and they can play drums, bells, and guitar.

Oversimplified and vague explanations of music being "against my religion" can lead non-Muslim music educators to retain stigmatized viewpoints of Muslims and result in failure to facilitate discussion, or make reasonable accommodations to make music accessible to concerned Muslim students or parents.

Sheikh Ali, a highly accomplished resident scholar and senior Imam for nearly forty years in the GTA, affirms that Muslims and non-Muslim music educators may have very different concepts in mind when discussing the topic of music. Coming from a "moderate" Islamic viewpoint, Sheikh Ali explains that there is nothing categorical in the Qur'an explicitly forbidding music. From an Islamic jurisprudent perspective, this means that everything is permitted, unless it can be proven otherwise with a categorical text. Sheikh Ali contextualizes how some Muslims

If parents are unsure of what music education looks like, or are concerned whether intentions conflict with religious beliefs and practice, an open, on-going dialogue can bring forth clarity, empathy, and understanding.

have come to associate music as negative, and threatening to their Islamic faith.

A: In the time of the Prophet, Peace Be Upon Him, it was singing with instruments. That was music. ...When the prophet was preaching, they would bring girls who were performing in the brothels and things like that, so they would be brought to sing these lewd songs to distract people from listening to his serious talk. So, Muslims who were exposed to that were told to shun it. Shun this kind of frivolous activity that will distract. ...Always keep in mind those who declare music *haram*, forbidden – they are talking about this specifically. They don't have in mind everything that can be associated with music in the Western mind when you use that word in English "music." You know, it has different meanings – some of it positive some of it purely vulgar, everything. So you, *we*, have to be very, very critical in our understanding. ...If you read carefully all those who say, music is *haram*, are they talking about the same thing which you are talking? For you in an English context music is the harmony, that sound, that is uplifting, which is relaxing, soothing the mind.

Sheikh Ali emphasizes that before discussion on music can occur, people must ensure that they have an understanding of one another's definition of music. Recognizing that Muslims view themselves as accountable to God for all choices that they make, all musical activities are to be judged individually based on the intentions, content, circumstances, time and place that involvement in music is occurring. Based on this logic, participation in music in a school setting can be permissible, while attending nightclubs remains forbidden.

Conversations with Mr. Jährir, associate director of an Islamic centre, echo Sheikh Ali's ruling. He explained to me that it is not always the music that is *haram*, but it can be the words, instrumentation, and/or the actions. In other words, it is the music's intentions that can distract from an Islamic way of living. In his opinion, if the intentions are good, then music can be acceptable in some circumstances. That being said, for reasons not discussed, Mr. Jährir does not permit his young children to participate in music in school.

Despite scholarly interpretations of the Islamic stance of music, the experience music educators have in a school setting can look very different. Cathy, a music educator at an urban K-5 school with an almost exclusively Muslim population de-

scribes the insights that she has developed through teaching music to Muslims:

Parents are very shy to tell me what their worries are... They don't want their kids getting involved in songs about you know, sex and drugs and rock n' roll. And I mean, it's a school, we're not going to do that. So I usually put their minds at rest for that.

Being able to define music and contextualize their musical intentions is therefore a foundational step for music educators to take to foster communication with Muslim parents who may be reluctant or uncomfortable with their child's participation in music education.

What does doing music look like? Articulating goals and intentions From an Islamic perspective, what is deemed to be appropriate behaviour in relation to singing, playing instruments, listening to music, and dancing can raise concerns towards participation in music education. Parents like Mrs. Bassema explain that they are reluctant to have their children engage in musical activities such as dancing because it can invite inappropriate behaviour between young boys and girls. Recalling Cathy's insight that parents do not want their children involved in activities relating to "sex, drugs, and rock n' roll," the worries that some parents may have, even for young children, relating to music and gender become clearer.

Sheikh Ali attributes these concerns to incomplete or misinformed assumptions:

A: They have assumptions. You know, some of them are stereotypical views about the West – just like the West has stereotypical views about Muslims. So the solution is to educate. To tell them. To explain to them what [you] mean. Because if you ask a parent, "what's your understanding of music?" that's not what the teacher's understanding of music is. (*laughs*)...So, we educate them and let them see, and let them judge for themselves and then let them talk if they have a problem in understanding.

Or, they can ask a scholar, or their Imam and they will clarify. [sometimes] they are told that all the music that is played in the west is all lewd...they don't know the classical music, you know, Mozart and all those people. It's just spiritually uplifting. So, when you really try to educate them that it's not the same thing, then definitely they will have a more positive view. It has to do with education because they are not exposed.

Cathy empathizes with the family situation of her students and reflects on the role that it plays in her teaching. She acknowledges the trust that parents like Mrs. Bassema place in educators to value and account for their family life, and by doing so establishes a foundation for helping parents feel included in their child's music education. At the same time, she also emphasizes that while she will make accommodations for students, she will not make changes to the material she teaches, such as Dalcroze eurhythmics.

In alignment with Sheikh Ali's call for rectifying of false assumptions through education, Cathy echoes how inviting parents into her music classroom has been a valuable strategy for gaining parental support in music.

C: When the kindergartners have their open house, all

these moms and dad sat around and watched a whole music lesson class. I'm hoping that they went out into the community and said, this is what we saw, because they came up to me and said, "wow! We didn't even know, that's what music is! How it's taught! Boy! They're learning listening skills!" and [the parents] were very excited.

While some adaptations desired by Muslim parents, such as Mrs. Bassema's suggestion for gender-segregated dancing, may not be possible to implement in Ontario public schools, adaptations can easily be made in other areas to ease common areas of tension in music education.⁴ Cathy states that she uses scarves in replacement of handholding in circle dances, avoids lyrics with any religious content, teaches mostly theory during Ramadan, and is "light" on Friday's lessons since that is prayer day. She describes how a grant intended for ballroom dancing lessons was redirected to purchase percussion instruments for the school since this musical activity would be more positively received in their particular school community, while still meeting educational objectives. Jim ensures that dietary needs are met when food is present at school events like concerts. From a parent's perspective, Mrs. Bassema requests that teachers consider costumes for performances to make sure that they cover appropriately. During the interview, she expressed her appreciation for teachers' understanding, flexibility, knowledge of Islam, and the efforts that her school makes to accommodate their faith.

While it may not result in agreement, with communication and awareness comes sensitivity and respect. If parents are unsure of what music education looks like, or are concerned whether intentions conflict with religious beliefs and practice, an open, ongoing dialogue can bring forth clarity, empathy, and understanding.

Why learn music? Differing priorities in education

A desire to teach their children Islamic values and/or preserve cultural heritage may be a significant focus of parents' educational goals for their child. Cathy expressed that one problem at her school was attendance since many families travel to their countries of origin for months at a time, leaving huge gaps in their children's education. Mrs. Bassema describes the daily schedule for her children which includes getting up before sunrise for *fajr* prayer⁵, completing homework, and attending school, followed by *madrassa* (Arabic classes) from 4:30 to 7:00 p.m. from Monday to Thursday. Clearly, a schedule such as this for an elementary age child leaves little room for music rehearsals or instrument practice. Presuming that other Muslim children could follow a similar schedule to that of Mrs. Bassema's children, it becomes quite apparent that music education may not hold as much importance as activities that encourage an Islamic way of life.

Further adding to its discouragement, traditionally in Islam becoming a musician also means that one cannot earn money since musicians are not supposed to receive payment for their services. Recalling that unanimously approved music is devoted to praising Allah, Harris (2000) explains that, "every musician is a potential *gari*, reciter of the Quran...no one can be paid for teaching how to sing these because it is a religious duty" (p. 197). For these reasons, pursuing music is not a logical career choice for some Muslim students and can be discouraged by their

families, or culture at large as an unsound decision for ensuring future financial and professional success. Mrs. Bassema's explanation of why she permits her children to participate in music in school also reflects this difference in priority.

B: Because of the grades. That's only thing that I allow them to do it. Because it counts in their end of the year [marks]. ...So that's why. No other reason.

K: Do you feel that if it was an option – if music was optional – at the elementary level like it is in high school – do you feel that many students would prefer not to have music?

B: Yeah. That's for sure. If it's optional, then I'm not going to let them do it. It's better to stay away.

Sheikh Ali recalls the Qur'an's traits of true believers, who "shun all that is frivolous," or, anything that distracts a Muslim from their ability to worship God and serve humanity. Such a notion may cause Muslims to see the function of music to be solely entertainment, and lacking any significant purpose or priority in living an Islamic life.

How can I gain parental support? Revaluing music through education Music educators Jim and Cathy expressed the need to sometimes justify the purpose of teaching music to Muslim parents and students. Reaffirming the importance of parent-teacher communication, both teachers expressed the benefits of discussing the wealth of skills acquired through music education with parents who questioned the value of music in job acquisition, financial success, or its academic purpose. Parental support for music education can be earned through highlighting interdisciplinary connections and skills that can be developed through music learning such as social, organizational, listening, and mathematical skills.

Although both educators reported on the value of explaining music's merits to parents and students, they also fondly recalled many experiences where their students simply loved doing music for the sake of it. Sheikh Ali goes beyond justifying the arts to emphasizing the necessity for creativity in living a balanced life.

A: We are free to be creative. And this is where the arts come. The arts are vital. These are creative expressions and God wants us to be creative. God *wants* us to be creative. Creative expressions cannot be prohibited in Islam, how can it be when God says this is the natural way? So everything that God has [given], all those instincts, all those things there are, you know, for human beings there is a function.

For music educators, it is easy to see how music's aesthetic value can surface even as teachers continue to make a sell for music in other areas of skill development outside of music. Yet, inclusion of this notion in discussions with parents may also help to work towards enhancing the value of music for those who may place more value on learning other subjects.

Conclusion

Assumptions of Islam as a static religion are dispelled through Sheikh Ali's description of the evolution of Islam as it has travelled to different cultural settings. He states that, "if Islam does not accommodate itself to various cultural settings, then it is not

universal." Recognizing music as important, he envisions the emergence of "Canadian-Islamic musical expressions" as an expression of Islam adapted to the culture here. This study has attempted to provide some insights into the current situation for teaching music to Muslim students in Ontario Public schools. It does not intend to oversimplify the issue or homogenize what it is to be a Muslim. Further investigations into defining and identifying the influence of cultural versus religious values in relation to music education could be explored. In addition, future studies could delve into possible tensions felt by teachers to meet the diverse needs of their students while still preserving Canadian culture, or Muslim student perspectives on music education in school. By examining differences that can exist in definitions of music, intentions, priorities and values amongst music educators and Muslim parents, it is my hope to help music educators create a musical environment that is sensitive to Islamic practices, beliefs and values. In this way, I offer that musical learning and experiences can reach Muslim students, and hope to inspire those who are opposed to musical practice due to beliefs rooted in Islam to reconsider their position.

¹ The music of *Romeo and Juliet* would not be acceptable since the story involves a premarital relationship.

² Al Faruqi (1980) introduced the term *bandasab al sawt*, sound arts, in order to facilitate dialogue about music without the stigmatized connotation of the word music within the Islamic community.

³ Pseudonyms have been used for all participants

⁴ Sheikh Ali rules that men and women should not be segregated and expressed the importance of mixed social interaction in life provided that the activity does not involve or invite inappropriate behavior. He explained that a school setting is typically an ethical setting but cautioned teachers to be responsible and think critically about the messages activities could send to students.

⁵ *Fajr* prayer is the first of five prayers for Muslims throughout the day and happens at dawn before the sun rises.

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