



Music and Sound Seminar Series

First seminar

Listening to the Qur'an

By Kristina Nelson

November 3, 2024, at 11:30am

In person at [CEDEJ](#) and online

Abstract

The title of this Symposium- MUSIC AND SOUND-reflects a current academic and multi-disciplinary focus of interest. The terms and concepts, “soundscape”, “sound object”, “aural epistemology”, and “resonance” are some of the terms peppering scholarly bibliographies, that bring together anthropologists, linguists, psychologists, sociologists, musicians and physicists, to name a few. In this lecture I will focus on the sound of the recited Qur’an. The question, "Is Qur'anic recitation music?" continues to be discussed in Muslim and non-Muslim contexts alike. While the discussions are relevant to our understanding of the tradition, the lines separating “sound” from “music” blur when we look at intent and affect, and focus on context and perception. The sound is unique, instantly recognizable as something apart from poetic declamation in the classical language and from song. Correctly articulated, it is considered the sound of revelation, the sound of God. Reciters of the Egyptian melodic tradition of recitation, *mujawwad*, aim to use their artistry to emotionally and spiritually engage listeners in the sonic experience, and they draw on elements of the Arabic music system. Islamic scholars are careful to eschew the term "music" in connection with the Qur'anic text precisely because the text itself is unique, *sui generis*. That the tradition shares elements of Arabic music, is responded to as music, often discussed in terms of music, its esteemed practitioners given prominent space on the walls of the Cairo Conservatory, and inspiring high fees and the formation of fan clubs continues to cause confusion among scholars and practitioners attempting to label it. While the Qur’anic text itself is a model of euphony and rhythm, the parameters of the sound are shaped by a web of referential systems, among them the rules of *tajwîd*, (governing rhythm, timbre, articulation of syllables and sectioning of the text in the interest of clarity of meaning), sensitivities to the inappropriateness of music in an Islamic context (*samâ‘ polemic*), codes of behavior (*adab*) for listener and reciter that guide their intent, and guard against distortion or inappropriate rendering of the text, and finally, the melodic material and aesthetic of the musical system. The reciter must navigate a landscape of discrete boundaries while, at the same time allowing artistic creativity free rein in melodic improvisation. Finally, the reciter is responsible for never letting artistry overwhelm focus on the text. The tension involved in balancing the meaning of the text with the exacting and detailed controls of the rules of *tajwîd* and with free melodic improvisation and with audience focus creates a visceral and affecting dynamic unparalleled in other traditions. Call it what you will - let's listen.

About Kristina Nelson

Nelson has a PhD in Arabic Studies and Ethnomusicology from the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of "*The Art of Reciting the Qur'an*" (University of Texas (UT), Austin Press 1986 and AUC Press, Cairo 2001), as well as of a number of articles on the subject. She has taught at Universities of California, Berkeley, Austin, Texas, and Khartoum. From 1974-75 she worked as a Senior Research Fellow in the Arabic Lexicography Project that produced "A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic" (Hinds, Badawi. 1986). Since 1983, she has lived and worked in the Middle East (Gaza, Tunisia, Sudan, Egypt) as a teacher, writer, producer, mentor and fundraiser, and has lived continuously in Cairo since 1994. She was responsible for the regional Culture and Arts Program of the Ford Foundation (1990-1997), founded and directed the Arab Arts Project, (1997-2000), and now works freelance as an arts mentor and consultant in the region.

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