

## GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

## Sacred Chant



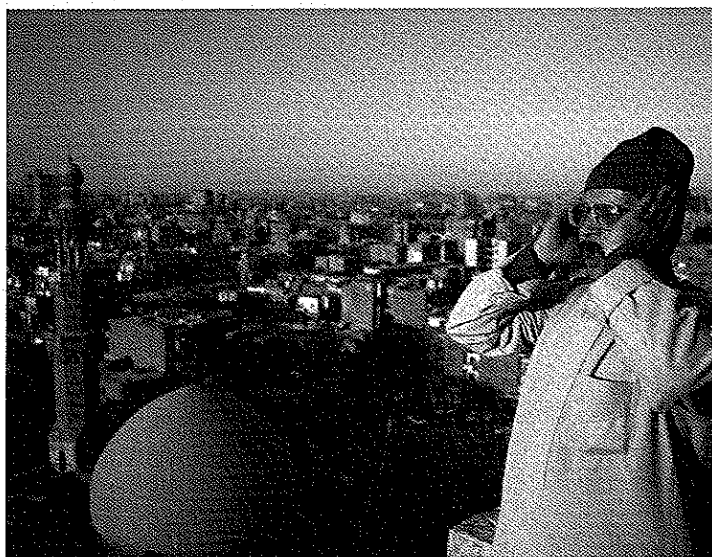
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The vast number of cultures that exist or that have existed in this world all generated their own music—or, as we say, their own different “musics.” Often they are very different indeed; the first time South African Zulus heard Christian hymn-singing they were amazed, just as much as the missionaries were when they first heard Zulu music. Yet for all their diversity, the musics of the world do show some parallels, as we are going to see in the Global Perspectives sections of this book. There are parallels of musical function in society, there are parallels of musical technique, and sometimes there are parallels of both together.

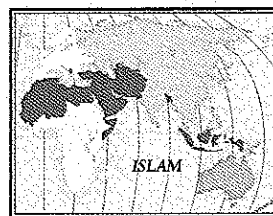
Often these parallels come about as the result of influences of one culture on another—but influences are never accepted without modification and the blending of a foreign music with music that is indigenous. At other times parallels appear in musics that have nothing whatsoever to do with one another. Considering all these parallels, we have to believe that certain basic functions for music and certain basic technical principles are virtually universal in humankind.

One of these near-universal features—and one of the most fundamental—is the role of music in the service of religion. Singing serves across the world as an essential means of marking off the rituals of worship,



A muezzin high in a minaret calls the faithful to prayer in Cairo, Egypt.

signaling their special status and their difference from other, secular, pursuits. The repertory of Gregorian chant developed in the Christian Church of the Middle Ages (see pages 56–62) is only one of many traditions of monophonic religious chant, albeit one of the more elaborate.



## Islam: Reciting the Qur'an

Another highly elaborate tradition of chant is found in Islam, practiced today by about a fifth of the world's population, and

the dominant religion in some fifty nations. Across all of Islam, the revelations of the prophet Muhammad gathered in the Qur'an (or Koran) are chanted or sung in Arabic. Muhammad himself is said to have enjoyed this melodic recitation.

Usually Qur'anic recitation is rigorously distinguished from all types of secular music making. It is thought of as “reading” the sacred text aloud, not “singing” it; it is not even considered to be the same sort of activity as secular singing or playing instruments. These nonreligious activities might be referred to as “music” (*musiqi*), but reading the Qur'an is not.

Given these distinctions, it is not surprising that Qur'anic recitation, like Gregorian chant, is monophonic, nonmetric, and does not involve instruments. It aims, above all else, to convey the Qur'anic text in a clearly comprehensible manner. Unlike plainchant, it has been passed along in oral tradition down to the present day. It has resisted the written notation that came to be a part of the Gregorian tradition already in the Middle Ages. To this day, great Islamic chanters sing the whole 114-chapter Qur'an from memory.

## Ya Sin

Our excerpt is the beginning of a long recitation of one of the most highly revered chapters from the Qur'an. It is titled “Ya Sin” and is recited in times of adversity, illness, and death. A skilled reciter, Hafiz Kadir Konya, “reads” the verses in a style midway between heightened speech and rhapsodic melody. His phrases corre-

spond to lines of the sacred text, and he pauses after every one. He begins:

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.  
Ya Sin.  
By the wise Qur'an,  
Lo! thou art of those sent  
On a straight path,  
A revelation of the Mighty, the Merciful,  
That thou mayst warn a folk whose fathers were not  
warned, so they are heedless.  
Already hath the word proved true of most of them, for  
they believe not.

In his first phrases, Konya begins at a low tonic and gradually expands his range to explore pitches around it. By 0:38, he reaches a pitch central to his melody, a fifth above the tonic. The succeeding phrases circle around this pitch, reciting words on it and decorating it with ornamental melodic formulas of varying intricacy. In this regard, it is a bit like the Gregorian reciting tone we studied before (page 59), only more elaborate in its melodies.

### The Azan

Like Gregorian chant, Islamic chanting has developed a wide variety of approaches and styles. The best-known type of Islamic chant employs a style related to recitation, though it does not take its words from the Qur'an: the singing of the *adhan* or *azan*. This is a call to worship issued five times daily by a special singer called *mu'adhdhin* or *muezzin*. That an entire society comes to a stop five times a day for prayer reveals the tremendous force of Islamic religion.

Three Hawai'ian singers. They strike large, resonant gourds on the ground to accompany their song.



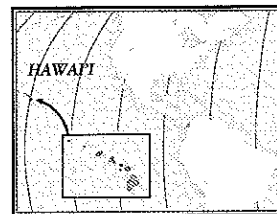
The muezzin traditionally delivers his azan from the minaret, a tower attached to the mosque, and later inside the mosque to begin the prayers. In Islamic cities today, the azan is often broadcast over loudspeakers to enable it to sound over modern urban noises.

### Hawai'ian Chant

We should not be too surprised to find certain broad similarities between Qur'anic and Gregorian chant. Both Islam and Christianity emerged from the same region, the Middle East, and Muhammad drew on elements of Christian doctrine in forming his new religion. He counted Jesus Christ as one of the Islamic prophets.

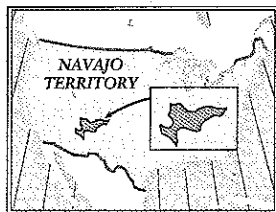
It is more surprising to find some of the same features in religious chant from halfway around the globe, in Polynesia—in Hawai'ian prayer songs, or *mele pule* (mél-eh póol-eh). By reciting these prayers, Hawai'ians intended to bring to life images of their gods fashioned of wood, stone, or feathers, animating them with divine powers.

Our brief example shows a style similar in some general ways to our Gregorian Preface and Qur'anic recitation. It is monophonic, like all traditional Hawai'ian song. It is also almost monotonal, with only one prominent pitch other than the central reciting tone. In this it contrasts with more active melodic styles used in



other Hawai'ian genres of song—especially love songs and *mele hula*, or hula-dance songs.

The *mele pule* takes its rhythms from the words and shows little trace of meter. Though nearly monotonal, it is ornamented subtly with various shifts of vocal delivery and divergences from its reciting tone. The most prominent of these is a clear, pulsating, almost sobbing *vibrato*, or wavering pitch, that the singer, Kau'i Zuttermeister, introduces on long syllables. This technique, called *i'i*, is a stylistic feature much prized in many types of traditional Hawai'ian song. It is felt to endow melodies with special, deep emotion.



### A Navajo Song

One more example of chant comes to us from Native American traditions. In these, too, singing is closely allied with the sacred. It plays a role in

healing, hunting, social rituals, and—embracing all these activities—in human relations with gods, spirits, and ancestors. Most Native North American song is monophonic, like the Hawai'ian, Arabic, and Western chants we have heard. Unlike them, it is usually accompanied by drums or rattles of one sort or another.

Our example comes from the Navajo nation of the Four Corners area of the American Southwest. It is called “K’adnikini’ya’,” which means “I’m leaving,” and it dates from the late nineteenth century.

Just as individual Gregorian chants have their assigned places in Catholic services, so this chant has its own special role. It is sung near the end of the Enemy Way ceremony, a central event of Navajo spiritual life. In this solemn ceremony, warriors who have come in contact with the ghosts of their enemies are purified and fortified. Such purification is still performed today, sometimes for the benefit of U.S. veterans of Vietnam or other wars.

“K’adnikini’ya’” falls into a group of Navajo sacred songs known as *bo’zho’ni* songs, and you will hear the related word *bo’zho’go* (“beautiful,” “holy”) sung alongside “*k’adnikini’ya’*” to end each of the seven central phrases of the song. Every phrase of the song begins with the syllables “hé-yuh-eh, yáng-a-ang-a.” These are *vocables*, syllables having no precise meaning. Vocables are sometimes called “nonsense syllables” and likened to the “tra-la-las” and “hey-diddle-diddles” of European nursery rhymes. But they are hardly nonsensical. Instead, as scholars have gradually realized, they can carry secret, venerable, and even mystical significance.

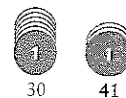


At a powwow in British Columbia

The melody of “K’adnikini’ya’,” like the other chants we have examined, is organized around a prominent reciting tone (the pitch of “he-yuh-eh”); each phrase turns upward at its end (on “k’adnikini’ya’”). The song’s meter, given the regular drumstrokes, is more pronounced than in any of our earlier examples. The formal plan consists of a refrain at the beginning and end, with a group of parallel phrases in between.

#### LISTEN

#### “K’adnikini’ya’”



- |      |   |  |
|------|---|--|
| 0:00 | a | Refrain                                    |
| 0:12 | a | Refrain repeated                           |
| 0:22 | b | 7 parallel phrases, each of 11 drumstrokes |
| 1:05 | a | Refrain                                    |