

A practical guide on how to teach music to Muslims

By

DR DIANA HARRIS

Open University, UK

ABSTRACT

For many people it comes as a surprise that teaching most Muslims is not the same as teaching any other religious group. Having taught Muslims in a state secondary school in England for several years, I was aware that for many of them music is a problematic area. In this paper I will explain briefly the background to this situation, but I will mainly be talking about how the music curriculum can be adapted to make it more acceptable to Muslims. I believe that tolerance is no longer enough and that what is needed now is sensitivity and understanding. For example, did you know that many Muslim girls have to give up playing instruments when they reach puberty, that is, if they have been allowed to play them in the first place? Did you know that singing any songs with lyrics about love is usually unacceptable, and that boys and girls should not be asked to perform together?

With the events of September 11th in America and the Bali bombing it is very easy to see that communities are in danger of becoming polarised. In England we see Muslims and non-Muslims moving further apart, but at the same time there are people in both communities who are more determined than ever to build bridges. It is my opinion that we, as music educators, are failing in our duty if we do not send our music students out of college prepared to teach people from all cultures.

INTRODUCTION

I am writing this as the first confirmation of bombing on Baghdad is coming through. What ever happens, and let us hope that it happens quickly, there is bound to be a political fallout which is unlikely to promote peace in the world. If it does end quickly, and Bush is victorious without too many body bags being returned to USA, who will he attack next? And in the meantime, many Muslims and non-Muslims believe that terrorism is likely to increase rather than the reverse. Although these

events are happening on a plain that is remote from most of us, the political repercussions will filter down and could affect any music teachers with Muslims in their classes.

As an example of what is happening, a piano teacher in New Zealand emailed to update me on a Muslim pupil of hers. Sadia is from Jakarta and her parents are practising Muslims but on the liberal side of Islam. They have been in New Zealand for five years, and felt happy and settled until they visited Jakarta for five weeks recently. Since they have returned they are much more security conscious, always keeping their door locked, and are suspicious of anyone who rings them. In the UK many Muslims are frightened; mosques have been attacked, women had their head scarves pulled off in the street and community relations are often strained. Non-Muslims are also scared of their Muslim neighbours, because we are being warned to keep an eye open for terrorist attacks and every Muslim is seen as a threat.

BACKGROUND

Islam is a way of life. Unlike Christianity, which is something that is chosen and which for many people is only practised on Sundays, Islam is a religion which all Muslims are born into and which you have to actively reject if you want to belong to another faith. For a good Muslim, all aspects of life are subject to the rules laid down by the Qur'an, their holy book revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th Century, and the Hadith which report the Prophet's sayings and actions. The Hadith are a body of literature, roughly equivalent to the Christian Gospels, which were written down as much as hundreds of years after the Qur'an was revealed. These can be divided into those thought to be sound, it being possible to prove a direct line of transfer from the prophet to the Hadith writer, and those that are considered to be unsound.

Music itself is not referred to in the Qur'an; some scholars believe that the phrase 'idle talk' refers to music but this can only be speculation. Where the hadith are concerned there are various places where music is mentioned – none of them favourable. For example, al Bukari, an accepted writer of hadith wrote:

At some future time there will be people from my umma (community) who will seek to make lawful fornication, the wearing of silk by men, wine-drinking and the use of musical instruments... Singing sprouts hypocrisy in the heart as rain sprouts plants¹

This seem fairly conclusive in its condemnation of both singing and musical instruments, but what you have to remember is the circumstances in which he is writing. There are three important considerations when it comes to deciding whether something is *haram*, illegal, or *halal*, legal, and these are the time, the place and the circumstances surrounding the action. ²For example, it is never permissible to take part in any form of music if you spend so much time doing it that you do not fulfil your religious obligations. Secondly, however acceptable the music which is being played or sung, if you are in a place which has other *halal* activities such as a brothel, or a place with alcohol, then it makes the music *haram* as well. Thirdly, if you are associating with the wrong kind of people then again the music will be corrupted.

CURRENT VIEWS ABOUT MUSIC

At a conference I organised in London last year,³ Tariq Ramadan spoke about how music is bound up with culture. He emphasised the point that there is only one Islam but many ways of interpreting it. He said,

It's not only about the issue of law or jurisprudence in Islam, it's more than that. It's also about culture, about the way we are dealing with the culture, and especially about the cultures of origins... We are saying, for example, as Muslims, that Islam is a universal message. It means that when we speak about a universal message we are speaking about different cultures and when we deal with different cultures we have to know what is the context we live in in order to link the universal message with the context of the specific environment.

For Tariq Ramadan music is totally acceptable in Islam as long as the rules regarding time, place and association are adhered to, but we must be sensitive to cultural issues.

¹al Bukhari (n.d.) *Sahih al Bukhari* Vol II, Translated by Muhammad Muhsin Khan Islamic University Madina 1971

² In Islam *haram* means illegal but *halal* is, strictly speaking, essential. Since music can never be a compulsory part of Islam we should really talk in terms of *haram* and *mubah*, acceptable, but *haram/halal* are more widely used.

³ *Music Education for Muslims* SOAS, London 22nd May 2002

This view is seen by many Muslims as being too liberal. On the other extreme are the people who believe music is wrong under any circumstances. Their argument revolves around the idea that people **may** be committing a sin without realising it so all music must be banned. Hewitt said,⁴

I think that music can no doubt stir the soul and emotions, that's what it's for, if it doesn't do that the composer hasn't done his job properly. So the dividing line between the good music and the not so good music and the dangerous music, well, where do you draw that line? And I think it would be very difficult for me to be listening to say, *Academic Festival Overtures*, and then my kids come along and they want to listen to Spice Girls. How can I say, you can't listen to that but I can listen to this? The line has to be drawn somewhere and I think the bad outweighs the good.

Whiteman⁵ agrees to a limited extent, because he feels if people cannot tell the difference between good and bad music then maybe they should refrain from listening to any. This is surely where our job as educators comes in?

An argument often proffered is that things can be *haram* by association but Whiteman refutes this:

I don't accept that things can be haram by association. This just doesn't stand up to reason. The *hadiths* often quoted by people who are very against music are always the ones which are about a recorded social event of music, drinking, fornicating, whatever, and then you think, hang on, you could ban anything by association. Most things in life can be used for good or ill. Music, drinking and sex can all be used for good or evil.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

The most important point is that you need to know what the arguments against music are, and be able to listen sympathetically to people with these views, but also know about Muslims who are in favour of music.⁶ If possible bring in a local Muslim who

⁴ Ibrahim Hewitt, Interview 4th Feb 2000

⁵ Ab-dul Lateef Whiteman, Interview 18th Feb 2000

⁶ If you would like more information there is a list of suggested reading at the end.

can also talk about the positive reasons for music, and quote acceptable hadith in favour of music. You could also bring in a Muslim musician to work with you, although this has problems of its own because in many Muslim countries musicians have no respect. I interviewed a Muslim who was the Chair of Governors at a large, state, inner-city secondary school, who told me that he was a rock musician but that he did not advertise the fact. I felt that as a musician himself, and as chair of the governors, he was in a perfect position to encourage music amongst Muslims. He said that he would not play in school because of his image. He didn't think it was appropriate and it would be misunderstood. As a musician the Muslims in the community would look down on him and think that he was trying to influence their children in a bad way.

It is also a good idea to ask Muslims to bring in music from their own culture. Many from the Indian sub continent, for example, will know the songs of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. When interviewing Bangladeshi women in Tower Hamlets about their children doing music in school, they did not appear to be concerned about music from a religious point of view, but because they were afraid of their children losing their own culture if they only heard western music in school. However, it is not safe to assume that just because it is music acceptable to one Muslim family it will automatically be acceptable to the rest.

Choose musical examples carefully to avoid offending, particularly during Ramadan, the holy month when the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet. I visited a girls' school in a UK midlands city, attended by a high proportion of Muslims because it was the only single sex school in the city. The head teacher had made it school policy that any girl attending must take part in all activities. She was able to do this because the majority of the Muslims had applied to the school from outside the catchment area. Although this can be seen as an acceptable policy, something I saw in the music department was not. The class were singing a secular cantata about Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves with references to the many wives, fully covered, making them out to seem comic. At the other extreme, however, many Muslims have laughed at the idea that you cannot play orchestral music about Romeo and Juliet because they were lovers outside of marriage, and would introduce the idea of pre-marital sex to the pupils.

It is very useful to have some examples of Muslim poetry, such as *Muslim Poems for Children* by Mymona Hendricks,⁷ for Muslims to use for composition. These are poems about all aspects of Islamic life, written in a metre and rhythm which make them ideal for use when composing songs. And be aware that if they are singing their own compositions they may well be using quarter tones rather than singing 'out of tune'. Singing is always a safer activity than playing musical instruments. There are two main reasons for this. First, music, for most Muslims, is allowable when it is linked directly to praising Allah. Unlike in the Western tradition where instrumental music is deemed equally to be in praise of God, for Muslims there must be words. Not only must there be words but they must also be the main point of the music. This is the reason that in most Arabic, and much Eastern music, the only accompaniment is a single instrument playing the same line as the voice, usually without harmony. Secondly, musical instruments have traditionally been associated with dancing girls, drink and debauchery. I was astonished at my first parents' evening, at a school with a large percentage of Muslims, when a parent told me that in her culture only prostitutes played musical instruments. She was not intending to insult me, and I did not take it as such, but I was shocked.

On the question of singing there are two further points to consider. To most Western ears the call to prayer (*adhan/adzan*), and recitation from the Qur'an, sound like music, but Muslims will be offended by the use of this term. 'Music' itself is confused concept. It comes from the Arabic word *musiqā* which is only associated with secular music. There is also confusion as to what it refers to: for some people 'music' is only singing and for others it is only playing musical instruments. Al Faruqi⁸ suggested using the term *handasah al sawt*, sound arts, as an alternative to music. I found linking music, dance and drama under the same term 'expressive arts' on the school timetable made all three subjects more acceptable. On the question of terminology try changing the word 'concert' to 'cultural evening', and include music from several cultures and perhaps some poetry for your evening to be better attended by Muslim parents.

⁷ Published by The Islamic Foundation, Leicester, UK

⁸ al Faruqi L I (1986) 'Islamisation through Sound Arts' *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* Vol 3 PP 171-180

This, however, raises another issue, the question of boys and girls performing together after puberty. Although most Islamic schools do not do music in primary schools many parents do not object to their children doing music in state primary schools. I have taught many Muslim girls who have come to secondary school having played steel pans, or even orchestral instruments, in their previous schools. Some of these girls have been allowed to continue, provided that they no longer perform in public, and if they can be in a single sex group. Others have had to give up. I remember one particular case of a girl who had reached grade 5 flute, and had to give up when she 'became a woman'. She brought the school flute back to me in floods of tears because she desperately wanted to be able to continue playing.

Muslims are almost unanimously unhappy about the idea of boys and girls being taught together at secondary age. With the majority of schools now being co-ed this is generally unsatisfactory for them, but with performing arts it is even worse. In most schools in the UK dance is taught as part of PE in single sex lessons. There is a very good case for this being extended to music and drama, in schools with a large number of Muslims. This obviously has severe repercussions for any sort of extra curricular activity and school performances. Even performing in school assemblies becomes impossible for girls if there are male teachers present. Some schools manage to treat the school as an extension of the family and will tolerate male teachers, but certainly not boys and girls performing together or to each other. Integrating music into other subjects has been successful in many cases. It is the idea of performing that is anathema to many Muslims, so where music can successfully be incorporated into humanities, maths, languages and sciences this is good. Of course it is the very idea of creativity, self-expression, performing that gives music its essence for many of us, so this is often a poor substitute. Interestingly enough, the use of computers or keyboards, and other IT related activities, will often make music more acceptable. Most Muslims are very keen for their children to be computer literate and somehow producing sound from an electronic source removes the performance from the child. This is pure sophistry in my view but if it makes music possible I am prepared to go along with it.

Be aware that at Ramadan, the celebration of the holy month when the Qur'an was first revealed, attitudes to music may well be more evident. I found that girls who were usually allowed to play and sing (in an all girls school), would often ask to be excused during Ramadan. Sometimes this was for purely practical reasons: singing and playing wind instruments can have a tendency to make you thirsty, and drinking during daylight hours is *haram*. In very extreme cases even swallowing your own saliva is thought to be banned. Secondly, there is the added consideration that all recreational activities are proscribed during Ramadan, when your thoughts should be solely on your religious duties.

Many non-Muslims are unaware that Jesus is a recognized prophet in Islam. Until the time of Muhammad, when the Qur'an was revealed, Muslims followed other religions. Christians, Jews and Muslims are all branches of the Abrahamic faith and, as such, have the Old Testament in common. Hymns in praise of Jesus are acceptable, but do not to expect Muslims to take part in music with an overtly Christian content or references to the Holy Trinity. You will find that many Christmas Carols are permissible because Muslims believe in the virgin birth. Where sacred music from the western canon is concerned, it is obviously important and necessary to include this in class music lessons. However, try to include music from other religions on occasions to balance it.

Finally, invite parents who object to music in the curriculum in to school to see what you actually do in classes. Many have no idea, but have been told that music is bad. Imam Badawi⁹ said that 90% of the people who objected to music in schools had never been inside a school let alone a music class. The myth that as music educators we will be playing rock music with disgusting lyrics, or making children sing songs which are unacceptable to their faith, really must be laid to rest.

CONCLUSION

⁹ Zaki Badawi (1993) *Proceedings of the Conference on Islam and Music: Much Ado About Music* Education Society of Muslim Researchers, London

I would like to conclude with a quote by Shaheen Sabir, a teacher at an independent secondary school in Pakistan.¹⁰ She is pointing out that central to the understanding of behaviour is *niyyat* (intention).

In Islam good is halal and bad is haram, anything which takes you to hell is haram. Once you slaughter an animal that animal is halal but if an animal is already dead and you eat that animal that is haram. So it's how you use a thing, how you are using music. You have to educate yourself about everything. Some people link music with the bad. The only thing is to educate yourself about music. How can one even live without music?

SUGGESTED READING

al Faruqi L I (1982) 'The Shari'ah on Music and Musicians' in al Faruqi I R (ed) *Islamic Thought and Culture* Institute of Islamic Thought Washington DC

al Faruqi L I (1985) 'Music, Musicians & Muslim Law' *Asian Music* Vol 17 Pt 1 pp 3-36

al Qaradawi Y (1960) *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam* Translated by el Helbawy, Siddiqi & Shukry, American Trust Publications, Indianapolis.

Harris D (2000) 'Limited Access Only: the problems of researching performing arts in a Muslim Pakistani community' *Music Education Research* Vol 2 No 2 Sept 2000

Harris D (2000) 'Taking the Mountain to Muhammad' *Quaderni della SIEM* Vol 16 Feb 2000

Harris D (2002) 'A report on the situation regarding teaching music to Muslims in an inner city school.' *British Journal of Music Education* 2002 19:1

Shiloah A (1997) 'Music and Religion in Islam' *Acta Musicologica* Vol 69 Pt 2 pp 143-155

¹⁰ Shaheen Sabeer, interview 21st Oct 1999