

ISLA 788, Special Topics in Islamic Thought

Fârâbî on Music

Thursdays 14:35-16:25

Morris Hall 328

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The purpose of this seminar will be to study the first two programmatic books of Abû Naşr Muḥammad al-Fârâbî's (d.950-951) big book on music: *Kitâb al-mûsîqâ al-kabîr*. This work seems to have been commissioned by Abû Ja'far Muḥammad ibn al-Qâsim al-Karkhî, minister to the Abbasid Caliph al-Râdî who was in power between 934 and 940. Abû Ja'far seems to have asked Fârâbî to write a book that would explain all of music, as it had been treated by the 'ancients' (the Greeks). Fârâbî put off the commission until he had had a chance to examine everything on the subject transmitted into Arabic. He apparently hoped he could give his patron a reference to a work already written and in circulation. But he says in a letter to his patron that he found the works he consulted incomplete, either because of deficiencies in translation of source works or because key texts had been lost, and also because he clearly thought that his competitors writing in Arabic on the subject were at best musically proficient people with no philosophical understanding or at worst people with neither philosophical understanding nor musical proficiency. This sad state of affairs moved him to honour his patron's request in a quite distinctive way: he assumed that the 'ancients' had brought music to a state of perfection, and so he tried to reconstruct the whole discipline in a systematic way, on the basis of the sources available to him in Arabic and his own tremendous musical and philosophical culture.

That meant figuring out first of all the relation between practical music and music theory.

Fârâbî takes all music to be concerned with melodies (he is unaware of polyphony and harmony, as we have come to know it). He takes practical music to be concerned with the business of composing, improvising and making melodies heard by singing and/or playing them on musical instruments. But though practical music is supposed to have developed and even flourished as a sort of natural development and expression of musical impulses in all people and peoples, he says it ultimately requires direction by a theoretical, philosophical or scientific understanding of melody as such, its function in human life and hence its principles and whatever can be shown to follow from these principles. Otherwise practical music will not achieve its highest possible perfection. So Fârâbî also tries to reconstruct the appropriate account of theoretical music as such, by treating it as a special branch of Aristotelian science. (**Do please note:** we are not presupposing prior acquaintance with the works of Aristotle. But we will be looking at Aristotle carefully as the need arises.)

This part of the project required some creative (and hard) thinking, because, for one thing, Aristotle himself gives very little guidance for the treatment of music. He had a fair bit to say in Book Eight of the *Politics* about the place of music in education, but this material may not have been transmitted into Arabic. He treats music as an incidental in the stage production of tragedies in the *Poetics*, of not much greater interest than the stage decorations and special effects. He suggests in passing in Book One, Chapter One of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that practical music – if that is taken just to be the ability to play an instrument well – is really just a matter of habituation: the only direction it requires is that of a teacher who already knows how to play the relevant instrument well and who can correct your bad technique with sufficient scolding. But for Fârâbî, taking his cue now from Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, genuine science or understanding is not knowledge *that* a thing is, but rather *why* it is (and why it is, *as it is*). The scolding music teachers we encountered in childhood music lessons had knowledge of the former (*that* there are melodies), but not the latter. The proof is that if you ever asked your music teacher *why* things are thus and such, the answer you almost certainly got was: 'Because! That's why!'

That just isn't good enough for Fârâbî. He will try to explain the why and the wherefore of melodies. But this is no simple venture, because the question 'why' can be answered in a number of different ways, as Aristotle himself observes in the *Posterior Analytics*. Fârâbî will try to give a complete answer to the question. He begins with a brief description or characterisation of melody as the gathering together of notes of different pitch combined in a determinate combination, sometimes accompanied by words that signify in a conventional way, sometimes not. He tries to account for the final cause of melody, i.e., its purpose in human life: this leads him to classify melodies according to purpose and degree of perfection; it also leads him to give a speculative history of the evolution of melody-making in human society (we find a parallel for this in his speculative history of language in Part Two of the so-called book of letters: *Kitâb al-ḥurûf*). He also tries to account for what we might call the material cause of melodies, i.e., the elements or principles out of which melodies are put together. This part of the story begins with the simple observation that notes of different pitch are the elements of melody just as letters are the elements of speech: you get a melody if you arrange notes in the right way, just as you get meaningful speech if you arrange letters in the right way. That observation leads Fârâbî to an attempt to determine the natural pitch range within which human melodies can be put together. There must be both a lowest and a highest pitch for human melody, but how do you determine what they are in a decisive way? Once this question has been answered, Fârâbî sets out to enumerate all the notes within this range and what is perhaps more important to him – their 'kinship relations' Some notes are 'akin' and assist one another in producing successful melodies; others are not 'akin', get in the way of each other and produce unsuccessful melodies: but, again, how do you establish these relations in a decisive way? It will not be enough just to appeal to what music teachers tell us about the tuning of, and fingerings on, the 'oud (although we should take account of what they say). But nor does it make sense to invoke Aristotelian cosmology and the doctrine of the five simple bodies, as Kindî does, because this is irrelevant (and silly). Finally it remains to account for the formal causes of notes and their kinship relations: this involves appealing to arithmetic and ratios of numbers. (The efficient causes get treated along the way when Fârâbî has occasion to discuss the physical acoustics of sounding bodies.)

Fârâbî's book on music has been under-studied, but it is very interesting in a lot of different ways: as a special application of Fârâbî's Aristotelian conception of science to a really hard case, namely that of music; as a highly developed complement to Fârâbî's conception of human culture and civilisation and their development; as a window into musical practice and theory in the Abbasid era; as a window into philosophical treatments of music in Arabic; as an important (and sadly neglected) chapter in the reception history of ancient Greek musical treatises (Fârâbî had available to him, and is clearly responding in a distinctive,

creative and interesting way to, Arabic translations or paraphrases of Ptolemy's treatise on harmonics and quite possibly the treatises of other ancient Greek theorists, as well as books in Arabic – now lost – responding to these theorists). We warmly invite people with interests in the relevant fields (Islamic studies, philosophy, musicology, the history of music theory) to participate in this seminar. We conceive this seminar as an opportunity to explore and believe that we could all benefit from the expertise of participants from these different fields. There are no specific pre-requisites as such. But we are presupposing a willingness on the part of participants to work through the text carefully (we have a new translation) and passages (where available) from the material Fârâbî is presupposing, whether that ultimately be from Greek sources or from Arabic authors (again translations will be available). Participants who do not read Arabic will naturally be excused from the extra hour per week we will schedule for those who do read Arabic and who will be expected to work through the original with us.