

Resonances of Al-Fārābī: The Evolving Tradition of Gambus in Malaysia

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Abstract

During the Abbasid era, prominent scholars and philosophers such as Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī made transformative contributions across multiple disciplines, including music theory. A foundational figure in Islamic philosophy, al-Fārābī significantly advanced medieval musical thought by developing theoretical models, composing original melodies, and improving the design of the Arabic ‘ūd (lute). By the 15th century, the ‘ūd had influenced the evolution of the gambus in the Malay Archipelago, where it became an important component of Malaysia’s cultural heritage. This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the role of the gambus within al-Fārābī’s philosophical and musical framework. Drawing on both primary sources such as the *Kitāb al-Mūsīqā al-Kabīr* and a variety of scholarly literature, including books, theses, and journal articles, the research highlights the gambus as a key element in the spiritual and cultural traditions of Malaysia. In line with al-Fārābī’s view of music as essential to human well-being, the gambus is celebrated for its aesthetic and spiritual significance. However, its therapeutic potential remains underexplored. Based on al-Fārābī’s claim about the healing power of music, this paper calls for further interdisciplinary research into the application of gambus music in Malaysian healthcare and therapeutic settings.

Keywords: Gambus; al-Fārābī; Music Therapy; Islamic Music Philosophy; Cultural Heritage.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Al-Fārābī—named after his birthplace, Farab—was a highly regarded Islamic scholar and philosopher who made seminal contributions to music theory. Often referred to as the “Second Teacher,” he gained prominence for his intellectual rigor and scholarly depth (Mustofa, 2007; Hoesin, 1959). Among his most influential works is *Kitāb al-Mūsīqā al-Kabīr*, a foundational text in medieval music studies that was widely referenced in Middle Eastern universities (Bakar, 1992).

The spread of Islam across diverse regions significantly shaped local musical traditions, including the introduction of the gambus, an instrument derived from the Arabic ‘ūd (Raja Mohd Yusof, 2018). Today, the gambus is recognized as a Malaysian musical instrument, supported by government and cultural initiatives. Historically, it has served as a medium for disseminating Islamic teachings and holds a prominent place in Malaysia’s musical and cultural heritage.

In Malaysia—an Islamic nation—there is a longstanding recognition of music’s capacity to foster positive emotional and spiritual well-being. Al-Fārābī, in particular, viewed music as a mathematical science with therapeutic value, positing that it could influence mood and spirituality (the meanings of the intellect). Anecdotal evidence from historical accounts describes his

performances as powerful enough to make audiences laugh, cry, or even fall asleep. Although the gambus is acknowledged for its therapeutic potential in Arab and Western contexts, studies on its healing properties in Malaysia remain scarce (Bernama, 2012). Mohamed Ghouse Nassuruddin, for example, highlights the gambus's ability to alleviate stress and promote psychological healing, yet its broader medical applications have not been extensively investigated.

Building on al-Fārābī's perspective, this study examines the role of the gambus in Malaysia through the lens of maqām-based music for spiritual and emotional wellness. Previous research by Hani and Ediyono (2019) underscores al-Fārābī's assertion that music can help treat psychosomatic disorders. Within the Malaysian context—where Islamic heritage and historical ties to Arab traders have long shaped cultural practices—two fundamental questions emerge. First, how closely does gambus music in Malaysia align with al-Fārābī's theoretical principles? Second, does contemporary use of the gambus uphold its potential therapeutic effects?

Accordingly, this article aims to achieve two objectives. First, it analyzes the implementation of gambus music therapy in Malaysia through al-Fārābī's theoretical framework, focusing on how maqām-based music is practiced today. Second, it investigates the extent to which gambus performances may foster emotional and psychological well-being, thereby affirming—or challenging—al-Fārābī's emphasis on music as a therapeutic medium.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines three key areas relevant to understanding the gambus within al-Fārābī's musical philosophy and its role in Malaysia today. First, it explores Islamic philosophy and music, focusing on Islamic perspectives of music, its ethical and spiritual significance, and its impact on human well-being. Second, it discusses the life and works of al-Fārābī, specifically his contributions to music theory and philosophy. Finally, it reviews the history and evolution of the gambus from the Arabic 'ūd to its adaptation and recognition as part of Malaysia's cultural heritage.

2.1 Islamic Philosophy and Music

According to Firdaus et al. (2020), Islamic philosophy is anchored in divine revelation, primarily the al-Quran and as-Sunnah. Consequently, philosophical discourse undertaken by a Muslim—whether it concerns life, education, or other domains—must align with core Islamic principles and objectives. This foundation has fostered the emergence of various influential Islamic scholars.

Historically, music therapy is believed to have originated in ancient Greek philosophical thought but was further refined by Islamic scholars who integrated Islamic values into its application. Early discussions often examined the interplay between music, cosmology, and astronomy, notably in the works of al-Kindī and the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'. Other scholars, such as Abū Bakr al-Rāzī, al-Fārābī, and Ibn Sīnā, rejected associating music with metaphysical or celestial elements; however, these varying perspectives collectively influenced the development of music therapy as both a physical and spiritual healing modality.

In broader Islamic culture, music has often been linked to health and well-being, especially in enhancing individual spirituality (Mohd Sufie & Sidik@Mat Sidek, 2016; Firdaus et al., 2020). Beyond entertainment or performance, music's therapeutic and holistic benefits have been widely recognized, underscoring its importance in Islamic intellectual and cultural traditions.

2.2 Al-Fārābī and Music

2.1.1 *Al-Fārābī's Biography*

Al-Fārābī (Abū Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ṭarkhān ibn Awzalagh al-Fārābī) was born in 257 AH (circa 870 AD) in the village of Wasij, south of Samarkand (now part of Atrar, Turkey), and passed away in 339 AH (950 AD) at the age of 80 (Ibn Khallikān, 1948). He came from mixed Persian and Turkish ancestry, though Islamic lineage traditions identify him primarily as Persian (Zar, 2004). He authored pioneering works on music theory during the Middle Ages, most notably *Kitāb al-Mūsīqā al-Kabīr*, which shaped subsequent scholarly discussions in both the Islamic world and beyond (Bakar, 1992; Hoesin, 1959).

2.1.2 *Al-Fārābī's Philosophy*

Al-Fārābī conducted extensive analyses and commentaries on Plato's and Aristotle's works, making him a bridge between Greek philosophical traditions and emerging Islamic thought (Kopecka, 2015). Due to his expertise in logic and music, he was titled “al-Mu‘allim al-Thānī” (the Second Teacher), second only to Aristotle in philosophy (Farmer & Neubauer, 1986). Adopting elements of Ancient Greek philosophy, particularly from Aristotle, he advanced a comprehensive philosophical system, influencing figures such as Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd (Mahmuda, 2017).

In music, al-Fārābī built upon and refined theories that traced back to Pythagoras, establishing systematic principles for medieval Islamic music theory (Mahmuda, 2017). He rejected purely metaphysical or cosmic associations with music, aligning instead with Aristotle and Aristoxenus on the notion that music's influence is grounded in tangible, emotional, and psychological realms (Shehadi, 1995).

2.1.3 *Al-Fārābī's Music Education*

Al-Fārābī traveled to Baghdad to pursue higher education in jurisprudence and other religious sciences (Mahdi, 1963). Initially not fluent in Arabic, he studied linguistics, grammar, logic (manṭiq), natural sciences, medicine, and music under various scholars, including Abū Bakr bin Sirāj (Daudy, 1958). Prior to Baghdad, he had already gained foundational knowledge in Islamic sciences and music in Bukhara (Mahmuda, 2017). Over two decades in Baghdad, he expanded his interests to philosophy, ethics, political science, and music (Ridwan, 1999).

Al-Fārābī's reputation as a master musician is illustrated in an anecdote recounted by Ibn Khallikān (1948): at the court of Sayf al-Dawlah, he performed melodies that induced laughter, tears, and even sleep among his audience—all with a single instrument (often described as the qānūn).

2.1.4 *Al-Fārābī's Works on Music*

In 936 AD, al-Fārābī authored *Kitāb al-Mūsīqā al-Kabīr* at the request of Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn al-Qāsim al-Kharkī, vizier to Caliph al-Rāḍī (al-Fārābī, 1967). This masterpiece examines the philosophy of music, acoustics, tonal systems, melodies, rhythms, musical instruments, vocal intonation, and the synergy between language and music. In addition, al-Fārābī wrote other influential texts, including:

- a) *Kitāb al-Iḥṣā’ al-Ikā‘āt* (The Book of Enumeration of Rhythms)
- b) *Kitāb al-Ikā‘āt* (The Book of Rhythms)
- c) *Kitāb Iḥṣā’ al-‘Ulūm* (The Book of Enumeration of the Sciences)

These works solidified his status as one of the most influential figures in medieval music theory (Bakar, 1992; Tercan, 2020).

2.1.5 *The Meaning of Music According to al-Fārābī*

Al-Fārābī conceptualized music as an art encompassing both vocal and instrumental melodies (al-alḥān). In *Kitāb al-Mūsīqā al-Kabīr*, he differentiates between two main branches of music:

- a) Theoretical Music (al-mūsīqā al-naẓariyyah) – the intellectual understanding of music and its components.
- b) Practical Music (al-mūsīqā al-‘amaliyyah) – the production, performance, and composition of melodies.

He describes *melody* (al-laḥn) as the orderly arrangement of tones (naghm) interspersed with pauses and rhythm (Shehadi, 1995). This holistic combination of tone, pause, and rhythm creates music’s powerful emotional and spiritual effect on listeners.

2.1.6 *Al-Fārābī’s Theory of Music*

Al-Fārābī presents a rational classification of music, distinguishing its theoretical aspects (composition, structure) from its practical use (instrumentation, performance) (Tercan, 2020). He selectively integrated Greek musical theories to suit Arab musical traditions, recognizing music’s role in shaping human emotions, behavior, and intellect (Bakar, 1992). His work in *Kitāb al-Mūsīqā al-Kabīr* details how melodies can influence emotional states, underscoring music’s therapeutic value (Üngör, 1995; Madian, 1992).

Through tables and descriptive analyses, al-Fārābī identifies various melody categories (e.g., *al-alḥān al-mulidha*, *al-alḥān al-mukhayyilab*, *al-alḥān al-infi‘aliyyah*) and correlates them with specific emotional responses (al-Fārābī, 1967). He likewise highlights the links between music and human intellect, underscoring that the correct combination of musical elements can induce positive physical and psychological impacts.

2.1.7 *Al-Fārābī’s Views on Musical Instruments*

Al-Fārābī’s works reference a range of musical instruments, such as the lute (‘ūd), pandore (ṭunbūr), reed pipe (mizmar), oboe (ṣurnāy), rebec (rabābah), lyre (mi‘zafah), harp (sanj), and others (Sawa, 1989; Shiloah, 1979). Farmer (1929) notes his reputation as an expert performer, particularly on the ‘ūd. Some scholars credit al-Fārābī with inventing or refining instruments like the qānūn and violin, further distinguishing Arabic musical traditions from Greek (Hani & Ediyono, 2019).

2.1.8 *Al-Fārābī’s Perspective on Music and Human Well-Being*

Al-Fārābī asserts that music has profound psychological, spiritual, and emotional influences on both humans and animals (Kolukirik, 2014). He emphasizes that music, when aligned with the soul, promotes tranquility and health, whereas disordered or meaningless sound can lead to emotional unrest (Suryo Ediyono, 2019). Additionally, he sees music as instrumental in fostering virtues such as wisdom and knowledge (al-Fārābī, 1967).

Practically, al-Fārābī demonstrated music’s power to evoke diverse emotional states—causing laughter, tears, or even sleep—through carefully structured melodies (Turabi, 1996; Isgandarova, 2015). He identified three principal benefits of music in human life: enhancing emotional well-

being, nurturing spirituality, and aiding in the healing of diseases (Horden, 2000; Suryo Ediyono, 2019).

2.1.9 Al-Fārābī’s Perspective on Music as a Therapeutic Medium

Music’s role in healing is central to al-Fārābī’s philosophy, especially regarding psychosomatic disorders. By harnessing the emotional resonance of specific maqām (musical modes), one can positively influence the mind and body (Hani & Ediyono, 2019). Al-Fārābī integrates spiritual elements into this framework, arguing that music gains greater efficacy when accompanied by ethical or religious poetry that strengthens the listener’s moral character (al-Fārābī, 1967).

He further explores the concept of *maqām*, evolving it from the rhythmic structure of the *adhān* (call to prayer) to a standardized form in Arabic musical tradition. Each maqām evokes a unique emotional or spiritual response (Benek et al., 2015), suggesting a structured approach to using music for therapeutic and spiritual well-being.

2.1.10 The Benefits of Music According to al-Fārābī

Al-Fārābī’s holistic approach underscores three broad categories in which music exerts its influence (al-Fārābī, 1967; Suryo Ediyono, 2019; Horden, 2000; Giola, 2006; Alakbarli, 2003):

- a) Music for the Soul: Enhancing emotional stability, preventing mental disturbances, and encouraging positive thinking.
- b) Music for Spirituality: Facilitating a deeper connection with the Creator through meditative listening, particularly relevant in maqām genres such as Hijaz.
- c) Music as Therapy: Alleviating psychosomatic disorders by addressing emotional stress, anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues through targeted musical modes.

2.3 Gambus

2.3.1 The Arrival of Gambus

The gambus, believed to be derived from the Arabic ‘ūd (also spelled “oud”), represents a significant cultural transmission from the Middle East into the Malay Archipelago (Raja Mohd Yusof, 2018). Historical sources suggest that maritime trade during the Sassanid era (6th century) laid the groundwork for Persian and Arab cultural influence, including the dissemination of musical instruments like the ‘ūd (Hilarian, 2005).

By the 15th century, intensified cultural exchanges between Arab traders and coastal states in the Malay Peninsula bolstered the instrument’s integration into local musical traditions (Mohd Anis, 1993). Although the exact timeline is debated, consensus exists that Islamization in the region played a pivotal role in popularizing the gambus, which was readily adapted for Malay artistic expressions (Hilarian, 2018).

2.3.2 Gambus Malaysia

Over centuries, the gambus has evolved into a quintessential component of Malaysia’s national musical heritage, symbolizing both Malay identity and Islamic artistic influence. Scholars like Jocelyne Guilbault and M. Kinzer (2017) underline the complex ways in which music intersects with politics, economics, and social structures, highlighting the gambus as an emblem of Malay and Islamic culture in contemporary settings.

In Johor, for instance, the Gambus Johor is celebrated for its local craftsmanship, culminating in Geographical Indication (G.I.) status conferred on Batu Pahat by the Malaysian Intellectual Property Corporation (MyIPO) (Mohmad Azaman, 2020). Annual Gambus Festivals, integrated into Malaysia's state tourism calendar since 2015, further underscore the instrument's cultural prominence (Latifah, 2015).

Local modifications in shape, size, string arrangements, playing techniques, and musical repertoire demonstrate the gambus's adaptability to regional tastes (M. Kinzer, 2017). These ongoing innovations exemplify the rich interplay between traditional roots and contemporary expressions, securing the gambus's enduring legacy within Malaysia's musical and cultural landscape.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study examines music therapy and the benefits of gambus through the lens of al-Fārābī's philosophical framework. Employing a qualitative methodology and literature-based analysis, the research draws upon both primary and secondary sources, including *Kitāb al-Mūsīqā al-Kabīr* and related scholarly works. Data collection involves a systematic review of academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and historical texts relevant to Islamic music theory and the development of the gambus in the Malay world. The analysis emphasizes source credibility, historical context, and relevance to contemporary Malaysian musical traditions. Research findings are articulated in clear and structured language, providing a comprehensive and coherent account of the methodological process.

4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Soul

Al-Fārābī posits that music can strengthen a weak soul and guide it toward inner peace and tranquility (al-Fārābī, 1967). He underscores that musical melodies should match an individual's emotional and spiritual state to be most effective. Within Malay society, the gambus is closely tied to traditional Islamic music, often incorporated into devotional songs (nasyid) by groups such as Raihan, Hijjaz, and Rabbani (Hilarian, 2006; M. Kinzer, 2017). Because of its Middle Eastern origins, gambus music remains a common component of da'wah (religious outreach) and spiritual expression in Malaysia (Attan, 2018).

Contemporary examples illustrate the instrument's evolving role. Collaboration between rock vocalist Sam (Bunkface) and the nasyid group Inteam in the single "Mencari Sinar" integrated gambus performances by Fauziah Gambus (Johar, 2021; Joseph, 2021). This fusion of modern and traditional sounds reflects the enduring appeal of gambus music in conveying spiritual themes. Likewise, the Nurulhilai Gambus Group, founded in the 1980s, revitalized qaṣīdah, nasyid, and gambus traditions in Rengit, Batu Pahat (Attan, 2018). Through these collective efforts, gambus compositions—often arranged in Arabic maqām—continue to offer spiritual solace and emotional comfort, supporting al-Fārābī's view of music as an innate, soul-enriching art form.

4.2 Spirituality

Al-Fārābī regarded music's spiritual and moral dimensions as paramount, emphasizing that beneficial music should accompany poetry that fosters a closer relationship with God (al-Fārābī, 1967). In Malaysia, the gambus fulfills this vision in multiple cultural contexts, functioning as both a solo and accompanying instrument in genres such as Zapin Melayu, Hamdolok, Qasidah, Samrah, Ghazal, and nasyid (Hilarian, 2018; M. Kinzer, 2017; Nizam, 2013). Besides major

performances, it features prominently in weddings, circumcision ceremonies, and Quranic recitation celebrations (Khatam al-Quran), reinforcing its role at the intersection of social and religious life (M. Kinzer, 2017).

Traditional gambus performances typically begin with praise songs for the Prophet Muḥammad (Yā Rasūlallāh and Yā Nabī Salām ‘Alaik), led by the gambus player, underlining its devotional function (Attan, 2018). A unique aspect is the taqsim—an improvisational passage performed in the same maqām as the main piece—to maintain spiritual and melodic continuity. Interpretations of maqām in Malaysian gambus vary, ranging from close adherence to Arab traditions to more localized approaches (M. Kinzer, 2017). Official religious events similarly integrate gambus, with performances of qaṣīdah and Quranic recitations—including those hosted by JAWI and JAKIM—demonstrating the instrument’s ongoing spiritual significance within Malaysian Islamic culture.

4.3 Treatment

Al-Fārābī traced the earliest rhythmic musical structures back to the call to prayer (adhān) and later formalized them into the maqām system, wherein each maqām retains fixed melodic characteristics (Isgandarova, 2015). Historically, gambus-based healing practices were noted in Bongawan, Sabah, during the 1960s, wherein patients purportedly entered trance states when exposed to gambus melodies, helping them articulate their ailments (Latifah, 2015).

Modern research in Malaysia supports music therapy’s broader benefits. For instance, a study at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) investigated gambus, gamelan, and fiddle as therapeutic tools for children with cerebral palsy and autism (Bernama, 2012). Results suggested that instrument-based therapy aligned with brainwave activity, fostering positive emotional and physiological responses. Over time, some children displayed significant cognitive and motor improvements (Mohamed Ghouse Nassuruddin, personal communication). Kamal Sabran’s doctoral research further explored gambus therapy for Alzheimer’s patients, blending traditional elements with electronic sounds (David, 2020).

Despite these developments, the comprehensive application of al-Fārābī’s maqām system for psychosomatic healing remains largely untapped in Malaysian healthcare settings. Although stringed instruments like the gambus continue to hold spiritual and cultural importance, their potential as structured therapeutic tools—mirroring historical Islamic hospital practices—has not been widely integrated into mainstream medical programs. Bridging al-Fārābī’s classical theory with current therapeutic models could expand the scope of music therapy in Malaysia, potentially reinforcing emotional, spiritual, and medical well-being through a distinctly Islamic musical approach.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Al-Fārābī’s musical philosophy emphasizes its profound spiritual, emotional, and psychological impact—an understanding that aligns with the continuing importance of the gambus in the Malaysian cultural and religious landscape. As a traditional instrument rooted in spiritual practices and communal rituals, the gambus has contributed significantly to individual well-being and social harmony. However, its potential role in therapeutic contexts, particularly in clinical, psychological and psychosomatic settings, remains underexplored. Al-Fārābī’s assertion of the healing properties of music provides a valuable theoretical foundation for advancing this discourse. Integrating the gambus into contemporary music therapy could offer a culturally resonant approach to mental health and holistic care. Such initiatives would not only revitalize traditional

musical heritage but also bridge the gap between indigenous knowledge systems and modern healthcare practices.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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