In the medieval Middle East, musical performance was a distinctive feature of Abbasid court culture throughout the second half of the eighth and ninth centuries CE.¹ At the caliphal court, women and men singers performed in formal and informal musical assemblies, or majālis, to predominantly male audiences,² and the success of a performer was linked in part to her or his ability to elicit ṭarab in the audience. ṭarab is a term that refers to a spectrum of emotions ranging from joy to sadness, affecting the bodies, hearts and minds of audiences in response to the performer’s voice, eloquence or body posture.³ However, in the course of the ninth and tenth centuries CE, at the time when Abū l-Faraj al-ʾIṣḥāḥī was writing his Kitāb al-Aghānī (‘Book of songs’), music was increasingly condemned by religious scholars owing, in part, to what they perceived as the controversial musical performances at court of professional slave women singers, known since pre-Islamic antiquity as qiyān (sing. qayna).⁴ The iconic description of their Abbasid successors as deceitful temptresses who used music to induce passion in men and extract financial benefits from them was skilfully drawn and immortalized in the century before al-ʾIṣḥāḥī wrote Kitāb al-Aghānī by the litterateur al-Jaḥiz (d. 868) in his famous essay entitled Risālat al-qiyān, or ‘The Epistle on Singing-Girls’.⁵ The critical attitude towards music expressed by pietists armed with mounting moral and cultural authority in turn shaped the socio-ethical boundaries of musical performances and ensuing manifestations of ṭarab at the Abbasid court.⁶
Abū l-Faraj al-İsfahānī (d. c. 967) was a historian and poet, as well as a connoisseur and lover of music. His twenty-four-volume anthology entitled Kitāb al-Ağhānī al-kabīr (‘The great book of songs’) compiles literary biographies of prominent women and men singers at the Abbasid court. Offering rich descriptions of musical performances and the manifestations of ṭarab with which audiences responded to them, each biographical entry forms a skilfully crafted unit that provides an argumentative discourse which reflects, and reflects upon, the controversies with which musical assemblies at court were associated. Whereas pietist and literary discourses critical of musical performance offer a reductive representation of slave women singers and obscure the roles of free women singers, Kitāb al-Ağhānī, in contrast, constructs nuanced and diversified biographical ‘life stories’ of slave and free women musical performers through its choice, omission and ordering of anecdotal or informational reports, referred to as akhbār (sing. khabar).

Using the notions of emotional community, gender and status as categories of historical analysis, this article examines Kitāb al-Ağhānī’s biographical narratives of three prominent singers of the Abbasid court, namely the princess ʿUlayya (d. 825), daughter of the third Abbasid caliph, al-Mahdī (r. 775–85); her brother, Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī (d. 839); and Shāriya (d. c. 870), a slave woman purchased and trained by Ibrāhīm to become a professional singer at court. The article first situates Kitāb al-Ağhānī within its sociopolitical context and interprets its ideological framework. A comparative analysis of the three biographical narratives then addresses the following question: how did emotions, gender and status shape, on the one hand, the musical performances of women singers and, on the other, their audiences’ emotional responses, holistically referred to as ṭarab? Through this question, this article thus seeks to nuance and complicate our understanding of the constraints and opportunities that shaped slave and free women’s musical performances, as well as men’s performances, at the Abbasid court.

Music and poetry became staple features of Abbasid court culture during the course of the eighth and ninth centuries CE. The reign of the caliph al-Maʾmūn (r. 813–33), son of the caliph Harūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809), witnessed a vibrant development of the arts and the sciences invigorated by a rich movement to translate mainly Greek and Persian works into Arabic. However, the cultural effervescence that characterized al-Maʾmūn’s court was paralleled by a growing pietist movement which was critical of the caliphate and more particularly of court culture. In the final year of his rule, the caliph’s imposition of the mihna, a procedure that required religious scholars to conform officially to the view that the Qur’ān was created, pitted the pious leadership,
emboldened by the stoic resistance of the religious scholar Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), against the ruling elite. As part of their opposition to the caliphate, religious leaders targeted the *qiyan*, a distinctive feature of court culture, as agents and symbols of moral depravity. During the following century, when *Kitāb al-Aghānī* was written, the Qur’anic injunction of ‘commanding right and forbidding wrong’ was used by opponents of the caliphate to legitimize the arrest of *qiyan* in the streets of Baghdad. Houses were broken into and searched for women musicians.

Activities against musicians in the streets of Baghdad were paralleled by a pietist discourse in which the representation of the *qiyan* and the attitude to adopt towards them and towards musical performance were one of the means through which pious ethical Islamic behaviour was articulated. Our earliest extant example of a pietist work critical of musical performance and its emotional impact on listeners is the monograph entitled *Dhamm al-malāḥī* (‘Tracts on Listening to Music’) by the religious scholar Ibn Abī l-Dunyā (d. 894). *Dhamm al-malāḥī* includes a collection of ḥadīths (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, or descriptions of his daily practice as reported by his companions) critical of the *qiyan*, and attributes negative connotations to the terms *malāḥī* and *ālāt al-tārāb*, which up to that point had been used simply to mean musical instruments. Amnon Shiloah notes that the connotation of *malāḥī* and *ālāt al-tārāb* as referring to instruments not only of entertainment but also of moral diversion from the straight path reflects an ideological stance. He adds that Ibn Abī l-Dunyā’s *Dhamm al-malāḥī* was part of a growing discourse on music under the category of samaʿ, or ‘listening to music’, in which pious-minded scholars engaged in categorizing which types of music could be listened to, in addition to where, when and how they could be performed. Pietist regulations of musical performance were thus instrumentalized to trace the ethical boundaries of Islamic cultural propriety.

Pietist concerns regarding musical performance and its effects on audiences are addressed in the following anecdote included by al-Khatīb al-Baghdādi (d. 1071) in his *Taʾrīkh Baghdad* (‘History of Baghdad’). Al-Baghdādi relates that when the ḥadīth scholar Abū Zurʿa al-Rāzī (d. 878) walked through the market streets of the Abbasid capital, he plugged his ears with his fingers from fear that the voices of women singing that poured from the city’s houses would awaken his heart. The use of the term *makhāfatan* (‘from fear’) highlights the intensity of the concerns of religious scholars, represented in the anecdote by its author and main protagonist, regarding the emotional impact of musical performance on potentially receptive audiences. The heightened
anxieties of the pietists may be explained by what this anecdote suggests: music as a form of entertainment had spilled out beyond the exclusive assemblies of the Abbasid court, into urban residences located along the popular market streets of the capital city.

Within this sociopolitical context of increased pietist criticism towards musical performance and its harmful effects on listeners, al-İsfahânî compiled and composed Kitâb al-Ağhânî. A number of narratives in Kitâb al-Ağhânî describe the extreme emotional impact (tarâb) that listening to music could have on listeners. These narratives implicitly acknowledge the legitimacy of the fears expressed by Abû Zur'a al-Râzî and Ibn Abî l-Dunya regarding the troubling and disruptive effects of musical performances by female singers on male audiences. In Kitâb al-Ağhânî, we read depictions of extreme and destructive manifestations of tarâb, such as tearing one’s clothes, crying excessively and hitting one’s head against a wall. In one instance, al-İsfahânî relates that a stern old man was sailing in a small boat on the Euphrates together with a group of male youths and a female slave singer. The woman sang a certain poem on the upper deck, and when her fine voice reached the ears of the old man in the cabin below, he became so excited that he threw himself into the river. Justifying his mad act after he was rescued, the old man claimed that he had been overcome by a sensation like that of ants crawling over him from head to toe, and this had made him lose his wits. However, depictions of extreme and destructive manifestations of tarâb in Kitâb al-Ağhânî are counterbalanced by narratives in which the emotional effects associated with music are legitimized on the basis that they induce happiness and soothe sadness. Al-İsfahânî cites the ascetic poet Abû l-Atâhiya (d. 825), who resorted to listening to singing for spiritual inspiration and pious comfort. Al-İsfahânî further notes that when Abû l-Atâhiya was asked on his deathbed for his last wish, he requested that Mukhâriq, a prominent singer of the Abbasid court, perform one of his favourite songs.

Not only was al-İsfahânî an observer of the emergence of religious and literary discourses critical of musical performance, he also witnessed the takeover of Baghdad, in the middle of the tenth century, by the Buyid warlord dynasty and the subsequent eclipse of the main patrons of musical performers at court, namely the Abbasid caliphate. Nevertheless, the advent of the Buyid dynasty inaugurated a period of political stability which granted al-İsfahânî, a courtier of the Buyid vizier al-Muhallabî (who held office between 950 and 963 CE) the opportunity to compile Kitâb al-Ağhânî. Hilary Kilpatrick describes Kitâb al-Ağhânî as an ‘epic panorama of pre- and early Islamic literature, history and culture’ and argues that al-İsfahânî was moved by his ‘desire to defend
music as an integral part of medieval Arabic culture and of court culture in particular. Through his anthology, al-İsfaḫâni ensured the recording, preservation and transmission of the significance of music and poetry in the making of Arab-Islamic culture. His biographical narratives provide, in part, a response to the criticisms of the religious scholars, arguing for the legitimacy of women’s (and men’s) musical performances at the Abbasid court, as well as in less exclusive musical assemblies, throughout the first 300 years of Arab-Islamic history.

The choice of the three biographical subjects explored in this article, namely ʿUlayya bint al-Mahdî, Ibrâhîm ibn al-Mahdî and Shâriya, is guided by the differences in the singers’ gender and status as well as by their common adherence to the emotional community formed by the Abbasid court. Barbara Rosenwein defines emotional communities as similar to social communities such as families, neighbourhoods and princely courts, whose members share a system of feeling based on a common understanding of what emotions they value, devalue or ignore; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate and deplore. The success of ʿUlayya’s, Ibrâhîm’s and Shâriya’s musical performances at court depended mainly on their ability to elicit ʿtarab in their audiences, or responses conditioned by ʿtarab, which in turn necessitated an understanding of the system of feeling that prevailed at the Abbasid court.

Al-İsfaḫâni organizes each biographical entry around a set of themes which, on the one hand, expose the terms of the controversy surrounding the musical performance of the biographical subject and, on the other, engage in an argumentative discourse that legitimizes the performance of the singers, as well as the expression (or containment) of ʿtarab by their respective audiences. A comparative analysis of these three biographical entries through the prisms of emotional community, gender and status provides insight into the roles of emotions, gender and sociolegal status in both delineating the constraints and opportunities of women’s musical performances and shaping the contours of the audience’s subsequent manifestations of ʿtarab at the Abbasid court. More generally, analysis of the factors that al-İsfaḫâni foregrounds in his narratives also informs us about the system of feeling that defined the Abbasid court as an emotional community by enhancing our understanding of the emotions that the women and men of the early Abbasid court thought were valuable or harmful to them, and the affective bonds that they valued, tolerated or deplored.
The controversy shaping ʿUlayya’s biographical entry concerns the tension created by the need to reconcile her status as a free woman belonging to the ruling elite with her role as a composer and performer of songs. Al-İsfahānî’s choice of narratives in ʿUlayya’s biographical entry may be grouped under three main themes: (1) those defining a legitimate framework for ʿUlayya’s engagement in musical composition and musical performance; (2) those outlining a suitable emotional code of conduct for listening to and manifesting tarab in response to ʿUlayya’s musical performances; and (3) those highlighting the role of emotions in defining the two previous themes and more generally in shaping the affective bonds structuring the Abbasid court as an emotional community.

The role of the caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, ʿUlayya’s brother, and more specifically of the caliph’s emotions, in authorizing and thus legitimizing ʿUlayya’s engagement with music is articulated in al-İsfahānî’s introductory remarks and both explicitly and implicitly repeated throughout her biographical entry. Al-İsfahānî begins by stating that she spent most of her time attending to her religious duties. In other words, he implicitly indicates that music was not ʿUlayya’s primary interest and that she conferred on her religious obligations the priority that she was expected to give them. Not only does al-İsfahānî note the priority of religious duties in ʿUlayya’s daily engagements, but he also relegates music to a marginal position by stating that ʿUlayya’s only source of pleasure was poetry: in other words, not music. Having thus described ʿUlayya’s proper hierarchy of interests, al-İsfahānî explains that she engaged in singing only when called upon to do so by the caliph, whose request, al-İsfahānî adds, ʿUlayya could not reject. So it is the caliph and not ʿUlayya who is portrayed as the main instigator and consequently the legitimate origin of ʿUlayya’s musical performances.24

The role of tarab in triggering al-Rashīd’s instigating role in ʿUlayya’s musical performance is illustrated in the following anecdote. In the first part of the anecdote, al-İsfahānî relates how al-Rashīd leads one of his courtiers by the hand through a series of three locked rooms which the caliph opens and then locks from the inside. In the last room, he and his courtier come upon a curtain, behind which they find a locked pavilion. The caliph opens the curtain and knocks at the pavilion’s door. A noise is heard, and the caliph knocks again. This time they hear the sound of a lute. At the caliph’s third knock, the beautiful voice of a woman reaches the two men.25

This part of the anecdote, with its repetitive description of different types of barriers – the doors, curtains and pavilions separating the caliph
and his courtier from ʿUlayya – demonstrates the seclusion of ʿUlayya, the need to keep her identity hidden as well as the difficulty of gaining access to her. However, the caliph’s knocks, which resemble a ritual of coded signals, with the number of knocks indicating to the woman inside the pavilion what action to engage in, suggest that the caliph’s visit is not an exceptional event but rather a familiar and so rather frequent one. The implied repetitiveness of the caliph’s visits, unhampered by the barriers that separate him from ʿUlayya, compounded with the caliph’s desire to share his experience with a courtier despite the need to keep ʿUlayya’s identity a secret, highlights the intensity of the caliph’s appreciation and anticipation of the ṭarab he feels when listening to ʿUlayya’s singing.

The second part of the anecdote highlights the objective of the caliph’s quest, namely the pleasure or elation he feels when listening to ʿUlayya, which in this part of the anecdote is manifested in the caliph’s body movement. Having heard the woman’s first song, the caliph then requests that she intone his favourite song, and the woman fulfils his request. At this point, the caliph is so overwhelmed by what he hears that he starts dancing. The caliph’s attitude is contrasted with that of his courtier, who hits his head against the wall. At this point the caliph says to the courtier, ‘Let’s go, for I fear that we may misbehave if we stay any longer.’ Once the two men have left the three rooms, the caliph grasps his courtier’s hand and informs him that the woman is ʿUlayya, then threatens to kill him if he ever reveals that he has learned the singer’s identity.26 This part of the anecdote introduces the proper rules of conduct, located at the interface of acknowledgement and concealment that define both ʿUlayya’s performance and the manifestations of ṭarab in her audience. Unlike other narratives which legitimize musical performance and ṭarab by pointing to their soothing and edifying effects, this narrative uses the pleasure engendered by the body’s physical reaction to music, manifested here in the caliph’s dancing and his need to share his pleasure with others, as a supportive argument for ʿUlayya’s musical performance. Legitimacy resides in a measured manifestation of musical affect and adherence to the rules of concealed acknowledgement.

The authorizing role of the caliph is again emphasized in ʿUlayya’s emotional response to her brother’s death. Al-Īṣfahānī relates that following the passing of al-Rashīd, ʿUlayya is overtaken, not by sadness, but rather by a deep-seated fear (jazaʿ at jazaʿ an shadidan) which leads her to abandon her singing. She clearly understands that the death of al-Rashīd implies not only the loss of a brother but also the loss of the authority legitimizing her musical performance. It is only upon the
persistent request of al-Rashīd’s son and successor, the caliph al-Amīn (r. 809–13), that she re-engages in musical performance and entertains him with a song. Al-İṣfahānī again indicates that the legitimacy of ʿUlayya’s musical performances is tied to the consenting authority of the caliph.

The rules of conduct associated with ʿUlayya’s performance which were introduced in the anecdote above are developed in a series of ensuing narratives. Al-İṣfahānī compiles several anecdotes describing musical gatherings presided over by the caliph where, despite ʿUlayya’s spatial seclusion, her voice is heard filtering through the harem walls or her songs are performed by her slave women or other singers in public musical assemblies. These assemblies create a context where the caliph can test and instruct his audience in the proper attitude to adopt when listening to ʿUlayya’s songs. This educational process is guided in part by the caliph’s own emotional conduct. Al-İṣfahānī relates that in a private majlis, or musical gathering, convened by the caliph al-Muʿtasım (r. 833–42), who is surrounded by four other male singers and his nephew Muḥammad, the singer ʿAqīd hums a song, accompanied by the caliph’s nephew, who plays the lute. The caliph feels ʿarab and displays it, not by engaging in excessive or uncontrolled behaviour, but rather by inquiring about the identity of the composer of the melody and lyrics. The four singers refrain from answering and remain silent. Muḥammad, the caliph’s nephew, informs al-Muʿtasım that it is ʿUlayya. At this point the caliph expresses displeasure at his nephew’s inappropriate response, namely acknowledging ʿUlayya’s authorship in public, by turning away from him. Muḥammad understands his error and realizes that the singers had deliberately refrained from mentioning ʿUlayya’s name. Muḥammad is temporarily ignored by the caliph until the latter believes that his nephew has learned his lesson. At this point the caliph soothes his nephew’s distress by explaining to him that he should not dread the caliph’s wrath, since they both share with ʿUlayya the same ties of kinship (lā turaʿ yā Muḥammad inna nasibaka minhā mithla nasibī) and would thus equally bear the disgrace of having her name revealed in public.

Having defined the proper framework for the performance of ʿUlayya’s songs, al-İṣfahānī offers a series of akhbār which illustrate how ʿarab induced by ʿUlayya’s musical performances succeeds in reversing a caliph’s emotional state from estrangement to rediscovered affection, and from anger to contentment. Al-İṣfahānī relates how ʿUlayya uses her musical compositions to help Zubayda, al-Rashīd’s wife, reconquer the heart of her husband when he is captivated by the exceptional beauty of a slave woman. ʿUlayya asks Zubayda to dress up her slave girls in their
most colourful apparel and teaches them a song of her own composition. Al-Rashîd is deeply moved by this brilliant assortment of visual and auditory pleasures. He displays his elation by rising to his feet to welcome his wife and his sister, and sends his servant Masrūr to distribute more than 10,000 dirhams among the people of the city. His emotional response to ʿUlayya’s musical composition favours mending and sustaining matrimonial relations as well as providing financial support to the needy.30

ʿUlayya’s musical talents succeed in soothing the caliph’s anger on a more personal plane. Upon her return from her pilgrimage to Mecca, ʿUlayya decides to spend some time in Iraq, in the city of Ṭīzanābād, known as a pleasure resort. Her stay in the city is reported to have taken the caliph by surprise and provoked his anger. On her return to Baghdad, ʿUlayya composes a poem and sings it to al-Rashîd. The exonerating verses of the poem, in which she allays the caliph’s fears of any inappropriate behaviour on her part, and its melody, mollify the caliph’s anger and allow him to understand and assent to her behaviour.31

Shāriya

The controversy in Shāriya’s biographical entry is linked, on the one hand, to the ethical and emotional challenges that the purchase, training and performances of Shāriya posed to the Abbasid court and, on the other, to the potential deceitfulness of her musical performances and their disruptive emotional effects on male audiences at court. Al-Īsfahānī’s biographical entry provides a bipartite response to these challenges. The first part recognizes the moral and social tensions that the acquisition of Shāriya by Ibrāhîm ibn al-Mahdî (the brother of ʿUlayya) provokes at the Abbasid court, and highlights Ibrāhîm’s willingness to use dubious means to counter them. In the second part, al-Īsfahānī undercuts the perceived deceitfulness and disruptive-ness of slave women’s musical performances by emphasizing the rigorous training preceding Shāriya’s musical expertise and the audience acclaim for the professionalism of her performances in the form of ʿajab (a stunned yet informed appreciation of very unusual musical skills) rather than tirab. Finally, as will be discussed in more detail below, Shāriya is described as using ʿajab not to deceive men but rather to become a member of the emotional community of the Abbasid court. Conversely, her professionalism provides a framework that legitimizes, and enables the Abbasid court to favour, her integration.

The moral and social unease triggered by Shāriya’s sociolegal status and her subsequent acquisition by Ibrāhîm and presence at court are
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illustrated, not through emotion words, but rather by conflicting anecdotes regarding her familial and social status. The slave trade supplied many of the women who were bought and trained in the Abbasid 'music industry' for the purpose of entertaining men. Shāriya, however, was not introduced to the Abbasid empire through the slave trade. She was born in Basra and was a muwallada, namely a person of mixed ancestry, normally an Arab free man and a non-Arab slave mother. The tension surrounding her status is illustrated in a number of successive narratives providing conflicting information regarding her origins. In one, she is alternatively described as the daughter of a free man of the Banū Sāma and a slave woman. In that story, her father’s refusal to acknowledge his paternity leads to her servile status, while her alleged mother is described as a sly woman who claimed that Shāriya was the daughter of a member of the Quraysh tribe, to which the Prophet as well as all members of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties belonged, and as such wrongly enslaved. Other anecdotes suggest that she was stolen and sold to a woman of Abbasid lineage who educated her and taught her how to sing, and then eventually sold her to Ibrāhīm. Yet another cluster of anecdotes portrays Ibrāhīm as claiming that Shāriya was given to him as a gift following the birth of his daughter Maymūna, or alternatively that Shāriya was Maymūna’s slave and that Ibrāhīm borrowed money from his sister to buy her.

Nevertheless, the prospective benefits associated with the purchase of Shāriya, given her musical training, clearly outweighed the pressures Ibrāhīm faced as a result of the socio-ethical tensions triggered by Shāriya’s presence at the Abbasid court. Al-Isfahānī highlights Ibrāhīm’s willingness to use deceit to ward off the criticism he faces following his acquisition and training of Shāriya. By doing so, al-Isfahānī implicitly counterbalances the representation of slave women as deceitful and greedy performers. The social and moral problems that the recruitment of Shāriya poses to the Abbasid court as a community are illustrated by the ‘blackmailing’ to which the court is subjected by the purported mother of Shāriya. The latter is depicted visiting the influential courtier ʿAbd al-Wahhāb ibn ʿAlī to complain about the fate of her alleged daughter. The ensuing developments involve prominent figures at court such as the caliph al-Muʿtasim and the judge Ibn AbīDuʿād. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb informs the caliph of the visit of Shāriya’s mother and of the latter’s complaints regarding her daughter’s status. The resulting investigation triggers a series of events in which Ibrāhīm deceives the caliph, the judge Ibn AbīDuʿād, concerned friends and other courtiers, in addition to Shāriya herself, into believing that he has manumitted Shāriya and married her. The involvement of the caliph in the matter
and Ibrāhīm’s recourse to subterfuge clearly show that the status of Shāriya as both a singer and a muwallada put a serious strain on the court’s social, moral and emotional value system.

The lucrative profits expected from Shāriya’s purchase are emphasized by narratives in which al-İşfahānī describes Ibrāhīm’s willingness to sell everything he owns, including his costly robes of honour, to gather the capital needed to buy Shāriya, despite being, in the words of his son Hibatullāh, penniless at the time. Having given the matter some thought, however, Ibrāhīm sends his son to a friend whom he asks to lend him a substantial sum of money, 10,000 dirhams, with the purpose of not only buying Shāriya but also attending to her various needs in terms of housing, clothing and food. The judiciousness of Ibrāhīm’s decision is demonstrated in his exchange with Ishāq al-Mawsīlī, a reputed singer and Ibrāhīm’s main competitor in matters related to music, regarding Shāriya’s monetary worth. Shāriya was first offered to Ishāq al-Mawsīlī, for the sum of 300 dinars, by the woman who owned and trained her. Ishāq finds the price too high and rejects the offer. At Ibrāhīm’s request, Ishāq listens to Shāriya a year later and offers Ibrāhīm 3,000 dinars. The anecdote alludes in part to Ibrāhīm’s superior judgement in foreseeing Shāriya’s potential as a singer; for our purposes, however, the anecdote highlights the lucrative aspect of the investment and illustrates the high level of expertise of Shāriya’s performance.

Sharia’s expertise and the training needed to achieve it are described in an exchange between Ibrāhīm and the connoisseur Ḥamdūn ibn Ismāʿīl, who, having listened to Shāriya’s singing, is greatly impressed (fa-akthara al-taʿajjub) by her performance. Ibrāhīm asks Ḥamdūn to make an educated guess as to the number of times Shāriya had to repeat the song before mastering it. Ḥamdūn guesses 100; Ibrāhīm tells him to go higher. Ḥamdūn says 300. Ibrāhīm replies that Shāriya had to repeat the song more than 1,000 times before she could perform it properly. The difficulty of mastering a song is again illustrated in an anecdote in which Rayyiq, another of Ibrāhīm’s lead women singers, and one of Shāriya’s trainers, remarks that when Shāriya had difficulty learning a song, Ibrāhīm would punish her by forcing her to learn it on her knees. She adds, however, that this was the harshest punishment Shāriya was subjected to. When all other means to teach Shāriya a song failed, Ibrāhīm’s last resort was to ask Rayyiq to accompany her with the lute and help her master the melody. Finally, in addition to singing, Shāriya was also trained in the art of playing the lute. The anecdote introducing Shāriya’s initiation to the lute explains that it was prompted by the belittling comments of her main competitor at court, namely the slave woman singer ʿArib (d. 890), who derided Shāriya’s inability to
play the instrument. It sheds light on another aspect in the lives of professional women singers at court, namely the competition they faced from their colleagues, which added yet another incentive to perfect their craft.42

Shāriya’s exacting professional training is rewarded and matched by the nature of the response elicited by her performances. While ʿUlayya’s audience manifested appreciation of her performance through different forms of ṯarab, Shāriya’s audience expresses it through ʿajab. The lexicon Lisān al-ʿArab describes ʿajab as referring to a sense of incredulous, stunned wonder resulting from witnessing a rare or unfamiliar phenomenon.43 Shāriya’s audience is not one of amateurs but aficionados, real connoisseurs of musical performance. What is stirred in them is not the body or the heart but primarily the mind of a male audience which appreciates the exceptional skills of a professional performer. The terms ʿajab and taʿajjub are used numerous times to describe the impact of Shāriya’s singing on her audience. That ʿajab is distinct from ṯarab is explicitly stated by the aristocratic aficionado ʿUbaydullāh ibn ʿAbdullāh ibn Tāhir, who, when asked by the caliph al-Muʿtazz (d. 869) to evaluate Shāriya’s performance, responds by noting that her singing is more a source of incredulous wonder than of emotional jubilance (ḥazz al-ʿajab min ḥadha al-ʿghinaʾ akthar min ḥazz al-ṯarab).44 ʿAjab is also expressed by the caliph al-Muʿtamid (d. 892) when he hears Shāriya perform, and he manifests his appreciation not through ṯarab but by congratulating Shāriya by saying ʾahṣanti (‘Well done!’).45 Here again, the caliph’s knowledgeable appreciation of Shāriya’s art is expressed through a verbal evaluative response rather than an emotional one affecting his body or his heart.

Last, a slave woman who has become a successful performer at court may invest her cultural capital in such a way as to gain entry into the community formed by the Abbasid court and take a more active and vocal role in defining her position at court. Professional training favours the building of a network of social ties extending beyond those linking the performer to her owner and trainer. Shāriya is described interacting with Farīda, the concubine of the caliph al-Wāthiq (d. 847), as well as the slave women of Khadīja, daughter of the caliph al-Maʾmūn. She eventually becomes the main competitor of another star professional woman musician and singer at the Abbasid court, namely the famous ʿArīb.46

Whereas ʿUlayya used the emotional capital gained through ṯarab, Shāriya uses the cultural capital gained through ʿajab. This cultural capital allows her to progress beyond being a passive woman whose life is played out for her by others: the father who repudiates her; the
anonymous thief who steals her; the woman who buys, trains and sells her; her alleged mother, who tries to extort money from her owner; and, finally, Ibrâhim himself, who trains her further. As she gains in fame, Shâriya is portrayed as playing a more active and vocal role in directing the course of her life. When the caliph al-Muʿtamid hears her singing and, as mentioned above, manifests his pleasure not through ṭarāb but through congratulations on the soundness of her performance, she composes a verse in response in which she says: ‘This is how I sing when very lightly dressed … How much better would I perform if suitably clothed!’ Upon hearing this, the caliph orders a whole wardrobe of the most refined clothing to be brought to her. Beyond the material benefit gained by her vocal expertise, Shâriya’s symbolic request for more appropriate clothing, the equivalent of a court tradition of bestowing robes of honour on men, may be interpreted as an implicit request for more dignity and greater integration within the court community. By the same token, Shâriya’s virtuoso professional performance gives al-Muʿtamid a ‘sortie honorable’ from the ethical predicament posed by her questionable status and her very presence at court by allowing him to act as the consummate music connoisseur rather than a consumer of slave women singers.

Both ʿUlayya’s and Shâriya’s musical performances are initially enabled by men for the pleasure of other men. In the case of ʿUlayya, legitimacy is gained mainly through the authorizing role of the caliph, which defines a proper code of conduct for ʿUlayya and her audiences. In both cases emotions either have an intrinsic value or play a didactic role in building this legitimacy: the ṭarāb felt by prominent male family members such as ʿUlayya’s brother, Hârûn al-Rashid, or her nephew, al-Muʿtasîm, as well as the conciliatory and soothing effects of her singing on familial affective bonds legitimize ʿUlayya’s engagement in music given her status as a free woman and member of the ruling elite.

Shâriya’s career is initiated by her being bought and trained by Ibrâhim. Unlike ʿUlayya, the legitimacy of Shâriya’s performance does not stem from ṭarāb or an emotional response felt by her listeners. It is rather won through ḥaşab, the sense of stunned wonder at her artistry, which grants Shâriya her cultural legitimacy. Shâriya’s biography thus suggests that at the Abbasid court, slave women’s performances are to be met with caution and judged by technical rather than emotional standards. In contrast, ʿUlayya’s biographical narrative implies that emotions triggered by a free woman’s music were considered valuable and legitimate at court. An important difference in the musical performances of ʿUlayya and Shâriya can be seen in the physical presence of the latter in musical assemblies. ʿUlayya’s seclusion means
that in public assemblies, her songs are performed by slave women singers or men. Nevertheless, both ʿUlayya and Shāriya are depicted as using the impact of their musical performances on their listeners as means to further their own wishes or needs.

Ibrāḥīm

The terms of the controversy shaping Ibrāḥīm’s biographical entry concern the tension created by, on the one hand, his status as a member of the ruling elite, knowledgeable in sciences of religion (ʿilm), and, on the other, his role as a composer and performer of songs. Whereas ʿUlayya’s musical performances operated mainly within the private realms of kinship and matrimony, Ibrāḥīm’s performances, like those of Shāriya, are staged in the public and treacherous field of male politics as well as the more forgiving private space of male kinship and friendship. The succession of narratives constructing Ibrāḥīm’s biographical entry may be grouped into three main themes which focus on countering the disruptive and deviant effects of listening to music posited by pietist discourse. Ibrāḥīm’s biography demonstrates (1) the controlling and containing, rather than disruptive, nature of Ibrāḥīm’s voice; (2) the cathartic effect of Ibrāḥīm’s singing on men in positions of power and its ability to mend and improve public relations; and (3) the bonding effects of Ibrāḥīm’s singing in private meetings meant to entertain friends and family members.

The legitimacy and social value or benefit of Ibrāḥīm’s engagement in music is first confirmed and consolidated by highlighting the constructive powers of his voice. Al-Īsfahānī counters the pietists’ perception of musical affect or ʿтарāb as disruptive through a succession of narratives which symbolize the capacity of Ibrāḥīm’s voice to tame both men and beasts. He relates that whenever it was Ibrāḥīm’s turn to sing at the caliphal assemblies (majālis), the vast spectrum of court attendants, from the most modest servants to the highest-ranking of officials, would leave their work behind and move as close as possible to hear him. As long as Ibrāḥīm sang, they stood still listening. When his performance ended, they quickly returned to their tasks.48 A parallel reaction by animals is illustrated in a narrative which relates that in the course of a musical assembly held by the caliph al-Amīn, the wild beasts in the nearby woods stretched out their necks and drew closer to the pavilion where he sang, to the point that they nearly laid their heads on the windowsills. But as soon as Ibrāḥīm stopped singing, the beasts moved as far away as they could.49

Ibrāḥīm’s musical performances contribute to mending the deep emotional rifts carved by the civil war that tore the Abbasid dynasty apart.
In addition to being accomplished in both the religious sciences and music, Ibrāhīm had also taken an active part in the political struggle which marked the ascent to the throne of his nephew, the caliph al-Maʾmūn. Al-Maʾmūn’s reign had been preceded by a civil war with his brother al-Amīn (r. 809–13). The defeat and murder of al-Amīn were followed by continued unrest, provoked in part by al-Maʾmūn’s decision to shift the seat of power from Baghdad (and Iraq) to the city of Merv (in eastern Iran). His opponents coalesced around Ibrāhīm, who was declared caliph but then defeated by al-Maʾmūn, who took power. Having demonstrated the powerful and controlling effect of Ibrāhīm’s voice, al-Īsfahānī relates a number of ḥabar showing how Ibrāhīm’s musical skills and melodious singing mitigated the bruised relations between him and his nephew, the caliph al-Maʾmūn, and favoured the mending of political rifts. Al-Īsfahānī recounts how, having defeated Ibrāhīm’s attempt to take over the caliphate, al-Maʾmūn has him brought to court in shackles. Ibrāhīm enters the caliph’s majlis dressed in modest clothing. Al-Maʾmūn, in a show of goodwill, orders his servant to give his uncle a luxurious robe of honour. In the meantime, the singer Mukhāriq, who is present at the majlis, intones a melody. His rendition is criticized by Ibrāhīm. Al-Maʾmūn then uses Ibrāhīm’s musical expertise to show his appreciation of his uncle’s musical skills while at the same time gently admonishing him. He first requests that Ibrāhīm improve Mukhāriq’s performance. When Ibrāhīm finally approves of Mukhāriq’s singing, al-Maʾmūn addresses Mukhāriq, saying, ‘You are like a luxurious garment so neglected by its owner that the dust has altered its colour. When the dust is shaken off, however, the garment recovers its true colour.’ This is addressed to Mukhāriq but also implicitly to Ibrāhīm, reminding him that his modest attire has just been replaced by a lavish robe of honour, encouraging him to uphold al-Maʾmūn’s expectations and maintain a suitable comportment. In another ḥabar, al-Īsfahānī relates how, during an early-morning encounter with al-Maʾmūn, Ibrāhīm expresses in a short song his worry as to his nephew’s intentions towards him. The lyrics and melodious singing soften al-Maʾmūn’s heart (fa-raqqa lahu al-Maʾmūn lima samīʾahu). The caliph then reassures Ibrāhīm that no harm will come to him as long as he adopts proper comportment.

The tension and restraint that pervade the public majlis held by al-Maʾmūn stand in contrast to the light-hearted atmosphere that permeates the private assemblies presided over mainly by al-Rashīd, or those which bring together Ibrāhīm with other singers. In these assemblies, both Ibrāhīm and his audience show very little restraint in expressing the pleasurable effects of both singing and listening to music.
There is no such restraint as that imposed on the audience listening to ʿUlayya’s songs. Al-İsfahâni relates that in the course of a gathering of all the famous musicians of the day at his house, Ibrâhîm, who is sitting playing chess with one of them, leans back on his chair and intones one of Farîda’s songs. The song is then taken up by Mukhâríq, whose audience is so elated they feel they could fly (kidna naṭīru surīran). Feeling challenged, Ibrâhîm straightens up and engages in another round of singing. As he sings, his shoulders keep moving, and his body keeps swinging, until his performance surpasses that of Mukhâríq. The renowned singer Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥârith disregards social decorum and tears off his clothes to express the ṭarâb he feels when listening to Ibrâhîm’s voice. Whereas in ʿUlayya’s and Shâriya’s performances body posture and movement are confined to their male listeners, they were legitimate means by which both a male singer and his male audience expressed the intensity of their involvement in musical performance.

Conclusion
The biographical narratives concerning ʿUlayya, Shâriya and Ibrâhîm in al-İsfahâni’s Kitâb al-Aghâni clearly demonstrate the role of emotions, gender and status in shaping and differentiating the musical performances of women (and men) at the Abbasid court. They also reflect an argumentational discourse in which al-İsfahâni demonstrates a clear awareness of the controversies surrounding women’s (and men’s) engagement in music and of the need to legitimize their musical performances. More generally, the biographical narratives about the three singers shed light on the system of feeling, the emotions that the women and men of the court thought were valuable or harmful to them, and the affective bonds that they valued, tolerated or deplored.

ʿUlayya’s biographical entry addresses the controversial issue of the engagement of a free woman of the ruling elite in musical performance, as well as the proper ways for her audiences to manifest their emotional response. Al-İsfahâni presents the sanctioning authority of the caliph’s appreciative emotional response to ʿUlayya’s musical performances as the primary source of legitimacy for her engagement in music. The caliph is further depicted as delineating the proper code of conduct for ʿUlayya’s performance as well as for the emotional responses of her listeners. ʿUlayya’s seclusion entails that her live performances are limited to gatherings of family members. In public, her songs are performed by proxy, mainly through the voices of professional slave women singers such as Shâriya, but also by male singers. When one is
listening to her songs, restraint in the manifestation of *tarab* is advised, and her authorship cannot be explicitly acknowledged but only implicitly recognized, in conformity with the constraints shaping the engagement of free elite women with music.

Shāriya’s biographical entry is built around the ethical and emotional challenges elicited by the lucrative practice of purchasing and training *muwalladāt* (slave women of mixed parentage born within the Islamic empire) as women singers for the Abbasid court. Al-İsfahānī does not engage in legitimizing the practice so much as in counter-balancing the critical perception of *qiyan*, women slave musicians, as deceitful and greedy by highlighting the deceit and greed of the men (and women) involved in the trading and training of slaves and *muwalladāt* of possibly free parentage for the purpose of entertaining men at court. He further downplays the potential deceitfulness of slave women singers by focusing on the rigour of their musical schooling, and the *ʿajab* (informed appreciation of unusual expertise) rather than *tarab* (spontaneous emotional response) expressed by their listeners. A cautious attitude towards the musical performance of slave women at the court is implicit in the attention he directs to their technical mastery and the type of response it elicits in real connoisseurs of music.

Finally, İbrāhīm’s entry raises the question of the benefits for a free man of the ruling elite of engaging in the mastery of the profane field of musical performance. Al-İsfahānī responds by demonstrating the legitimacy of such an endeavour through choosing *akhbār* which illustrate the constructive transformations triggered by İbrāhīm’s voice in both the public, forbidding and treacherous sphere of male politics and the more private gatherings constructed around male kinship and friendship.

Put together, the three biographies offer a more nuanced understanding of the constraints and opportunities for free and slave women singers at the Abbasid court in comparison to those of men. They also show the personal involvement of members of the ruling dynasty in producing as well as experiencing music and its emotional and aesthetic effects, *tarab* and *ʿajab*, the social risks and benefits involved in responding to music; and the ways in which risk and benefit could be handled depending on the status of the individual. More generally, and just as importantly, in the face of a rising pietist movement critical of the potentially subversive emotional effects of listening to music, al-İsfahānī provides a closely knit, argumentational discourse for the legitimate engagement of slave and free women (and men) in musical performances at the Abbasid court.
Notes


5. ‘When one comes to consider a singing-girl, three senses are involved; and [the pleasure] of the heart makes the fourth. The eye has the sight of a beautiful attractive girl; [...] hearing finds its sole delight in listening to her voice, touching her leads to carnal desire and the longing for sexual intercourse. All these senses are there as if scouts for the heart. In the presence of singing-girls a man experiences concurrent pleasures such as he would not find conjoined in anything else and the like of which the individual senses could never give him. Thus in consorting with singing-girls lies the greatest temptation.’ Al-Jahiz, *The Epistle on Singing-Girls by Jahiz*, A. F. L. Beeston (transl.) (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1980), p. 3.


7. Abū l-Faraj al-İşfahānî, *Kitāb al-Aghānī al-kabīr* (Beirut: Dār Şādir, 2008). *Kitāb al-Aghānī* is al-İşfahānî’s most famous work. In it, he collected the songs that had been chosen on the order of the caliph al-Wāthiq (d. 232) by the famous court musician Işāq al-Mawṣili. This list is believed to be a revised version of the one prepared by İbrahim al-Mawṣili, Işāq’s father, for the caliph Harūn al-Rashid (d. 193).


**Cultural History**

14. Ibn Abî l-Dunyâ’s (d. 208) work had been preceded by those of al-Mufadhal ibn Salama (d. c. 290) and Ibn Khurrradādbih (d. 300), which had also used the term malāhī in their titles in reference to musical instruments.
19. Ibid. vol. 9, p. 216, 217.
20. Ibid. vol. 18, p. 251.
23. Barbara Rosenwein, ‘Problems and Methods in the History of the Emotions’, *Passions in Context*, 1 (2010), pp. 1–33 (31). This approach to the emotions is based on the premise, developed mainly by cognitive psychology, that emotions in addition to thinking are a vital factor in shaping people’s actions. It posits that emotions are not universal or unchanging but rather to a large extent socially constructed through systems of feeling grounded in their cultural contexts within emotional communities.
25. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 141.
26. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 142.
27. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 145.
28. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 147.
29. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 133.
30. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 136.
31. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 144.
32. Youval Rotman has constructed a map of the medieval slave trade around the Mediterranean basin which is available online at https://networks.h-net.org/medieval-human-trafficking-map-and-data-dr-youval-rotman. The map was posted on January 11, 2018 by David Prior on the ‘Medieval Human Trafficking Map and Data,
Gendering Emotions

by Dr. Youval Rotman’ webpage of the’ Humanities and Social Sciences Online’ website which is run by H-Net.


36. Ibid. vol. 16, p. 6.

37. Ibid. vol. 16, pp. 6 and 7.

38. Ibid. vol. 16, p. 7.

39. Ibid. vol. 16, p. 6.

40. Ibid. vol. 16, p. 5.

41. Ibid. vol. 16, p. 9.


45. Ibid. vol. 16, p. 12.

46. Ibid. vol. 16, pp. 10, 11.

47. Ibid. vol. 16, p. 12.

48. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 113.

49. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 90.

50. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 84.

51. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 109.

52. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 89.

53. Ibid. vol. 10, p. 93.