

**LINES OF THOUGHT:**  
**NOTATIONS AND HISTORIES OF MUSIC THEORY FROM ABBASID BAGHDAD (762–1055)**

In the ninth century, Baghdad became the most bookish city on earth. This dynamic period witnessed a prodigious increase of Arabic-language books accompanied by a generalized turn toward written forms of knowledge transmission. At the same time, music theorists integrated perspectives from recently translated ancient Greek treatises into an Arabic musical tradition of performance practice and theory. These concurrent phenomena created a unique set of conditions for the development of technologies of music writing. This dissertation examines the emergence of musical notation in the Arabic context alongside the development of music-theoretical writings in the early Abbasid period (762–1055). I place al-Fārābī (870–950), the leading music theorist of the time, at the center of this story, showing how different facets and phases of his music-theoretical writings relate to this broader paradigm shift. Examining more than eighteen theoretical treatises alongside songbooks and compilations of musicians' anecdotes, I demonstrate that notation was available to theorists and performers active in ninth- and tenth-century Baghdad but remained largely unpursued, defying narratives of technological determinism.

The dissertation consists of five chapters preceded by an introduction. The first two explore the creation of the conditions for the development of a literate approach to music theory in the early Abbasid period: the Arabic book revolution and the translation movement. The third chapter provides a comprehensive assessment of musical notation in this period, considering its use in theoretical sources and in practice. The last two chapters focus on al-Fārābī's trailblazing contributions, both conceptually and in testing different visual strategies to convey rhythmic information.

In the first chapter, "Inventories: Music Books in Early Abbasid Baghdad," I consider the impact that the Arabic book revolution, the explosion in the number of circulating books at the turn to the ninth century, had on music. The generalized turn toward written knowledge transmission brought momentous changes on the social, educational, and intellectual landscape. Outcomes of this phenomenon include the

emergence of songbooks and anthologies of musicians' biographies and anecdotes as genres of popular literature as well as the development of a tradition of Arabic music-theoretical books aimed at independent learners outside the traditional face-to-face setting. Building upon insights from recent scholarship on the history of the Arabic book, I demonstrate how early Abbasid music theory treatises—privately circulated compilations of lectures and course notes, handbooks for autodidacts, large compendia and their abridgments—reflect different stages of Abbasid book culture.

The second chapter, “Genealogies: Forefathers, Greeks or Arabs?” focuses on the translation movement that began shortly after the foundation of the city of Baghdad in 762, a concurrent development to the Arabic book revolution. Al-Fārābī, in his *Great Book of Music*, puts forth a Hellenistic historical narrative of Arabic music theory, depicting his own work and that of his peers as a continuation of the ancient Greek tradition. Contrasting al-Fārābī's account with novel information from music-theoretical, historical, and literary works, I present a nuanced account of the translation movement in the field of music. While I maintain that the translation of Greek musical treatises into Arabic was a pivotal development, I show that there was already an autochthonous written Arabic theoretical tradition in place when the translation activity began.

In an exercise of unprecedented scope, the third chapter, “Notations: Writing Music in Abbasid Baghdad,” provides a comprehensive assessment of the different notation methods employed by Abbasid music theorists to capture pitch and rhythm. Moreover, considering evidence from theoretical and literary sources, I argue that musical notation was employed in a limited fashion outside theoretical sources for practical performance purposes.

It is onto this stage that al-Fārābī emerges. In the fourth chapter, “A Conceptual Alignment: Al-Fārābī's Understanding of Musical Time,” I bring to light the mechanisms that allowed al-Fārābī to convey rhythmic patterns to his readers with increased precision. Al-Fārābī stands out from other early Abbasid theorists in his engagement with visual approaches, yet the precise representation of time in his works is not a matter of graphic inventiveness. What makes al-Fārābī's notation intelligible to modern

readers are several conceptual innovations, such as the simple but momentous shift of understanding rhythm primarily as a series of note durations rather than as sequences of percussions. Engaging with al-Fārābī's works makes us aware of historical and cultural differences in the understanding of musical time, offering a glimpse at a way to conceptualize temporal relationships that is at odds with the one we take for granted in modern practice.

In the fifth and last chapter, "Lines in Front of the Eyes: Al-Fārābī's Rhythmic Notation and Its Scribes," I examine the innovative notation procedures that al-Fārābī employed in his three music works, fleshing out their differing processes and their affordances. Mindful of the novelty of his visual methods, al-Fārābī includes sections in his newer treatises explaining the workings of his notation. Yet, there are significant discrepancies between al-Fārābī's instructions and what actually appears in the surviving sources. This confronts us with the reception of al-Fārābī in later periods. I explore a particularly striking case in which a scribe took the initiative and employed procedures from al-Fārābī's last treatise to bring the notation of an earlier work up to date. While al-Fārābī describes his new visual methods as "putting rhythm under the sight," what we encounter, borrowing Malcolm B. Parkes felicitous expression, are the scribes' hands before our eyes.

By examining the inception of musical notation in this largely unexplored Arabic context, the dissertation provides a counternarrative to the standard story of music writing's development in the West, which arose within the book culture of Carolingian Europe during this same period. Making available a wealth of new Arabic materials, "Lines of Thought: Notations and Histories of Music Theory from Abbasid Baghdad (762–1055)" contributes to recent efforts to advance toward global histories of music.