Ibn Sinā’s Musical Theory

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Ibn Sinā (Avicenna in Latin, 980-1037) was a philosopher of encyclopedic knowledge and at the same time a famous doctor widely known in Europe as well as in the Islamic world. The present paper deals with his musical theory through analyzing his three works in Arabic: Kitāb al-Shifā (Book of healing), Kitāb al-Najāt (Book of the delivery) and Qānūn fi’l-Tibb (The canon on medicine). The paper is divided into five parts dealing with a definition of the science of music, the note (naghm), rhythm (iqa’), the instruments and the composition of melody.

Considering the fact that Ibn Sinā had been known as Avicenna in Europe since the latter half of the twelfth century, his musical theory must have transmitted to Europe in some shape. The relation between rhythm and pulse, in particular, written in his “The canon on medicine” seems to have exerted an influence on European notion of rhythm.

Another issue has come up in the course of the paper, i.e., whether the last part of the Kitāb al-Najāt, which deals with mathematics including music, was actually written by Ibn Sinā himself or not. Most scholars of Islamic philosophy regard this part as that composed by Ibn Sinā’s disciples. Hefny, however, states that the manuscript put in Bodleian Library, Oxford (Marsh 521, f. 159b-170b) is a work by Ibn Sinā himself.

Essentially Kitāb al-Najāt is said to be a summary of Kitāb al-Shifā’. The substance is, however, different, at least in part, from each other, e.g., the indication of rhythm (iqa’) and a grace note. To settle these problems, we must study other manuscripts and, before completing these works, be careful in citing Kitāb al-Najāt as a source of Ibn Sinā’s musical theory.