

Original Research Article**A Critical Analysis of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Views on Music
(Rereading the Relationships between the Sacred, History, and Artistic
Forms within the Horizon of Traditionalism)**

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Abstract

Within the framework of traditionalism and *philosophia perennis*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr regards traditional art as a manifestation of the sacred and music as a reflection of cosmic order. In this theoretical system, the Renaissance is interpreted as a turning point marking the rupture from the sacred horizon, and modern art—especially from the Renaissance onward—is generally considered to lack existential connection with the transcendent. Nasr's theory represents one of the significant metaphysical formulations concerning art in contemporary thought and has had considerable influence, particularly in studies related to Islamic art and traditional music. However, the relationship among the three levels in this theory requires more precise examination: first, the sacred as a transhistorical reality; second, the historical narrative of the Renaissance rupture; and third, objective criteria for distinguishing sacred music from other musical forms. The central problem of this research is how one can reconcile the claim of the transhistorical nature of the sacred with the limitation of its historical realization to traditional societies, and to what extent Nasr's historical formulation of the Renaissance corresponds with evidence from art and music history. Through an analytical-critical approach, drawing upon Nasr's primary works, his dialogue with Eliot Deutsch, as well as research in art and music history, this article examines the internal coherence of this theoretical system. The research findings indicate that while the metaphysical foundations of Nasr's theory possess coherence, conceptual tensions emerge at the level of historical analysis and in determining indicators of musical sacredness—tensions that remain unresolved without more precise reformulation. The aim of this critique is not to negate traditionalism, but rather to identify theoretical gaps whose consideration could contribute to the enrichment of this framework.

Keywords: *Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Traditionalism, Sacred Music, Renaissance, Traditional Art*

Introduction

In contemporary traditionalism, particularly in the works of thinkers such as René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Burckhardt (1967) and Nasr (1987), art is conceived not as a merely aesthetic activity, but

as a mode of manifestation of transcendent truth in the human world. In this intellectual system, the traditional world is one in which the hierarchical levels of existence are symbolically reflected in art, and traditional art takes shape through an intrinsic connection with the sacred. Nasr (Nasr, 1987; 1389),

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in his major works, presents traditional art as a manifestation of the sacred and a reflection of cosmic order. Within this framework, sacredness is not a psychological or social quality, but rather an ontological reality; in other words, the sacred exists at the level of being itself, not merely at the level of human interpretation (Nasr, 1989, 8-10).

Nasr explicitly states that traditional art is traditional not because of its subject matter, but “because of its conformity to the cosmic laws of forms” (Nasr, 1987, 15). This criterion indicates that the traditional character of art depends not on content, but on the structure and form of the artwork itself. From Nasr’s perspective, sacred art is art that takes shape directly within a ritual and liturgical context, making possible the presence of the transcendent; traditional art emerges within the horizon of a sacred worldview, even if its subject is not explicitly religious; and religious art may merely possess religious subject matter without necessarily having sacred quality (Nasr, 1987, 12-14; 1989, 202-205).

Music occupies a privileged position in this regard. Referring to the Pythagorean tradition and the heritage of Islamic wisdom, Nasr considers the proportional and numerical structure of music to be a reflection of cosmic order. From this perspective, numerical ratios in music are not merely quantitative relations, but carry an ontological quality and bear witness to the profound harmony of the universe. Thus, traditional music can constitute a more direct manifestation of the order of being (Nasr, 1987, 88-95).

However, a fundamental problem emerges at precisely this point: if the sacred is an ontological and transhistorical reality, how can its realization be limited to traditional societies? Nasr regards the Renaissance as a turning point marking the rupture from the sacred horizon and presents modern art (from the Renaissance onward) in its totality as characterized by a kind of separation from the transcendent (Nasr, 1989, 210-215). This historical formulation, though occupying an important position

in traditionalism, necessitates answers to serious questions. First, in what sense was the Renaissance rupture in artistic domains absolute or heterogeneous? (Burke, 1998; Gombrich, 1995). Second, if the sacred is transhistorical, why is it predominantly present in one particular period and considered absent in another? Third, what is the criterion for distinguishing sacred music: numerical structure, the artist’s intention, ritual function, or semantic horizon?

This article seeks to raise these questions analytically while maintaining respect for the metaphysical coherence of Nasr’s system. The aim is not a wholesale rejection of traditionalist theory, but rather a precise examination of the relationship among three levels within it: 1) the ontological level of the sacred; 2) the historical level of the Renaissance rupture; and 3) the formal/musicological level. The fundamental premise of this research is that Nasr’s theoretical tensions arise not in the metaphysical foundations but in the nexus among these three levels. If this nexus is explained more transparently, the traditionalist system can achieve greater analytical coherence, but if this nexus remains obscure, contradictions will emerge in the theoretical formulation. In what follows, first, the research background and the position of this discussion within existing literature will be examined, and then Nasr’s metaphysical foundations will be analyzed. Finally, its relationship with art history and musical examples will be evaluated comparatively.

Literature Review

• Traditionalism and theoretical foundations of sacred art

Traditionalism emerged in the twentieth century as an intellectual movement that, in opposition to modernity, secularism, and epistemological relativism, defended the existence of an absolute and transhistorical truth (Sedgwick, 2004, 23–30). Guénon (2001, 7–12) articulated the metaphysical foundation of this movement by proposing the idea of Perennial Wisdom and speaking of a single,

universal tradition underlying the diverse forms of religions.

In the works of Schuon (2005, 1–6), this perennial wisdom was elaborated into a system of hierarchical being and religious symbolism, analyzing the relationship between religious forms and transcendent truth. Burckhardt (1967, 7–12) applied this framework to the analysis of traditional art, particularly Islamic art, demonstrating how Islamic architecture, geometry, and ornamentation constitute a symbolic reflection of cosmic order and metaphysical principles.

Nasr (1987, 6–10), continuing this intellectual tradition but with a particular focus on the Islamic world, sought to present a coherent system concerning traditional art. In *Islamic Art and Spirituality*, he introduces Islamic art as the manifestation of the principle of tawhid and the reflection of “unity in multiplicity,” emphasizing that artistic structures in Islamic civilization are rooted in a monotheistic worldview. Within this framework, traditional art is not merely the product of the artist’s individual taste, but rather the manifestation of forms rooted in a spiritual and transhistorical tradition (*ibid.*, 11–15). Numerous studies in Islamic art, traditional architecture, and religious symbolism have utilized this theoretical framework and found it effective in explaining the internal coherence of traditional art (Burckhardt, 1967; Nasr, 1987; Blair & Bloom, 1994). These works have generally emphasized the connection between artistic structures and monotheistic worldview in Islamic civilization, analyzing Islamic art in relation to its metaphysical foundations. In this body of research, Nasr’s theory has been employed more as an interpretive framework for understanding Islamic art, with less attention given to the critical evaluation of the internal coherence of this theory.

• The Nasr-Deutsch Dialogue

At the philosophical level, one of the most significant critical engagements with traditionalism took shape in

the dialogue between Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Eliot Deutsch. Deutsch (1994), with an approach informed by comparative philosophy and analytic philosophy, questioned certain presuppositions of traditionalism concerning absolute truth and hierarchical being, emphasizing the possibility of pluralistic readings of the sacred.

In response to these critiques, Nasr defended the metaphysical foundations of traditionalism, arguing that Deutsch’s critique rests on the presuppositions of modern epistemology and remains distant from the ontological understanding of truth articulated in religious traditions (Nasr, 1994, 203–210). According to Nasr, traditionalism is grounded in an ontological understanding of truth and therefore cannot be evaluated solely by relativistic criteria or modern epistemology (*ibid.*, 205).

The significance of this dialogue lies in demonstrating that Nasr was not indifferent to contemporary philosophical critiques and sought to defend his theoretical foundations. However, the main focus of this debate concerned the issue of relativism and absolute truth, with less attention given to the historical implications of traditionalist theory in the domains of art and music. In other words, Nasr’s defense of the metaphysical foundations of traditionalism does not necessarily resolve historical and musicological questions.

• Contemporary research on islamic art and critiques of Nasr

In recent years, academic research has undertaken an examination and critique of Nasr’s views on Islamic art. Some of these works have shown that while Nasr’s distinction among “sacred art,” “traditional art,” and “religious art” is theoretically clear, it encounters complexities at the level of historical application (Nasr, 1987, 12–14; Burckhardt, 1967).

Some critics have emphasized that the criterion for the sacredness of art in traditionalist works is sometimes linked to the “traditional context of society” rather than solely to the internal structure

of the artwork or the aesthetic experience of the audience (Shiloah, 1995, 3–6). In other words, sacredness in this framework becomes implicitly connected to specific historical and cultural conditions. While this issue is defensible within the traditionalist framework, it requires more precise articulation to avoid conflating the ontological level with the historical level.

In the domain of music, musicological research on the Islamic tradition has shown that concepts such as *ghinā'*, *samā'*, and *qirā'ah* have had distinct meanings and functions in Islamic history and cannot all be subsumed under the unified concept of “music” (Shiloah, 1995, 12–20; Farmer, 1929). These studies indicate that theoretical analysis of music in the Islamic tradition requires more precise conceptual distinctions.

• Research gap

The literature review reveals three dominant approaches in existing research:

First, works that defend traditionalism and emphasize its metaphysical coherence (Nasr, 1987). Second, general philosophical critiques of traditionalism are conducted primarily from the perspective of relativism or modern philosophy (Deutsch, 1994; Sedgwick, 2004). Third, case studies of Islamic art were conducted without a systematic analysis of the theoretical foundations of traditionalism (Blair & Bloom, 1994).

What is less evident in existing research is an analysis that simultaneously examines three fundamental levels in Nasr's theory: the ontological foundation of sacredness, the historical formulation of the Renaissance rupture, and the formal or musicological criteria for distinguishing sacred music.

The present article seeks, while maintaining theoretical precision and avoiding hasty judgment, to analyze these three levels in relation to one another. The aim is to clarify how the claim of transhistorical sacredness in Nasr's theory can be reconciled with its historical formulation in the analysis of art and music.

Metaphysical Foundations of Art and Music in the Thought of Seyyed Hossein Nasr

• Sacredness as an ontological reality

In Seyyed Hossein Nasr's intellectual framework, sacredness is neither a mental state nor merely a moral quality, but an ontological reality. This point is decisive for understanding his theory of art and music. In *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Nasr emphasizes that within the traditional world, being is understood hierarchically, with the levels of existence extending from the material plane to absolute reality (Nasr, 1989, 65–72). Within such a world, traditional art constitutes a reflection of this very hierarchy of being and may therefore be regarded as a manifestation of the sacred (Nasr, 1987, 6–10).

For Nasr, sacred art is not merely a form of representation but a mode of presence. He specifies that sacred art “bears the presence of a transcendent reality” and that the conditions for such presence to manifest are provided within the context of the religious tradition (*ibid.*, 14–18). The work of art within the tradition is therefore not simply a symbolic sign; it can serve as the bearer of an objective manifestation of metaphysical truth. Within this framework, traditional art takes form in connection with revelation, sacred law (*sharī'ah*), and wisdom (*ḥikmah*). The traditional artist is not a creator in the modern sense of the word, but rather an intermediary through whom artistic forms are realized (*ibid.*, 16–20). This conception stands in fundamental contrast to the modern understanding of art as individual expression and autonomous self-creation.

• The relationship between number, form, and cosmic order

One of the central pillars of Nasr's theory of music is the connection between numerical ratios and cosmic order. Drawing on both the Pythagorean tradition and the heritage of Islamic wisdom (*ḥikmat*), he emphasizes that number is not merely a mathematical quantity but the bearer of qualitative and symbolic meaning (Nasr, 1996, 24–27). In this view, harmonic

ratios in music are understood as a reflection of the inner proportions of the cosmos — an idea rooted in the Pythagorean tradition and the theory of the harmony of the spheres (Godwin, 1993, 5–12).

A precise distinction must nonetheless be drawn here. Nasr does not claim that every numerical relationship is in itself sacred; rather, he holds that within the context of a sacred worldview, numerical ratios can be understood as the language of cosmic order (Nasr, 1987, 149–153). In other words, numbers within the traditional horizon carry symbolic and ontological meaning, not merely computational significance.

At this point, a fundamental question arises: is this meaning intrinsic to the sonic structure of music itself, or is it the product of its cultural interpretation? If the meaning is intrinsic, it should be possible to identify, through structural musical analysis, properties that objectively carry cosmic order. If, however, the meaning is interpretive, then sacredness becomes dependent upon a particular cultural horizon and worldview. This distinction marks one of the initial sites of theoretical tension in any analysis of Nasr's position.

• The Distinction between sacred, traditional, and religious art

To prevent conceptual conflation, Nasr draws a distinction among three types of art:

- 1) Sacred art (*fann al-muqaddas*): art formed directly within the context of ritual — such as mosque architecture or the recitation (*tilāwah*) of the Quran.
- 2) Traditional art: art that has emerged from within a sacred worldview, even if its subject matter is not explicitly religious.
- 3) Religious art: art that has religious subject matter, but which is not necessarily sacred in terms of its form and structure.

Nasr introduces this distinction in order to explain the difference between ritual arts and arts that merely carry religious content (Nasr, 1987, 12–15). This is one of the strengths of his theoretical system, insofar

as it demonstrates that religious subject matter alone is not the criterion of artistic sacredness.

The critical question, however, arises at the level of application: how can one practically determine whether a given work belongs to the category of traditional or merely religious art? Is membership in a traditional society sufficient, or must specific formal and structural criteria be provided? If the answer depends on social belonging, sacredness becomes bound to historical context; if it depends on structure, then precise musicological criteria must be articulated. This unresolved tension between the contextual and the formal dimensions of the criterion represents a recurring difficulty in the application of Nasr's typology.

• Nasr's response to the relativist critique

In his response to Eliot Deutsch, Nasr emphasizes that critiques grounded in relativism rest on a distinctly modern presupposition — namely, that truth is a culturally conditioned construct. Against this view, he defends the existence of an absolute and hierarchical truth (Nasr, 1994, 203–210). In Nasr's view, religious traditions are grounded in an ontological understanding of truth and cannot be evaluated solely by the standards of modern epistemology.

This defense is internally coherent at the metaphysical level: if an absolute truth exists, traditional art may indeed serve as its manifestation. However, the defense of absolute truth does not, in itself, guarantee the historical formulation of the theory. Even if we accept that sacredness is a transhistorical reality, it remains necessary to demonstrate how its presence and absence manifest within the actual history of art. Establishing the ontological claim does not automatically resolve the historical and typological questions that follow from it.

• The focal point of the problem

At this stage, it can be said that Nasr's metaphysical foundations possess internal coherence. The central question, however, begins precisely at this point: if sacredness is an ontological and transhistorical reality,

why does its realization in Nasr's theory appear to be largely confined to traditional society, with the Renaissance designated as the point of rupture? To address this question, it is necessary to move to the historical dimension of his theory and examine the concept of the "Renaissance rupture" in closer detail.

The Renaissance and the Question of Rupture: A Historical Analysis of Nasr's Theory

Within the traditionalist framework, the Renaissance is regarded as a pivotal turning point in the history of the West. Following René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, Nasr views the Renaissance as the phase in which the center of gravity shifted from transcendent truth to the human subject (Nasr, 1996, 38–41; Guénon, 2001, 27–32). In this account, the emergence of linear perspective in painting, the spread of humanism in thought, and the increasing prominence of the individual artist are all taken as signs of this transformation.

Within this analysis, linear perspective is not merely a visual technique but a symbol of an ontological displacement: the world comes to be organized from the standpoint of a human observer rather than from the standpoint of a transcendent truth (Panofsky, 1991, 27–30). The Renaissance is thus understood as the beginning of a process that ultimately led to the secularization of art.

Historical art scholarship, however, has shown that the Renaissance was not a sudden event but a gradual process. Gombrich demonstrates that many naturalistic elements already existed in European art prior to the Renaissance, and that the development of perspective was the outcome of incremental experimentation by artists over time (Gombrich, 1995, 213–220). Burke (1997, 16–22) similarly emphasizes that the Renaissance unfolded unevenly across different regions of Europe, and that medieval elements persisted in many domains for centuries thereafter.

The situation in music is no less complex. Renaissance music — particularly in the works of

Josquin des Prez and Palestrina — continued to take shape within the liturgical context of the Church and remained in the service of religious experience (Grout & Palisca, 2001, 150–160). If the criterion of sacredness is liturgical function, then Renaissance music remained within a sacred horizon. Moreover, the contrapuntal complexity of this period itself bears witness to a proportional and mathematical order in musical structure (Taruskin, 2010, 58–64).

The central question, therefore, is at which level a rupture can meaningfully be identified: at the level of liturgical function, at the level of musical structure, or at the level of philosophical worldview? The answer to this question is of decisive importance for any evaluation of the traditionalist narrative of art history. Musicological Criteria of Sacredness: Testing the Theory against Concrete Cases

•The problem of criteria

If we accept that, in Seyyed Hossein Nasr's thought, traditional art is a reflection of cosmic order and a manifestation of metaphysical truth, an important question follows: how is this to be recognized at the level of music? In other words, what is the criterion for identifying a piece of music as sacred? Does sacredness reside in the sonic structure of the work, in the intention of its creator, or in its liturgical function? Three theoretical possibilities can be distinguished in this regard:

- 1) The Structural/ Formal Criterion
- 2) The Intentional Criterion
- 3) The Liturgical/ Functional Criterion

Each of these criteria carries different theoretical implications, and unless they are carefully distinguished from one another, the theory risks falling into conceptual ambiguity.

• The structural criterion: numerical and harmonic ratios

Drawing on the Pythagorean tradition and the legacy of Islamic wisdom, Nasr emphasizes the connection between music and numerical ratios. On this view, musical intervals are

not merely physical relationships between frequencies but reflections of cosmic proportions (Nasr, 1989, 150–155; Godwin, 1993, 5–12). From this perspective, musical harmony can be understood as a mirror of the order of the universe.

A fundamental question arises here, however. Virtually all musical systems are built upon numerical ratios. From Western classical music to the Iranian *dastgāh* system and even the harmonic structures of modern music, all are grounded in precise frequency relationships (Grout & Palisca, 2001, 4–8). If the presence of numerical ratios were sufficient as a criterion, one would have to accept that an extraordinarily wide range of music qualifies as sacred.

Yet Nasr does not accept this conclusion. It therefore seems that the mere presence of numerical ratios is not enough. What matters within the traditional horizon is the symbolic and metaphysical understanding of those ratios. In other words, numerical ratios carry sacred meaning only when they are interpreted within the framework of a sacred worldview (Nasr, 1987, 147–153). This distinction exposes an important problem. If sacredness resides not in the sonic structure itself but in its interpretive horizon, then the structural criterion alone cannot account for the sacredness of music.

• The intentional criterion

A second possibility is that the sacredness of music depends on the intention of the work's creator. In the history of Western music, Johann Sebastian Bach offers a prominent example. He signed many of his works with the inscription *Soli Deo Gloria* ("To God alone be the glory"), and his religious compositions — the cantatas, the masses — were explicitly in the service of Lutheran theology (Taruskin, 2010, 327–335).

If the composer's religious intention is the criterion of sacredness, then a musical work enters the sacred horizon by virtue of its creator's spiritual purpose. This view, however, raises its own

questions. Is any music composed with religious intent thereby sacred? If a composer in the modern world creates a work out of deep personal faith, should that work also be considered sacred?

In the twentieth century, Olivier Messiaen offers a striking case in point. His works are grounded directly in Catholic theology and mystical experience (Griffiths, 1985, 78–84). If the composer's intention is the criterion, then one must accept that sacred music remains possible in the modern era. Such a conclusion puts the narrative of a complete rupture between traditional and modern art into question.

• The liturgical/functional criterion

A third possibility is that sacredness depends on the liturgical function of music. On this view, music performed within a liturgical context may be considered sacred by virtue of its direct connection to religious ritual. In the Renaissance tradition, the works of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina stand as a prominent example of this type. Works such as the *Missa Papae Marcelli* were created within the framework of Catholic liturgy and are recognized in the history of Western music as classical instances of liturgical music (Grout & Palisca, 2001, 166–172; Taruskin, 2010, 101–108).

If liturgical function is the primary criterion, however, one must also accept that a great many post-Renaissance works were likewise created within liturgical contexts. The matter is further complicated in the Islamic tradition. Concepts such as *ghinā'* (singing), *samā'* (audition/listening), and *qirā'ah* (recitation) have carried distinct meanings and occupied different positions throughout Islamic history, and the relationship among sound, ritual, and religious legitimacy has remained a subject of sustained debate (Nasr, 1987, 161–168). The liturgical criterion alone, therefore, cannot yield a simple or uniform definition of sacred music.

• Palestrina, bach, and messiaen: a comparative analysis

To clarify the problem, three historical cases can be examined as tests for these criteria.

The first is Palestrina (sixteenth century), whose works were shaped entirely within the liturgical context of the Church. The complex polyphonic structure, the liturgical function, and the composer's religious intention together place his works within the sacred horizon by all three criteria (Grout & Palisca, 2001, 166–170).

The second is Johann Sebastian Bach (eighteenth century). His works are marked by considerable contrapuntal complexity in their structure, and many were created in a religious context. Yet a portion of his output is concertante or purely instrumental in character. If Bach is also considered sacred, one must explain how such sacredness was sustained within the cultural context of a period generally regarded as the beginning of modernity (Taruskin, 2010, 327–335).

The third is Olivier Messiaen (twentieth century), whose music is performed predominantly in concert settings and makes use of a modern harmonic language, yet is at the same time deeply grounded in Christian theology. Here, the theoretical tension becomes more visible: if modernity is inherently secular, how is the presence of such music to be accounted for (Griffiths, 1985, 80–84)?

These three cases demonstrate that the question of sacredness cannot be straightforwardly confined to a particular historical period. The structural, intentional, and functional criteria each lead to different conclusions, and without a more precise formulation, the theory is exposed to internal inconsistency.

• Summary of the section

The musicological analysis undertaken here shows that the concept of sacredness in Nasr's theory requires greater clarity at the level of criteria. If sacredness is defined at the ontological level, it is necessary to explain more precisely how it is realized in musical structure, in the artist's intention, and in the liturgical

function of the work. Without this, a gap opens between the metaphysical claim and the historical analysis. In the following section, the discussion moves to the domain of Islamic art, where concepts such as *ghinā'*, *samā'*, and the sonic experience within the mystical tradition will be examined in order to show that even within the Islamic tradition itself, the question of musical sacredness is neither simple nor uniform.

Music in the Islamic Tradition: Jurisprudence, Sufism, and the Question of Sacredness

• The conceptual distinction between music and Ghinā

In contemporary discourse, the term “music” is broadly employed to encompass all forms of organized sound. Within classical Islamic jurisprudential texts (*fiqh*), however, the primary locus of debate has historically been *ghinā* (illicit singing or vocal music), rather than music in its expansive, modern sense. This distinction is of fundamental conceptual significance. In hadith and juridical corpora, *ghinā* typically refers to a specific mode of diversionary and intoxicating singing (*lahw* and *tarab*), intimately associated with hedonistic gatherings or illicit content (Shiloah, 1995, 31–36).

Conversely, other sonic expressions—such as the cantillation of the Qur'an (*tilāwa*), the call to prayer (*adhān*), supplications (*munājāt*), and even certain ritualized manifestations of *samā'*—were deemed permissible or even spiritually commendable within specified frameworks. This divergence demonstrates an inherent differentiation among varied sonic genres within the Islamic tradition. Put differently, the primary concern in many juridical debates was not the ontological status of sound or music per se, but rather its functional role, social context, and cultural semiotics. hence, art inevitably crystallizes within a sacred horizon (Nasr, 1996, 88–92). This perspective is comprehensible from the standpoint of cultural anthropology, given that most pre-modern societies lacked a rigid institutional demarcating line between the sacred and the profane.

Nonetheless, such an assertion demands rigorous critical qualification. Even within traditional societies, distinct modes of artistic production coexisted: liturgical/ritual art, courtly art, folk art, and pure entertainment. This heterogeneity suggests that the artistic output of a traditional society cannot be uniformly categorized as sacred art.

Furthermore, postulating a traditional society as a priori sacred risks introducing circular reasoning: traditional society is sacred because its art is sacred, and its art is sacred because it is generated within a sacred society. To avert this logical circularity, it is imperative to articulate more refined, intrinsic criteria for discerning sacredness in art.

• Intra-traditional complexity and theoretical implications

Historical and jurisprudential scholarship underscores the presence of diverse, often competing perspectives on sound and music within the Islamic tradition itself. While certain currents underscored the spiritual and anagogical function of sound, others raised profound ethical and societal concerns regarding its perilous repercussions (During, 1989, 12–18).

This historical reality indicates that the sacredness of music cannot be treated as an automatic, intrinsic attribute of every artifact produced within a traditional milieu. Rather, it remained contingent upon distinct hermeneutic, ritual, and socio-cultural frameworks. Consequently, attributing sacredness solely to historical context is theoretically insufficient and necessitates a more nuanced conceptual articulation. From this perspective, to preserve its internal consistency, Nasr's theoretical framework must delineate more explicitly between two analytical registers: ontological sacredness on the one hand, and the historical and sociological conditions of its actualization on the other.

This examination of the locus of music within the Islamic tradition yields several conclusions: the general concept of “music” is not synonymous with the jurisprudential category of *ghinā*; there

exists substantial internal heterogeneity and debate concerning sound and music throughout Islamic history; the sacred experience of sound holds a foundational status in Sufism; and the dialectic between “traditional society” and “sacred art” requires a more rigorous theoretical formulation. These findings pave the way for the concluding section of this analysis, wherein the conceptual tensions inherent in Nasr's theory will be systematically synthesized without succumbing to reductionist oversimplifications or precipitate judgments.

• Final formulation of conceptual tensions and the possibility of theoretical reconsideration

The preceding analysis demonstrated that Seyyed Hossein Nasr's theory of art and music exhibits considerable coherence at the level of metaphysical foundations. Within the framework of his Traditionalist philosophy, sacredness is conceived not merely as a historical or cultural construct, but as an ontological reality grounded in the very structure of being. From this perspective, traditional art is the sensible manifestation of cosmic order and the reflection of the hierarchical levels of existence in sensible forms; music, by virtue of its fundamental reliance on numerical ratios and proportions, is deemed closer to this metaphysical order than any other artistic medium (Nasr, 1987; 1989). Within such a philosophical system, Nasr's critique of the Renaissance acquires a distinct meaning: the Renaissance represents not merely an artistic evolution, but a paradigm shift in the conception of humanity and the cosmos—a transformation through which a sacred worldview was progressively supplanted by an anthropocentric, secular horizon.

Nonetheless, when this metaphysical edifice is juxtaposed against empirical data from art history and musicological analysis, a series of theoretical tensions comes to the fore. These tensions do not necessarily indicate a fundamental inconsistency within the theory; rather, they suggest that the dialectic between metaphysical premises and historical actualizations of

art warrants a more rigorous conceptual formulation. The following section critically examines the most salient of these tensions.

• **The first tension: the transhistorical character of the sacred and the historicity of its realization**

Nasr regards sacredness as transhistorical — a truth pertaining to the structure of being, not to any particular period. At the historical level, however, he locates the fullest realization of this sacredness primarily within traditional society and identifies the Renaissance as the beginning of its decline. The traditionalist response available here is that the claim concerns predominance, not absolute elimination: in the traditional period, the sacred horizon is the dominant paradigm, while in the modern era, the anthropocentric paradigm prevails.

This response is defensible up to a point. Nevertheless, a question remains: if sacredness is an ontological reality, how is its relationship to a given historical paradigm to be explained? Can a shift in the cultural horizon alter the presence of ontological truth, or only the perception of it? If the second alternative is accepted, one must conclude that sacredness remains potentially present even in the modern era, though its perception has become more difficult. This position significantly qualifies the narrative of a total rupture.

In Nasr's thought, sacredness is a transhistorical truth — a reality pertaining to the structure of being, and therefore not reducible to any particular historical period. In his historical narrative, however, the full realization of this sacred horizon is attributed primarily to traditional societies, while the Renaissance is presented as the beginning of its decline in Western civilization.

One possible response within the traditionalist framework is to interpret this narrative not as a claim of the complete elimination of the sacred, but rather as a description of a shift in the “dominant cultural paradigm.” On this reading, in traditional societies, the sacred horizon constitutes the prevailing framework for understanding the world and producing

art, whereas in the modern era, an anthropocentric and secular paradigm comes to dominate epistemological and artistic structures. Such an interpretation allows for a distinction between the “ontological presence of the sacred” and its “cultural standing.”

This distinction, however, raises an important theoretical question: if sacredness is an ontological truth independent of historical conditions, how is its relationship to shifting cultural paradigms to be understood? Can historical transformations affect the mode of presence of this truth, or do they merely alter the conditions of its perception and interpretation?

If the second alternative is accepted, the consequence is that the possibility of experiencing the sacred remains potentially present even within the modern cultural horizon, though historical conditions may render its perception more difficult or more marginal. In that case, the narrative of absolute rupture between the traditional and modern worlds would require modification, and art history could be interpreted not in terms of a simple binary of presence/absence of the sacred, but rather as a spectrum of degrees of its manifestation.

• **The second tension: the criterion for identifying sacred music**

The comparative analysis of the works of Palestrina, Bach, and Messiaen showed that the criterion of musical sacredness cannot be reduced solely to a historical period or even to numerical structures and mathematical proportions. Numerical ratios are present in most musical systems; religious intention can be found across different historical periods; and ritual function has not entirely disappeared from art in the modern era.

The response that can be offered within the traditionalist framework is that sacredness is realized not in the mere musical structure or the artist's intention, but in the “quality of presence” (the quality of ontological presence) of the work of art. However, this response requires a more precise analytical formulation. If the quality of presence

is a phenomenological matter dependent on lived experience, then the possibility of its realization across different historical horizons must also be examined.

Otherwise, there is a risk that sacredness may be implicitly restricted to a “privileged historical space,” even though it has been theoretically defined as transhistorical. Clarifying this relationship between the metaphysical definition of sacredness and the historical conditions of its realization appears necessary for the theoretical coherence of Nasr’s position.

• **The third tension: the homogenization of the renaissance**

In the traditionalist narrative of Western history, the Renaissance is often presented as a fundamental point of rupture, after which Western art gradually became secularized. However, research in art history and musicology demonstrates that the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and then to the modern period was a gradual, multilayered, and heterogeneous process.

Within this framework, even in periods typically classified as “modern,” examples of art with explicit religious and spiritual orientation can be found. Therefore, the image of a complete rupture between traditional and modern art is not consistent with historical complexity.

The possible traditionalist response is that the issue is not individual historical cases, but rather the “overall civilizational orientation.” This response is defensible to a degree, yet it still requires objective indicators for identifying this orientation. Otherwise, historical analysis may remain at a general, descriptive level and lack sufficient analytical precision.

• **The possibility of reconsideration within the traditionalist framework**

In light of the tensions outlined above, a theoretical proposal can be put forward that remains faithful to the metaphysical foundations of Nasr’s view while avoiding historical oversimplification.

First, sacredness can be understood as an ontological

possibility rather than as an exclusive property of a particular historical period. Second, the historical realization of this possibility can be analyzed in gradational and scalar terms rather than through a simple binary of presence or absence. Third, the criterion for identifying sacred music can be defined through the relationship among several levels: musical structure, the artist’s intention, ritual function, and the horizon of meaning within which the work is received.

Such a reconsideration does not entail a rejection of traditionalism, nor does it entail the acceptance of modern relativism; rather, it is an effort to increase the conceptual coherence of the theory and to make it compatible with the complexities of art history and musicology.

Conclusion

This article examined Seyyed Hossein Nasr’s views on music across three levels: metaphysical, historical, and musicological. At the level of metaphysical foundations, Nasr’s theory of the sacredness of art — which treats it as an ontological reality linked to cosmic order — possesses considerable internal coherence and provides a robust framework for understanding traditional art. However, connecting these foundations to the historical analysis of art, particularly in the interpretation of the Renaissance and subsequent periods, gives rise to conceptual tensions that require more precise formulation.

The findings of this research showed that the claim of the transhistorical character of the sacred, when its historical realization is confined primarily to traditional society, requires clearer theoretical explanation. Likewise, to distinguish between sacred and non-sacred music, general references to overarching principles are insufficient; criteria must be developed at the formal, intentional, functional, and semantic levels. Furthermore, the narrative of the Renaissance rupture must be reread in light of the complexity and heterogeneity of art history,

rather than being presumed to follow a simple, uniform trajectory.

Overall, it can be said that Nasr's theory possesses coherence at the ontological level, but encounters difficulties when confronted with historical particulars and concrete musical works. These difficulties do not amount to a rejection of the theory's overall validity; rather, they indicate that in order to bring it into alignment with the diversity of artistic experiences across history, further analytical elaboration and conceptual differentiation are needed.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding this study.

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