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BETWEEN SPIRITUAL PRAYER AND EWPRESSIVE ART: HOW RELIGIOUS MUSIC CAN BE UTILIZED FOR RELIGIOUS, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL LIBERATION

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Abstract : Prayer serves on the one hand as a method of self-expression, also a means of communication between humans, the divine realms and musical art, on the other hand, it acts as a way for conveying ideas, emotions, and facilitating communication. While we often associate "music" with musical instruments and vocals, it is crucial to acknowledge that sound itself is music, and verbal expression can also be considered the same. Religious music, found in hymns and devotional songs, often goes unnoticed in terms of its purpose, also potential spiritual and spiritual _influence. The question is If music possesses such effect, why not harness its power to serve society and humanity in general by disseminating ideas of liberation from political subjugation, oppression, material poverty, and spiritual destitution? This article sheds light on the profound influence of religious music on human consciousness, its capacity to stimulate cognition and decision-making, also its role in mobilizing individuals within religious and political contexts. The ideas of Gustavo Gutierrez, the founder of "Liberation Theology" in Latin America, and the thoughts of Ali Shariati, who drew inspiration from the Quran to advocate for the marginalized, will be explored. Relying on the intellectual groundwork laid by these thinkers, this article highlights the potential of transforming religion and faith intellectually to confront social challenges, resist oppression, and foster change by the utilization of music. Adopting an analytical theoretical framework, this article references relevant books and articles that examine the role of music in human life and its impact on the listener's consciousness. Additionally, the theological concepts of Liberation Theology pertaining to the use of language within sacred texts for social and political liberation will be examined. The intended outcome of this article is to broaden readers' horizons and emphasize the importance of ideas and intentions in spiritual, religious, and social development. Furthermore, it aims at underlining the significance of music as a means for achieving these objectives.

The connection between expressive art and creativity, and between prayer and vertical communication with God, lies in a fundamental common element: the human being. The human translates ideas into visible and audible emotions. These emotions, once translated, become a means of communication between the sender and the receiver, transforming into tools for constant and open dialogue. To harmony achieve the pinnacle of in communicating with God, sincerity of intentions and thoughts is essential, as emotions are an integral part of communication. Emotions serve as the soul surrounding every mechanism of communication, the invisible words that reach each individual and resonate with their being.

In this context, free prayer, which involves supplication to God, bears some resemblance to the freedom of self-expression found in art forms like painting, sculpting, dancing, and music. While prayer is a direct communication with God, artistic expression serves as a means to share oneself with others and connect with the Creator, who encompasses everything, and from whom we originate.

This introduction may seem poetic or abstract to many readers as it delves into the invisible and personal aspects of every individual, such as thoughts, emotions, and intentions, which can only truly be understood by oneself. However, human methods of communication indeed raise questions, especially when it concerns the spiritual aspect or the exploration of what lies beyond nature. The primary and fundamental question that emerges strongly here is: What links prayer, spirituality, expressive arts, and self-communication and/or communication with others? And how does this connection lead to the possibility of liberation? Liberation from what? Expressing oneself is a step towards liberation by shedding the residues that distort one's thoughts.¹ But how can we establish a connection with God through art and specifically through musical melodies? Based on these questions, I will thoroughly examine the intricacies of the matter: the impact of words

and melodies on individuals, including their thoughts, emotions, decisions, actions, and their relationship with God. The primary objective of this study is to establish the significance of language and auditory stimuli and communication tool,² in fostering interpersonal connections, both among individuals and in relation to spiritual communion with the divine.

Firstly, "emotions" express deep and sincere desires, and sincerity is a divine attribute that allows God to work within us. This also applies to art, where no considerations act as barriers to expressing ideas and emotions. From this perspective, individuals can develop а harmonious way of expressing their faith in their daily lives, making it beneficial for their life journey .3 Similarly, religion plays a significant role in the life of every individual, whether they are believers, non-believers, or followers of different philosophies (agnostics).

DIMENSIONS OF PRAYER

In addition to the worship dimension, which means prayer as a duty or obligation that connects the created with their Creator, prayer is also considered a means to glorify God, seek His forgiveness, and implore Him both individually and collectively. Prayer can also be a spontaneous repetition of words without full mental awareness or a vertical form of communication expressing love, gratitude, and appreciation towards the Creator. The final aspect I will discuss and base my arguments on is the complaint of the oppressed and the needy (both materially and spiritually) to the Creator, seeking assistance and intervention to change reality and establish justice over injustice.

During times when humans encounter difficulties throughout their lives, they develop questions concerning the existence of a Creator. If there is a Creator God, why does He permit suffering and pain? This gives rise to inquiries about how to establish the existence of God. Is God intertwined with human life? Does He condone injustice? If God is just, how does He manifest His justice? Is God solely present for the needy, or does our quest for salvation motivate our communication with Him?

LIBERATING GOD FROM THE TEXTS TO DWELL IN SOULS

The philosopher Enrique Dussel believes that the impoverished person doesn't question the reality of God's existence as mentioned in the sacred texts, but rather seeks His presence among the poor. They interpret their historical journey in the light of the experiences of the people of Israel with God. The God of life can only be truly known and loved through His existence in the lives of every individual and community on a daily and constant basis. According to Dussel, God's revelation of Himself throughout history can be achieved by attentively listening to the voice of the Other, both in the present and always. The impoverished or oppressed individual turns to God, who is capable of all things, yet remains unaware of their personal potential and the abilities that this God has instilled within them, capable of bringing about any change.⁴

Indeed, both the Bible and the Quran contain numerous religious texts that embody the essence of change and liberation, signifying that God never forsakes humanity. Nonetheless, the interpretation and comprehension of these texts hinge on the perspective of the interpreter-the one who reads the text and understands it within its historical context—ultimately applying it to enrich human life regardless of time or society. Thus, the text establishes a personal connection between God and the reader. The true creativity lies in the ability to perceive and embrace the liberating spirit found within these scriptures.

God, with His attributes of love and justice, calls upon humans to liberate themselves from suffering, material poverty, and spiritual destitution, and this emancipation commences with the power of words.

External change and internal change are inseparable, as each of them requires the other for a person to attain a stage of awareness and liberation. In this context, I will explore the experiences of two theologians, Gustavo Gutierrez,⁵ a prominent figure in Liberation Theology, and Ali Shariati,⁶ who both sought to bring about external and internal transformations in humanity by challenging oppressive dominant forces by drawing inspiration from religious texts. It is important to note that the mention of these two figures serves as an example and is not exhaustive within the religious-sectarian sphere, as there are numerous thinkers and theologians who have utilized religious texts to serve the betterment of humanity and society. The objective is to focus on religious texts that transcend sects and sectarian divisions.

COMPASSION IS AN ACT OF CREATIVITY AND PRAYER

The theologian Gustavo Gutierrez has placed the word of God in the Bible at the service of humanity. The word of God serves as a means for addressing the suffering, injustice, and pain experienced by individuals, providing attentive and tireless ears that are always present to listen, respond, and offer solutions—acting as the ears of God through human beings.

Interpreting the text marks the beginning of creativity, as both parties breathe new life into words that have existed for hundreds of years and continue to resonate with humanity every day. "The Word" has become a liberator from poverty and pain, embodying Gustavo Gutierrez's idea of "Liberation Theology." According to Gustavo Gutierrez, the role of Liberation Theology is to focus on the word of God in the Bible, highlighting the image of a just God who opposes injustice and evil. The Holy Bible speaks through the prophets of the Old Testament and through Christ in the New Testament about the injustice and lack of fairness in society.⁷ In this context, I make reference to the book of the prophet Isaiah, specifically citing the passage, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). The indication that God demonstrates concern for the vulnerable and marginalized while injustice endures throughout history, transcending a specific era, suggests an intolerance toward any manifestation of oppression. This principle extends universally to all instances of human injustice, irrespective of their nature or origin. Faith entails the emulation of the divine attributes, thereby embodying a resolute stance against oppression. And according to Gutierrez, the study of Christology should start from Jesus's human characteristics and his behaviour on earth with humans, meaning his solidarity with the poor and his fight against injustice. This makes working for justice a matter of faith.⁸

The word of God, present in the Bible for thousands of years and existing in our present history, remains unchanged and rejects manifestations of evil such as economic poverty, physical violence, hidden psychological turmoil and spiritual violence. Justice arises from recognizing the equality that prevents feelings of dominance and injustice, and consequently, pain. Oppression and injustice against anyone or any group that is treated as invisible,⁹ such as the marginalized poor, black individuals facing racial discrimination, and women facing gender discrimination by the male- dominated societal system, must be opposed.¹⁰

Liberation Theology calls on humans to work with the poor, empathize with their experiences, and understand what they go through. One cannot truly comprehend the reality of any social situation without first-hand experience, thus prompting action, which is the struggle to liberate humanity from injustice¹¹. In this context, a verse from the Gospel of Matthew spoken by Jesus is cited: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." The righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" Jesus will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25: 31-40).

Bonhoeffer says that freedom in the Bible does not mean it is a possession that one grants for oneself, but rather freedom is a life given for the sake of others. Freedom is a relationship between two parties, so for a person to be free means to give oneself for the sake of others because they are in a relationship with them.¹² Christ identified Himself with every human being, being present in their suffering and injustice, and creativity lies in the ability to recognize this. We conclude that the freedom we are called to entails stepping out of ourselves, breaking down anything that might reinforce the selfishness within us, and the essence of this freedom is openness to others."

CHANGE WITHIN THE SELF AND THE COMMUNITY

The thinker Ali Shariati is a proponent of a revolutionary thought that utilizes sociological sciences to interpret the problems of Muslim Iranian society in the light of the Quran and Islamic principles, which he referred to as the "Religion of Truth." The Religion of Truth is founded on the belief in the one and only God, the Creator, whose command, when He intends something, is "Be, and it is" (Surah Ya-Sin, verse 82). He is the Truthful, and " And whose word is more truthful than Allah's?" (Surah An-Nisa, verse 87), the Just, "Who created and proportioned" (Surah Al-A'la, verse 2) and "Who destined and [then] guided" (Surah Al-A'la, verse 3). This gives hope to humans, as the

beautiful attributes of God and religious beliefs are not limited to their unseen dimension but are translated into the social reality of human life. ¹³

Ali Shariati drew upon numerous philosophical, theological, and sociological ideas, benefiting from this intellectual content to apply it through the lens of his Islamic perspective. According to him, any society entrenched in corruption and injustice cannot be changed except through educating and enlightening the youth based on Islamic principles. Building upon sociological facts and the reality of the human social condition, encompassing its economic and social circumstances in relation to the rest of the societal components, he believed that societal change is only achievable by arming the upcoming generation with all these elementsreligious, social, and humane-to achieve justice and construct a better society.¹⁴

Shariati fought to disseminate human values in society, with the aim of countering any ideology or system that contradicts Islamic principles. He focused on examining the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. The dominant faction donned the garb of religion, leveraging the power of texts to manipulate the minds of subjugated individuals, the who found themselves mentally under the sway of religious and political authorities. Consequently, religion transformed into a mechanism of intellectual dominance and subjugation, deviating from the true essence of God.

Islam emerged for the entirety of the human community, embracing every individual irrespective of their religion, race, social and economic standing, family background, or social position. This signifies that Islam considers all human beings as equals, with the criterion being their belonging to "humanity." Thus, the Islamic message aims to emancipate humanity from the worship of fellow humans, commonly referred to as "slavery," and guide them towards the worship of God, the Lord of all creation and the bestower of freedom. ¹⁵

Awareness is the state that contradicts ignorance, it is the absolute consciousness of everything happening around the individual, on the social, economic, and environmental levels, specifically political awareness. Shariati distinguishes between human consciousness and knowledge, stating that awareness is wisdom, and ethical conscience and selfawareness exceed the realms of philosophy and science¹⁶, aiding in an individuals' understanding of their own value and abilities, which are determined by their belief in themselves.¹⁷ Any change within oneself or within society is solely dependent on one's 'faith' in intrinsic value.

Shariati sees history as the product of revolutions built on human consciousness. He references Imam Hussein's experience against the oppression of the Umayyads, highlighting Imam Hussein's awareness of injustice that led him to become a free rebel. Ali Shariati views Imam Hussein as the historical hero who was present to address the issues of his time. For him, life signifies faith and struggle (jihād), and it is the living individual responsible for this struggle, not just the capable and strong individual.¹⁸ Therefore, revolution stems from the recognition of human value and the value of life.

Submission kills the freedom of thought and feeling, and consequently, the ability to create. Creativity in faith is the ability to discover oneself and establish a connection between the human self and the divine self, which can be achieved through liberation from constraints. This might seem unclear to many readers, but liberation is a form of self-creation, where a person can free themselves through words and knowledge. However, this requires a level of intellectual awareness and personal effort. This is what leads me to classify the works of both Gutierrez and Shariati as intellectual creativity, as each of them managed to encounter God through the suffering of humanity. But what if we added a musical tone to these words?

MUSIC AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

Music is the result of successive vibrations and sound waves that come together to form musical tones, and it has the ability to interact with every living being. Scientific experiments have provided evidence of the impact of sound vibrations on various elements, such as sand, water, and even agricultural crops that grow from the earth. In these experiments, sand or water is placed in direct contact with sound vibrations, which determine the geometric patterns formed by the sand, depending on the variation of the waves. Agricultural crops, like roses, are also affected by the nature of the musical vibrations directed towards them, leading to either positive or negative outcomes, such as flourishing and rapid growth or death.

Human interaction with sound begins during the period of development in the womb, where the fetus can hear external sounds and interact with them. At this stage, the fetus can distinguish between different sounds and establish a kind of relationship with them. Sound itself is a series of vibrations that move through the air, and these traveling sound vibrations carry an energy that humans can perceive and be influenced by.²⁰

Based on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, music serves as a means of emotional communication, where rhythm exists in both words and music, and their interaction positively influences the transmission of feelings. In the field of ethnomusicology, ²¹ music has been utilized as a tool to resolve conflicts among people. Each group or faction in society holds different opinions and perspectives. Engaging in discussions between these groups can escalate divisions disputes. Linguistic and communication, with its harsh and rigid language, may create barriers to conflict resolution. On the contrary, music provides a space for each group to express themselves, granting all parties the opportunity to listen to

one another. ²² Music is one of the arts that allows humans to express their thoughts, translating them into musical notes capable of conveying emotions and ideas on a broad and unlimited scale. The role of words is crucial, as they define the intended direction or message conveyed through a song or anthem.

Communication through music is based on the text, the idea, the melody, the rhythm, and the physical and vocal expressions, combining oral and sound-based communication with nonverbal language (paraverbal communication²³). Music serves the foundation as of communication and is responsible for conveying information or messages through the text. All these factors play a role in influencing the recipient's "perception" and generating new energy within them. Music acts as a mediator, transmitting the message to the recipient's subconscious and shifting the relationship from framework rational to spiritual а communication. It engages with the self (interpersonal communication) based on accompanying thoughts and emotions, which are amplified through sung music and influenced by the ideas and opinions of society.

If music or song is a means of expression that can convey a message to every listener, and prayer is a form of communication between a believer and their Lord, then why not utilize music to serve this message and spread the spiritual dimension to reach every listener? The creative essence of music lies in crafting a melody that conveys a particular emotion, idea, and message to the recipient. When prayer itself is a message, music becomes a vehicle to disseminate this message effectively.

Music, heritage, and religion have intertwined to create a culture that reflects the human experience in confronting daily social issues arising from the country's politics. In this context, I recall the Second Vatican Council, which advocated for the use of vernacular language in hymns and prayers in the church. This led to the incorporation of folk music like "Maríachis" into the divine liturgy, using traditional and popular musical instruments. The Church (representing the people) became a platform to express its thoughts and struggles, encompassing the sufferings of humanity. This phenomenon was referred to as "Liberation Theology in Music." The impact of this movement extended beyond the Church, as it became the essence of Liberation Theology in songs that voiced the grievances of the oppressed. It became an expression of the desire for liberation from the oppressive grasp of power. This music even spread to film festivals in the Cuban capital, "Havana."²⁵

In Islam, we observe that melody plays a role in Quranic recitation (Tajwid) through musical modes (maqāmāt). These modes are used to recite Quranic verses in a way that deeply impacts the listener. The reason behind this lies in the fact that each musical mode corresponds to the subject and spirit of the verse, thus conveying a harmonious feeling to the listener and allowing them to resonate with the words of Allah. Each musical mode has its unique arrangement that distinguishes it from others, concerning the intervals between its tones, its stability, personality, and the scales it incorporates. Each mode stands out for the emotions it evokes in the listener.²⁶

In Quranic recitation, the musical modes used vary depending on the nature of the verses. The Bayātī mode is used in the Quran for the rules of Hajj, prayer, fasting, and Jihad. The Nahāwand mode is associated with emotions and is used for reciting spiritually themed verses, such as those about the Day of Judgment, punishment, and reward. The Saba mode carries a sense of complaint and is chosen by vocalists for singing elegies and laments, particularly on the days of Ashura, when Muslims mourn their tragedies.²⁷

These musical modes are connected to the emotional state, but they only truly impact the reader or listener when accompanied by Quranic verses and words. Musical modes convey information to the recipient, whether in a joyful, sorrowful, terrifying, or encouraging manner. When leading the prayer, the imam is knowledgeable about these modes, selecting the appropriate one for relevant verses and mastering the recitation of the chapters, which enhances the sense of devotion and captures the attention of the worshipers.²⁸

So, musical modes are the musical scales that harmonize with the content the of accompanying words and correspond to the emotional state of the individual. However, the term "singing" is disapproved of in Islam, as it is categorized among songs and commercial music that are associated with places of entertainment that can sexually stimulate consequently, individuals and, spread immorality. Anything that misguides a person and leads them into desires is forbidden, while anything that brings them closer to God or seeks to elevate and spiritually develop them towards the better is permissible. This standard includes religious and revolutionary songs that incorporate religious and political beliefs. Therefore, music is a means to convey an idea or issue to the listener.

The use of music in Quranic recitation or religious hymns is a compelling testament to the fact that musical art serves as a gateway for freely expressing ideas originating from the heart and accompanied by emotions. This represents a part of creativity, where music has evolved into a tool for communicating with God and others, as it conveys audible words that are understood and perceived through Supplication finds emotions. expression through musical notes that penetrate the heart and resonate with the mind, requiring no additional words.

This connection between music and expression embodies creativity and liberation, as humans cast aside constraints by initially expressing themselves through ideas intertwined with emotions, which later manifest as intangible realities brought to life through words. Words remove the veil from the truths, forming the very bedrock of enlightenment. We cannot emancipate ourselves from any oppression or oppressor until we affix clear verbal labels and expressions to these truths.

Human beings achieve liberation when they recognize the truth, understanding the cause or reason behind their predicaments. At this point, using the word of God for enlightenment becomes a creative endeavour, fostering internal change that generates ideas contributing to progress and empowering decisions to break free from external constraints.

Creativity is a divine attribute; it emanates from God and is not a talent bestowed upon select individuals. Everyone has the potential for creativity; it only requires acknowledging that each person is unique. God has not given humans a silent word, referring to mere ink on paper and a set of laws to be followed blindly. Instead, God operates within and through humans, manifested by His eternal word.

Musical tones influence the listener's emotions and help them interact with words and express their thoughts freely and clearly. According to the composer Paul Hindemith, a creative musician possesses the necessary skills to produce musical compositions that awaken emotions and images in the recipient's imagination, making music the means to evoke emotions and images in humans.²⁹

In this context, it is noted that the Prophet used to recite the Quran melodiously, giving each letter and verse its due right and time. Some verses should not be stopped at, as pausing at a verse distorts and reverses its meaning, such as the verse: "So woe to those who pray" (Al-Ma'un, verse 4), as it should be completed with the following verse: "Who are heedless of their prayer" (Al-Ma'un, verses 4-5) to complete the meaning. The formulation of meaning, in addition to the word accompanied by the contextual setting (musical setting) and the speaker's intention. All of these factors play a role in conveying accurate meanings to the listener. ³⁰

The ultimate goal of the science of Tajwid is the knowledge of correct pronunciation and preserving the tongue from any deviation, whether it is an obvious deviation that affects the meaning or a subtle deviation that affects its recitation without perfection, such as considering the rules of Tajwid.³¹ Furthermore, the performance is influenced by the psychological state and the personality of the speaker. The beauty of the performance has a significant impact on the listener's psyche. If a reciter masters the Tajwid of the Quran but his performance is not good, it does not affect his audience. He may recite the Quran with Tajwid that is not perfect, yet it moves the listeners with the quality of his performance. ³²

Beautifully said, but you might wonder, after hearing this narrative, how can one reconcile spirituality and faith with art and creativity, all to benefit humanity in their daily lives and society as a whole? The answer lies in utilizing creativity for personal and societal transformation, accomplished through spiritual songs.

While there are numerous Christian and Islamic religious songs, if prayer to God through musical melodies (whether through vocals or instruments) can unite and liberate individuals from their hardships, then why do impoverished communities still persist, and why do individuals continue to suffer under the influence of prevailing social cultures they inhabit?

The reason lies in the fact that creativity is not always used for constructive and humanitarian purposes. Brainwashing with political, social, or religious beliefs is a form of creativity. This is evident and clear through political and religious songs that manipulate minds to serve political interests under the guise of religious beliefs. In this context, I recall extremist religious groups that use songs to incite listeners, attracting people to causes that may not directly concern them. However, when the chants are accompanied by musical rhythms, they synchronize with the physical and mental rhythms of the listener, generating enthusiasm towards any cause, regardless of its implications.

MUSIC IN POLITICAL STRATEGIES: AN INSTRUMENT FOR CHANGE AND CREATIVITY

Highlighting the significance of musical anthems in mobilizing and influencing people, it is important to note that governing regimes have employed music to further their own interests. Totalitarian³³ regimes utilize music to garner support, especially when facing specific conflicts that threaten their stability. They achieve this by showcasing national anthems that often align with their ideologies, aiming to create a united front that supports and defends their existence. In this context, I recall the request made by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2011 to play the national anthem in public squares as a means to suppress opposition. ³⁴

Music has also played a role in wars, and in this context, I refer to the Vietnam War (1955-1975), where anthems were used as a means of resistance, boosting morale, and mobilizing crowds in demonstrations. Additionally, there was an event during which the American forces ousted a Panamanian president from his position, which was achieved through psychological pressure exerted by the U.S. military. They did so by playing loud music from the band "AC/DC," which carried messages directed towards the Panamanian army. The lyrics of these songs contained a form of threat that psychologically pressured the Panamanian army, leading them to surrender shortly thereafter. 35

The purpose of discussing the mentioned historical events is to emphasize that those in

power can use songs to control and influence people. In the age of globalization, anthems and songs are ubiquitous, and spreading liberating ideas necessitates employing a similar approach to positively impact listeners and challenge prevailing injustices in societies. Furthermore, we can use musical anthems and songs not only to empower the oppressed in confronting their oppressors but also to exert pressure on those in authority. Therefore, influencing the recipient on the psychological and intellectual level represents a form of creativity, with the objective of disseminating ideas, promoting critical thinking, and expanding horizons for personal and societal transformation.

We observe that creativity arises from sincere intentions and emotions, as prayer or direct communication with God can be achieved through genuine thoughts and intentions accompanied by strong emotions that convey the power of these ideas. This principle also extends to artistic expression, where the artist's sensitivity determines the success of their art, gauged by the degree of impact the artwork (in all its forms) has on the recipient.

Therefore, artistic creativity through music and singing is considered a form of prayer, as it involves communication with God through an ascending vertical dialogue. As for art, through the translation of ideas and emotions, it becomes a form of horizontal and vertical communication, connecting individuals with themselves, others, and God. Here, liberation begins, as the word of God found in the Holy Scriptures and the Quran is a message of liberation, starting with God's merciful promise to support the truth against falsehood. This liberation starts with the individual, Liberation from social and political norms, from the entire system, begins with self-enlightenment.³⁶

This message encourages humans to strive and defend themselves against any oppressive force. It motivates individuals to take action and make an effort, hoping that God will guide them on the right path. This message cannot be hidden, especially when embodied in a composed anthem that originates from the essence of humanity and reaches everyone who hears it.

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