Qur’ānic recitation, focusing on the intersection of the interior, conceptual, rule-based space of the mouth and the exterior, physical, highly variable architecture of mosques. In both cases, timbre plays a critical role in making Qur’ānic recitation recognizable, even to untrained ears, and even if—especially in the case of mosques—that predominant, stereotyped setting is not necessarily representative of the tradition more broadly. The article examines the tension between Qur’ān as fixed text and as recitation (qur’ān) and the challenges of reconciling these two notions of Qur’ān into a definitive, unitary whole, that proved elusive in the early centuries of Islam, precisely on grounds of timbral, phonetic, and dialectal questions. At the same time, the elaborate design of rules for proper recitation has been so fully developed over the last millennium that it has become a kind of cultural technique, a rule-based algorithm that imposes on human performers a set of media-like operations. Indeed, recent computer science and engineering have fully embraced the algorithmicizing of vocality and timbre in recitation to the point of creating a number of software platforms designed to reproduce or assess the proper application of these rules. In all these different trajectories—mouth, mosque, and media—the alphabetics of the Qur’ān play a central role in transducing a sacred text into the contingencies of the material world.

Keywords: Qur’ānic recitation, tajwid, mosques, Islam, cultural technique, algorithm, alphabetics, timbre

"It is known that most people have thirty-two teeth." So begins the Karabaş tajwid manual, an Ottoman-era guide to proper recitation of the Qur’ān, probably written in the sixteenth century. While its provenance is uncertain, its prevalence in modern Turkish society is not: almost any religious bookstore in Turkey or the Turkish diaspora today will carry copies of the Karabaş Tajwid (or tecvid, in modern Turkish), sometimes reproducing the original Ottoman Turkish text alongside a modernized version. The first two pages of the dense, fourteen-page manual in Ottoman Turkish are devoted to the anatomy of the mouth and especially the teeth. It lists the Ottoman Turkish names of teeth in both the singular and plural (front teeth, incisors, canines, bicusps, molars), followed by various anatomical features in the mouth, throat, and even the nasal cavity. The centerpiece of
these preliminaries is a large diagram on the second page labeled *mahrec tasvīrī*, literally a diagram of “exit points” (Arabic, *makhraj*, pl. *makhārij*), featuring a mouth with designations for particular Arabic letters and the locations in the mouth from which they should be articulated (Figure 1, with modern adaptation in Figure 2). The various organs described on the preceding page give rise to seventeen distinct points of articulation. Only on the third page does the text include a title, Karabaş Tajwid, followed by the expected invocations *bismillāh al-rahmān al-rahīm*, in the name of God the Merciful the Compassionate, with pronouncements of praise to God and blessings on the prophet Muhammad, his family, and his companions. The manual then reverts quickly to the task at hand, launching into a kind of Socratic dialogue on sacred vocal timbre: “It is known that there are three long vowels or letters (*harf-i med*), vāv (َ, or ū), yā (ﻯ, or ī), alif (ﹶ, or ā). But when does a vāv become a long vowel? When it has no short vowel markings following it and the vowel before it is ‘u,’ it is a long vowel.” Similar questions and answers then elaborate *tajwid*, the extensive set of rules governing the proper phonetics and performance of Qur’anic recitation.  

*Figure 1.* Ottoman-era diagram of the points of articulation, from Karabaş Tajwid (reproduced in Eser, *Tam Karabaş Tecvidi*). The image includes multiple perspectives simultaneously, featuring a side-view of the mouth with the nose protruding at the top right and lips at far right, but with individual teeth and the tongue shown as a cross-section. The throat extends to the left. The large letters in the center of the mouth are the letters whose pronunciation is being illustrated.
But of course, Qur’anic recitation is a living tradition, accessible not only through manuals but also the tens of thousands of recitations taking place daily around the globe. One hot July day in the middle of Ramadan, I accidentally wandered into an unusual recitation at the Fatih Mosque: the Turkey International Holy Qur’an Recitation and Memorization Competition. The encounter was serendipitous. I had in fact been trying to attend a more local version of Qur’an recitation held daily during Ramadan, known as *mukabele*, a recitation of the entire Qur’an in its thirty parts (one per day), usually performed by two reciters after congregational prayers for anyone who wants to listen and/or read along. In this case, however, a four-day international competition had interrupted the regular recitation schedule, with roughly one hundred participants competing in two different groups, one focusing on *hafızlık*, or the complete memorization, the other on *güzel okuma*, literally “beautiful reciting,” or in other words, *tajwid*. The *tajwid* competition took place simultaneously in Sultan Ahmed Mosque, also known as the Blue Mosque. As ridiculous as it may sound, I must confess that I was initially rather crestfallen by these circumstances. I had been following along with the daily *mukabele* recitations and was eager to complete a *hatim*, or reading of the entire Qur’an. But at these events, small portions were chosen for the reciters on the spot, and they then recited, making it impossible to read along with them. As I settled into listening, I found my attention shifting from the recitation itself to the particular qualities of the recitation in Fatih Mosque. The lengthy reverberation of such cavernous, Ottoman-era mosques, coupled with the amplification systems used for the recitation, produced a complex layer of additional timbre: if the rules of Qur’anic recitation conceptually shape the vocal timbres used in recitation, the reverberation of those vocalizations in a reverberant space created new set of timbral combinations resulting from these echoic temporalities. This contrast was especially audible to me for rather circumstantial reasons: the mosque in which I had most recently been listening to *mukabele*, Bayezid Mosque, was under construction, so prayers and recitations took place in a small, partitioned side of the mosque with low ceilings and a very simple sound system, resulting in a much drier, less echoic sound.
In these two examples we see two timbral configurations that offer a useful set of poles to consider the place of timbre in Qur’anic recitation: on the one hand, the interior, conceptual, rule-based space of the mouth; and on the other, the exterior, physical, highly variable architecture of mosques. In both cases, timbre plays a critical role in making Qur’anic recitation recognizable, even to untrained ears, and even if—especially in the case of mosques—that predominant, stereotyped setting is not entirely representative of the full scope of the tradition of Islamic recitation more broadly. For instance, within the course of a single Thursday during the competition, I heard not only these competition recitations, but also the more intimate mukabele in Bayezid Mosque, as well as several different recitations during the course of an evening of zikr and prayers at a local Sufi lodge. In the case of the Sufi rituals like zikr, the recitation of names and attributes of God, many of which come in the form of phrases from the Qur’an, the ritual not only takes place in a much less reverberant space, it also requires active, vocal participation from the congregation, which includes both men and women, though separated from one another. Physical contingencies like architecture, gender, vocal range, age, proficiency in Arabic, and even the ability to produce some of the more idiosyncratic, guttural sounds of certain forms of zikr, also shape the timbre of Islamic recitation in this case.

In this chapter, I offer a brief history of the timbral varieties of recitation within Islam, with special focus on the recitation of the Qur’an. A key tension in that history emerges between what we might imagine (in English orthography) as Qur’an and qur’ân: between the composite collection of revelations given to Muhammad and compiled in the ensuing years after his death, on the one hand, and a more general concept of reciting (the literal meaning of the Arabic verbal noun, qur’ân) and especially the act of intoning the Qur’an aloud, on the other, with clear injunctions that the act of reciting aloud (qur’ân) adhere as closely as possible to the Qur’an. A unified version of these two notions—recitation and revelation—proved somewhat elusive in the early centuries of Islam, precisely on grounds of timbral, phonetic, and dialectal questions. At the same time, the elaborate design of rules for proper recitation has been so fully developed in the last millennium that tajwid as a corpus of reciting guidelines has become a kind of cultural technique, a rule-based algorithm that imposes on human performers a set of media-like operations. Indeed, recent computer science and engineering has fully embraced the algorithmicizing of vocality and timbre to the point of creating a number of software platforms designed to reproduce or assess the proper application of these rules. In all these different trajectories—mouth, mosque, and media—the alphabetics of the Qur’an play a central role in transducing a sacred text into the contingencies of the material world, from the incisors, gums and tongues of reciters to the granite and marble of mosques, and even to the seemingly dematerialized world of computer software.

On Alphabetics

As a theoretical note, by alphabetics, I mean the interplay between letters as a written, or at least writable, sign system that gives rise to sonic performance as well as a set of sonic transcriptions. An outgrowth of that dualistic function of alphabetics is a theoretical cor-
Qur’an Alphetics and the Timbre of Recitation

pus and set of sonic performance conventions that have emerged as the Islamic science of recitation (‘ilm al-tajwīd). In focusing on alphetics and timbre in Qur’anic recitation, I hope to bring together two distinct trajectories in existing scholarship: ethnographic (especially ethnomusicological) accounts of Qur’an recitation generally and recent media theory on the alphabet as an audiovisual medium or cultural technique. Kristina Nelson’s seminal work, The Art of Reciting the Qur’an, remains the definitive work on this topic. In expanding geographically beyond Nelson’s focus on Egypt, as well as more recent work by Michael Frishkopf showing interconnections between reciting in Egypt and the Gulf States, Anne Rasmussen, and Rachel Harris have added significantly to this literature with their work on women’s recitation in Indonesia and Uyghur China, respectively. While not strictly musicological, a few recent linguistic studies have also addressed Qur’anic recitation with a sharp focus on phonetics, such as Mohammed Elashiry’s exploration of vocal register and prolongation among Egyptian reciters and Saeed Alsurf’s videofluorographic (X-ray) study of pharyngealization. Similarly, within religious studies and other kindred disciplines, William Graham, Michael Sells, and Navid Kermani have further emphasized the sonic, aesthetic, and—implicitly, at least—timbrally rich nature of the Qur’an.

This chapter also responds to increased attention over the past decade-plus to the question of the alphabet not as a given, but as a site of techno-sensory slippage. Of course, these two trajectories need not be bifurcated: as Friedrich Kittler argues in the introduction to Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, Islam, and especially the revelation, recitation, and transmission of the Qur’an, has much to say to media studies. Kittler even goes so far as to describe the Prophet Muhammad, traditionally understood by Muslims to be illiterate, at the moment of the Qur’an’s revelation as having “miraculously alphabetized eyes,” allowing him to read/recite the divine word, which is itself a command to read/recite, iqra’! But in the mid-2000s, the study of the alphabet as a form of communications technology came into its own, through works like Sybille Krämer’s discussions of writing as a visual phenomenon that cannot be simply taken for granted as discourse and the first volume of Kittler’s Musik und Mathematik, a speculative history of the Greek alphabet as a multimedia operation of sound recording, musical notation, mathematics, and, less obviously, love. But the particular alphetics of the Qur’an recitation provide a useful counterpoint to the theoretical thinking of Krämer, Kittler, and their peers. On the one hand, much of Krämer’s arguments seems less applicable in Islamic contexts, where the alphabet in the Qur’an and Arabic language more generally were always self-consciously marked. The Qur’an itself highlights the uniquely sacred status of Arabic within it: “Lo, We have sent it down as an Arabic qur’ān, so you may have understanding.” As we saw already from just a cursory glance at a tajwid manual, especially for non-native Arabic speakers—as is the case with the Karabaş manual—the precise values and qualities of individual letters are highly regulated. Furthermore, as calligraphic tradition makes abundantly clear, writing was visualized. On the other hand, Kittler emphasizes Greek’s ability to literally and phonetically—or perhaps even phonographically—transcribe sound, thanks to its inclusion of complete voweling, in particular. But Qur’anic recitation shows how productive a very different alphabetic system can be, precisely because it requires a sup-
plement of knowledge and vocalic, timbral rules in order to reconstitute the text as sound. That sonic supplement also places particular demands on breathing and other bodily practices—themes that appear commonly in other parts of Kittler’s oeuvre but less so with regards to alphabetics—giving Qur’anic alphabetics and timbre an important anchor in the body. Furthermore, at least for devout Muslims, these multiple strata of alphabetic systems (that is, the written Qur’an, the rules of *tajwid*, and arguably the moment of performance, as well) not only accurately reproduce language, they accurately reproduce a divine system of revelatory media transduction from God’s Preserved Tablet to the angel Jibril to Muhammad to his followers, a chain of transmission I will discuss below. In short, Qur’anic alphabetics are both more emphatic and self-conscious (*pace* Krämer) and more sonically dynamic (*pace* Kittler) than the writing systems they choose as their models for analysis.

**Timbral Histories I: Muhammad’s *qur’ān***

The Qur’an itself and the *hadith* collections of oral traditions of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad repeatedly highlight the timbral, phonetic, and alphabetic concerns at the heart of Qur’anic recitation. Beyond the self-referential moment of its initial revelation, mentioned above, the Qur’an calls for recitations that adhere to *tartīl*, generally understood to mean a slow, measured tone. Indeed, in contemporary contexts, *murattal*, the adjectival form of *tartīl*, is usually contrasted with *mujawwad*, the adjectival form of *tajwid*, to give a sense of the two major styles of recitation: *murattal* is relatively quick, maximally intelligible, with little melodic embellishment, while *mujawwad* expands temporarily (that is, can frequently slow down) to allow for a variety of sonic gestures to add to its expressivity.

From the numerous *hadith* traditions that similarly touch on questions of reciting the Qur’an, I draw on two examples that illustrate some key notions about timbre and alphabetics, as well as the complexities and stakes of recitation. The first is an account of Muhammad himself reciting, as recounted by a chain of witnesses who transmitted the account with performative recitations:

Ahmad bin Abu Siraj narrated to us: Shabāba informed us: Shu’ba narrated to us from Mu’āwiya bin Qurra from ‘Abdullāh bin al-Mughaffal al-Muzanī: he said, “I saw Allah’s Messenger (may the blessings and peace of God be upon him) on the day of the Conquest [of Mecca], riding his camel and reciting [yaqra’u] *Sura al-Fath* or some part of *Sura al-Fath*.” He said, “He recited, elaborating on it vocally” [fa-rajja’a fiha]. He said, “Then Mu’āwiya recited [qara’a], imitating the recitation [yaḥki qirā’ata] of ‘Abdullāh bin Mughaffal and said, ‘Were I not afraid that the people would crowd around, I would recite with vocal elaboration [rajja’tu] as Ibn Mughaffal recited with vocal elaboration. He was imitating the Prophet (may the blessings and peace of God be upon him).’ I said to Mu’āwiya, ‘What was his vocal elaboration like [kayfa kāna tarjī’uHU]?’ He said, ‘āh, āh, āh,’ three times."