



Medieval Arabic Dance: Philosophical and Speculative Foundations of the Performing Arts in the Abbasid Era

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ARTICLE INFO

KEYWORDS

medieval Arabic dance; Abbasid performing arts; al-Fārābī; al-Mas'ūdī; pre-expressive technique; dancer-philosopher.

HOW TO CITE

Sales, M. (2026). Medieval Arabic Dance: Philosophical and Speculative Foundations of the Performing Arts in the Abbasid Era. *International Journal of Civilizations Studies & Tolerance Sciences*, 3(2), 34-47.

<https://doi.org/10.54878/7sfyzq64>

ABSTRACT

This paper reconstructs, through a textual and philosophical reading of selected Abbasid-era sources, the pre-expressive foundations of medieval Arabic court dance as an integrated performing art rather than a recoverable “catalogue of steps.” Methodologically, it advances an interpretive hypothesis grounded primarily in al-Fārābī’s *Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr* and al-Mas’ūdī’s *Murūj al-Dahab*, supplemented by reflections drawn from al-Kindī’s musical theory, while delimiting the investigation to the Abbasid period (second half of the 8th to the first half of the 13th century). The author is a performing scholar—dancer, choreographer, and researcher—whose analysis emerges from nearly thirty years of embodied practice in Arab-Islamic and Persian dance forms, and whose dancer-philosopher perspective combines firsthand performance experience with rigorous philological inquiry. The present work is the second volume of a two-part research project: the first volume (Sales 2006, Akkuaria, Roma) introduced the dancer-philosopher perspective and examined al-Kindī’s philosophico-musical principles; the current volume (Sales 2025) extends that inquiry to al-Fārābī and al-Mas’ūdī and develops the five-nucleus model of pre-expressive requirements. The approach integrates (i) textual-philological analysis of these witnesses, (ii) a controlled comparative-analogical reading oriented toward Persian and Central-Asian stylemes still attested “without solution of continuity,” and (iii) a dancer-philosopher standpoint developed through long practical experience, in which dance remains inseparable from musical philosophy and its ontological horizon. Results are organized into a five-nucleus model of pre-expressive requirements: professionalisation of the artist; the body as sonic/percussive extension; mimetic dance; defined repertoires and technical abilities; and the organic relationship between musical execution and choreutic practice. The paper concludes that, although reliable textual testimonies appear only from the 10th century, their described richness implies a long prior maturation “not born suddenly from nothing,” and that Abbasid court dance should be understood as multi-competent artistry (dance, song, and rhythmic



Double-blind peer review by independent reviewers.

Received: 06 Jul 2026, Accepted: 17 Nov 2026, Published: 07 Dec 2026

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1. Introduction

Medieval Arabic dance in the Abbasid period poses a methodological challenge: the surviving testimonies most useful for research do not function as choreographic notations, but as passages embedded in philosophical, musicological, and historiographic discourses whose primary aim is not the step-by-step description of dance. Accordingly, the present study proceeds as an “ipotesi di analisi” that seeks to infer some peculiar aspects of medieval Arab dance from significant passages in a small corpus of medieval texts, rather than to reconstruct a lost repertoire in the positivist sense. This choice is not a retreat from history but a precise delimitation of the object: the investigation is restricted to the artistic dance that developed within the court of the Abbasid caliphs, whose evolution proceeds together with the development of music and classical Arabic poetry.

The temporal frame is equally delimited. The research focuses on the Abbasid period between the second half of the eighth century and the first half of the thirteenth century, because it is within this span that textual references to the specific genre of dance under consideration appear for the first time. At the same time, the study acknowledges an evidentiary threshold: reliable testimonies and the certain bases available in this field date only to the 10th century. Yet the very richness and perfection described by those later witnesses is taken to imply that the discipline did not emerge “suddenly from nothing,” which authorizes an interpretive reconstruction of prerequisites rather than a naive chronology of first appearances.

The textual cornerstone of the inquiry is explicitly stated: al-Fārābī’s *Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr* and al-Mas’ūdī’s *Murūj al-dahab* (used as complementary lenses), integrated by reflections drawn from the musical theory of al-Kindī. This triangulation matters because it aligns three distinct discursive registers: philosophical systematisation (al-Fārābī), historiographic observation (al-Mas’ūdī), and a music-philosophical horizon in which musical theory can function as a criterion of deep understanding for the arts, including the visual and choreutic.

The methodological standpoint is therefore not merely textual but also philosophical and practical. Sales frames her second publication as beginning with an exploration of al-Kindī’s philosophico-musical principles, justified by the “ontological primacy” of musical art in the performative culture under study. From this perspective, dance is not separable from music: where speculative thought intuitively creates as solidified vibration, a “philosophy of dance” is organically connected and inseparable from a philosophy of music. The “experience of almost thirty years in the field” is explicitly invoked as

a methodological reminder that embodied practice can serve as a test and deepener of conceptual claims, without substituting for the philological reading of sources.

The study’s scope also depends on a distinction between professional (or semi-professional) artistic dance and other forms of lyric or popular practice that, however aesthetically compelling, are not pertinent to the present question of “pre-expressive requirements.” The author therefore avoids expanding the inquiry into a generalized anthropology of entertainment, even while recognising that Abbasid court dance was situated within activities of entertainment of an aristocratic society that also performed artistic patronage. In other words, the “court” is not a sociological backdrop but a structuring condition for the dance’s relationship to musical knowledge, poetic refinement, and professional formation.

Within this courtly ecology, one of the most consequential working hypotheses concerns the performer’s profile. Sales cites the view that “probably at the time there did not exist the exclusive profession of dancer (*rāqīṣa*),” since this figure was always “associated with singing and music.” A related premise is formulated in explicitly comparative terms: “the Middle Ages did not know the frenzy of specialisation that is the symbol of our time,” and Abbasid performers are thus approached as integrated artists rather than mono-specialised technicians. This integrated profile is reiterated by the claim that such dancers “knew how to dance, sing, [and] beat the rhythm on various percussion instruments,” which already implies a pre-expressive field of competencies extending beyond bodily movement alone.

A further premise concerns the symbolic nature of the medieval universe as an interpretive key. The author states that, both in the West and in the Islamic world, the medieval universe “is, and remains, of a symbolic type,” which orients analysis toward correspondences, allegories, and multi-level meanings rather than toward purely functional descriptions of entertainment practices. In this symbolic horizon, music theory is not reducible to practice alone, and the chapter explicitly distinguishes speculative musical inquiry from practical music-making. This is one reason why the study can treat musical philosophy as a privileged access to dance’s pre-expressive logic, especially when dance is historically inseparable from music and poetry in the court context.

The comparative dimension of the work is likewise stated as an extension of what emerges from the sources themselves. Sales notes that the “specific aspects” found in al-Fārābī and al-Mas’ūdī induce a comparison between medieval Arabic dance and stylemes closer to Persian and Central-Asian models, in which some such peculiarities could potentially remain present “without solution of continuity.”

The point is not to claim direct lineage without evidence, but to use living traditions as controlled analogies for interpreting what the medieval texts presuppose about skill, musicality, and embodied rhetoric.

These premises converge in the comparative synthesis that identifies five principal thematic nuclei through which the pre-expressive requirements of Abbasid court dance can be reconstructed: the professionalisation of the artist; the body as sonic extension; the question of “mimetic” dance; the presence of defined repertoires and technical abilities; and the relation between musical and choreutic execution. The synthesis is explicitly described as “integrated by reflections of a musicological, historical and philosophical character,” which clarifies that the output is a conceptual model derived from textual evidence rather than a chronology of dances.

This methodological integration of embodied experience and philological reading is not incidental but systematic. The author's long practice as a dancer enables her to recognise in the medieval descriptions concrete pre-expressive requirements—specific uses of the body, vocal production, rhythmic percussion—that a purely textual reader might underestimate or misread as mere ornamentation. It is precisely from within the practice of dance that certain passages in al-Fārābī and al-Mas'ūdī become technically legible rather than remaining at the level of aesthetic description.

Sales is therefore a performing scholar—dancer, choreographer, and researcher—who has directed the Istituto di Studi Coreutici Comparati (Orchěstès) in Rome and whose approach emerges from nearly thirty years of active practice in Arab-Islamic and Persian dance. Rather than treating the body as an external supplement to philology, she treats embodied training as an epistemological interface through which medieval descriptions become “readable” in terms of concrete pre-expressive requirements. This 2025 volume constitutes the second part of a research program begun with Sales (2006), which examined al-Kindī's music-philosophical principles as the ontological foundation of Abbasid court performing arts.

On this basis, the present article addresses three research questions, formulated to match the nature of the sources and the author's dancer-philosopher method.

RQ1. What pre-expressive requirements can be reconstructed from the principal Abbasid-era textual witnesses on dance and music—especially al-Fārābī and al-Mas'ūdī, integrated by al-Kindī's musical theory?

RQ2. In what sense was the medieval Abbasid dancer not a mono-specialised professional but an integrated artist of

dance, song, and rhythmic percussion, consistent with the claim that *rāqīṣa* was structurally associated with music and that performers could dance, sing, and play percussion?

RQ3. How does a philosophical-hermeneutic reading, grounded in the symbolic nature of the medieval universe and in the primacy of musical philosophy, illuminate the place of dance within the broader system of medieval Arab-Islamic performing arts?

2. Literature Review

The literature relevant to medieval Arabic dance in the Abbasid era is intrinsically interdisciplinary because the primary witnesses on dance are embedded in treatises and narratives whose chief categories are musical, philosophical, historiographic, and symbolic rather than choreographic. Sales's own method explicitly integrates “musicological, historical and philosophical” reflections into a comparative synthesis of “pre-expressive requirements,” and this integration provides a principled rationale for the scope of scholarship surveyed here. In what follows, five clusters of scholarship are mapped as complementary to Sales's text-driven inquiry: foundational musicology and historiography; performance studies and socio-professional framing; iconography and material culture in relation to symbolic thought; comparative and contemplative-religious approaches; and Sales's prior contributions that prepare the dancer-philosopher standpoint.

2.1 Foundational musicological and historical scholarship on Arab-Islamic music and dance

Sales's primary sources are music-philosophical and historiographic works—al-Fārābī and al-Mas'ūdī—integrated by al-Kindī's musical theory, and therefore the foundational scholarly problem is how Arabic musical writings are edited, transmitted, and interpreted as evidence for performative culture. This is the terrain in which philological and historiographic studies such as Shiloah's work on Arabic musical writings (Shiloah 1962) and Farmer's broad history of Arabian music (Farmer 1962) become structurally relevant to the project's evidentiary base, even when the present article remains focused on Sales's specific textual choices.

Because Sales's inquiry begins from the “ontological primacy” of music and from the inseparability of dance and music at court, any review of scholarship must foreground musicology as more than contextual background: it becomes a methodological precondition for reading dance through musical categories and for understanding why “learning dance is closely connected to learning music.” In this perspective, the medieval court dancer's competencies—dance, singing, and rhythmic percussion—are not ancillary curiosities but data points

that bind the historiography of dance to the historiography of musical pedagogy and rhythmic.

Sales's delimitation further implies a critical stance toward general dance histories that treat dance primarily through step vocabularies and Eurocentric genealogies, since her object is explicitly reconstructed from textual witnesses that do not "notate" dance but presuppose it as a professional art nested within music and poetry. Sachs's comparative dance-historiographic project (Sachs 1996) can thus be read as an important methodological foil: it exemplifies the ambition of universal coverage while also revealing how whole regions and periods can be eclipsed when the evidence does not match the expectations of choreographic description. Within more specialised surveys, classificatory work on Arabic dances (e.g., Henni-Chebra and Poché 2000) aligns with Sales's insistence on delimitation—namely, that not all aesthetically fascinating lyric or popular materials are pertinent to the specific problem of pre-expressive requirements for professional or semi-professional artistic dance.

2.2 Performance studies of the Arab-Islamic and Persianate region

Sales's sources support a model of the performer as a multi-competent artist rather than a single-skill specialist, and she makes this point explicitly by contrasting medieval practice with modern "frenzy of specialisation." Performance studies that address improvisation, virtuosity, and aesthetic codes in Persianate and Near-Eastern solo traditions—such as Shay's discussion of Iranian dance aesthetics (Shay 1999) — become relevant here primarily as controlled analogical frames, consistent with Sales's claim that certain stylemes might remain present in Persian and Central-Asian models "without solution of continuity."

At the same time, Sales's delimitation to Abbasid court dance entails a specific social ecology: dance appears as part of elite entertainment and patronage, and its professionalisation must be read as embedded in courtly institutions and tastes. Studies attentive to courtly entertainers and the gendered labour of performance (e.g., Nielson 2022 on medieval Islamic court entertainment, including *qiyān* and *jāriya*) may therefore be methodologically adjacent, even when Sales explicitly restricts her inquiry to a philosophically informed reconstruction of pre-expressive requirements rather than a comprehensive social history of performers.

What Sales does require, however, is a performance-theoretical vocabulary capable of relating embodied practice to symbolic and philosophical horizons, since her dancer-philosopher perspective insists that the arts of

movement are best understood through their connection to musical philosophy and, by extension, to the medieval symbolic universe. In this respect, scholarship on aesthetics and performance in Islamic spiritual and artistic contexts (e.g., Hoffman 2008) provides a conceptual bridge for thinking about how embodied practices are interpreted rather than merely described—an orientation congruent with Sales's claim that medieval reality "remains" symbolic and that speculative thought frames Creation as vibration and meaning.

2.3 Iconography, material culture, and contemplative thought

Sales grounds her study in textual evidence from al-Fārābī and al-Mas'ūdī, and she characterises the inquiry as an interpretive hypothesis extracted from "significant passages" rather than an exhaustive survey of all media of evidence. Nevertheless, her insistence on the symbolic nature of the medieval universe entails that images, objects, and spaces—when they are studied—should be approached as part of a broader allegorical and cosmological imagination rather than as mere illustrations of "daily life."

Within this horizon, iconographic and material-culture studies of the dancer figure in Islamic visual culture (e.g., Gelfer-Jorgensen 1997) and broader treatments of Abbasid courtly visual culture (e.g., Hawthorn 2020) can be positioned as complementary approaches that share Sales's concern with how courtly arts are coded, patronised, and rendered legible within elite symbolic systems. The conceptual precondition for such integration is the kind of philosophical framing Sales foregrounds at the outset: where music has "ontological primacy" and dance is inseparable from music, a theory of imagination and symbol can inform how one relates texts, images, and embodied techniques in a single interpretive field.

Sales's opening emphasis on speculative musical philosophy also connects the study to scholarship on Islamic philosophy and the imagination (Corbin 1991), since her argument depends on the premise that medieval artistic practices refer beyond themselves to symbolic correspondences and ontological principles. Likewise, contextual historical work on the Greek-Arabic translation movement (Gutas 2002) can be treated as relevant insofar as Sales explicitly distinguishes speculative inquiry from practical music and situates her reading of al-Kindi and al-Fārābī within a philosophical register that exceeds craft description.

2.4 Comparative and contemplative-religious framing

Sales's comparative method is anchored in what she claims emerges from her medieval sources: the "specific aspects" found in al-Fārābī and al-Mas'ūdī "induce"

comparison with Persian and Central-Asian models where certain peculiarities remain present without interruption. This makes controlled comparative scholarship—such as Bayatly’s technical and ethnographic attention to dance practices in the region (Bayatly 1996, 2001, 2005) — directly pertinent, particularly where it provides concrete descriptions of sonic techniques that illuminate Sales’s theme of the body as an “extension sonore.”

In fact, the Bayatly passage quoted by Sales describes a “very characteristic” type of finger snap executed through complex finger positions and frictional sliding that produces sound in a resonant cavity formed between the fingers, thereby providing a micro-technical example of how the dancer’s body can function as a sonic instrument. When read alongside Sales’s proposal to classify dancer-produced sound through an analytic quadripartition and to conceive the dancer as a true “percussion instrument” uniting sounds produced “in the act of dancing” with those of the orchestra, this comparative material supports a broader model of choreutic-musical integration rather than an isolated trick.

Comparative framing is also justified by the courtly premise that Abbasid dance was inseparable from music and poetry, and that performers often combined dance, song, and percussion; such integration resonates with comparative approaches that analyse performance as a composite of vocal, instrumental, and bodily competencies rather than a discrete genre. Within contemplative-religious framing, studies of dervish dance and its philosophical interpretation (Molé 1963) can be placed in methodological continuity with Sales’s insistence on the medieval symbolic universe.

Finally, contemporary intercultural performance studies (Capezio 2017) become relevant insofar as Sales’s own work culminates, in its fourth chapter, in translated contemplative texts used in theatre-dance productions between 2004 and 2011, indicating a research-to-performance bridge that treats poetic language as a carrier of embodied affect and stageable contemplative states.

2.5 The author’s own prior contributions

Sales explicitly positions her second publication as beginning with al-Kindi’s philosophico-musical principles due to the “ontological primacy” of music, and she grounds this stance in extensive field experience that informs a dancer-philosopher method. Even where earlier works by the author (Sales 2006, 2011) are not quoted in the present excerpted material, the internal logic of the 2025 book demonstrates continuity: the interpretive

hypothesis, the integration of musicology/history/philosophy, and the comparative-analogical orientation are presented as systematic components of a single research program rather than as ad hoc tools.

The distinctiveness of this program can be summarised by three internal commitments that function as criteria for engaging other scholarship. First, the object is Abbasid court dance specifically, bound to music and classical Arabic poetry, and therefore scholarship is assessed for its capacity to address courtly integration rather than isolated “dance” as an autonomous art. Second, the methodological aim is to extract “pre-expressive requirements” from the sources through comparative synthesis, so scholarship is evaluated in relation to skill-structures (professionalisation, rhythmic competence, sonic body techniques) rather than to the reconstruction of named choreographies. Third, the interpretive horizon is explicitly symbolic and philosophical, and thus scholarship that can articulate how medieval arts refer to cosmology, ontology, and allegorical meaning is privileged as a partner to the textual witnesses themselves.

3. Purpose and Objectives

This study aims to reconstruct the pre-expressive foundations of Abbasid court dance through a philosophical and philological analysis of selected medieval textual witnesses (Sales 2025). Rather than treating dance as a recoverable repertoire of isolated steps, the work seeks to identify the conditions of possibility — musician-dancer competencies, embodied techniques, and rhythmic-musical logics — through which medieval dance appears as an integrated performing art. The inquiry is therefore oriented toward the “pre-expressive requirements” that make court choreography intelligible as craft, knowledge, and aesthetic articulation within the medieval Arab-Islamic symbolic universe.

Two specific objectives structure this reconstruction. First, the article identifies a musician-dancer competency profile from al-Fārābī and al-Mas‘ūdī, treating their remarks as evidence for an integrated performer rather than a mono-specialised technician (Sales 2025). In particular, the research extracts criteria that link dance to song and rhythmic percussion — thus grounding the performer’s artistic formation in musical theory and historiographic observation. Second, the study models five thematic nuclei of pre-expressive requirements through comparative synthesis (Sales 2025). These nuclei — (i) professionalisation of the artist-dancer; (ii) the body as sonic and percussive extension; (iii) mimetic and pantomimic dance; (iv)

defined repertoires and specific technical abilities; and (v) the organic relationship between musical execution and choreutic practice — are not presented as a timeline but as a structured model. The model is designed to clarify how medieval dance presupposes precise embodied skills, regulated timing, and a type of musical-rhythmic literacy.

The implications for performance pedagogy and Islamic performing arts studies follow directly from this methodological orientation: by articulating historically grounded pre-expressive competencies, the work offers a vocabulary for training programs and academic reconstructions that respects the medieval intertwining of music, poetic imagination, and embodied technique (Sales 2025).

4. Methodology and Approach

The article's methodological strategy combines three complementary strands: (a) textual-philological analysis; (b) comparative-analogical method; and (c) dancer-philosopher interpretive synthesis (Sales 2025). Together, these strands allow the reconstruction of dance-related information from sources that are not written as choreographic notations, while maintaining control over the inferential steps required to move from philosophical and musicological discourse to pre-expressive requirements.

(a) Textual-philological analysis. The investigation proceeds by close reading of al-Fārābī's *Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr* and al-Mas'ūdī's *Murūj al-Dahab*, supplemented by al-Kindī's musical-theoretical reflections (Sales 2025). The objective is not to treat these texts as dance manuals but to extract passages bearing on dance, rhythm, movement, and competency requirements from within their philosophical, musicological, and historiographic registers. The dance-relevant data are therefore inferred through careful attention to how musical categories (voice, instruments, rhythm, vibration, temporal structure) are used to conceptualise embodied action, sonic production, and performer capability. This approach supports the paper's core claim that where the sources speak of music's ontological primacy, dance cannot be reduced to mere ornamentation but must be read as a technically governed component of musical artistry (Sales 2025).

(b) Comparative-analogical method. The second strand uses a controlled comparative-analogical method that places the medieval witnesses in dialogue with living Persian and Central-Asian performance traditions. This comparison is justified by the claim that certain stylemes persist in performance lineages “without solution of continuity” (Sales 2025). The method therefore does not assume direct documentary lineage, but uses micro-technical observations to test whether medieval

descriptions of embodied sonority and rhythmic articulation remain technically recognisable. A concrete example is Bayatly's micro-technical account of the finger snap as executed through complex finger positions and frictional sliding, producing sound in a resonant cavity formed between the fingers (Bayatly 1996; Sales 2025). Such observations provide a tactile grammar for reading medieval accounts of how bodily action generates structured vibration.

Within this comparative logic, Barba and Savarese's concept of pre-expressive principles offers an additional framework for cross-cultural skill analysis (Barba and Savarese 1988). In this perspective, the goal of comparison is to identify stable skill-structures “under” the varying surface conventions of performance, thereby making the inference of pre-expressive requirements methodologically responsible.

(c) Dancer-philosopher interpretive synthesis. The third strand is an interpretive synthesis grounded in the author's dancer-philosopher profile: nearly thirty years of embodied practice in Arab-Islamic and Persian dance forms function as an epistemological interface that makes medieval descriptions technically legible (Sales 2025; Sales 2006). This practice does not replace philology with impressionism; rather, it enables the author to recognise in textual accounts specific body uses, vocal production techniques, and rhythmic percussion requirements that a purely textual reader might underestimate or misread. The lived experience of timing, resonance, breath, and tactile articulation becomes a constraint that guides interpretive selection within the text's discursive possibilities (Sales 2025).

By integrating these three strands, the methodology yields a five-nucleus model of pre-expressive requirements that is both text-grounded and technically interpretative, while remaining explicitly aware of the non-choreographic nature of the sources.

5. Findings / Results

The findings are organised around five thematic nuclei that emerge from the comparative synthesis developed in Chapter Two of Sales's book (Sales 2025). These five nuclei are reconstructed as pre-expressive requirements of Abbasid court dance: (5.1) professionalisation of the artist-dancer; (5.2) the body as a sonic and percussive extension; (5.3) mimetic and pantomimic dance; (5.4) defined repertoires and specific technical abilities; and (5.5) the organic relationship between music and dance. Before presenting these nuclei, two analytical subsections ground the model in the primary sources themselves (al-Fārābī and al-Mas'ūdī): first, al-Fārābī's placement of dance within a music-theoretical hierarchy (5.0), and second, al-

Mas'ūdī's description of competencies and the iconographic evidence that supports a courtly performer's multifaceted artistry (5.ob) (Sales 2025). In this way, the model does not merely summarise what dance looks like; it reconstructs what dance requires in order to be performed as a philosophically and musically intelligible art.

5.o. al-Fārābī's Classification of Dance within Music: Hierarchy, Vibration, and Mimesis

Al-Fārābī's passage places dance inside a music-theoretical hierarchy, not as an autonomous art but as a category ranked by its proximity to the human voice and by the kind of sonic quality it can generate. The analysis begins with a two-group taxonomy: in Group A, knowledge-production and compositional mediation rise from the theorist and extend through composer, executant, and the ordinary professional; in Group B, music is ordered starting from the voice and moving outward toward accompanied voice and finally toward instrumental music, whose internal sub-ranks end by including dance and cadenced mimicry. This is already an interpretive decision with ontological implications: dance is not treated as mere ornament, but as a controlled technique that can—under specific conditions—produce musically intelligible effects. The hierarchy also clarifies that the highest-ranking position is occupied by those artistic forms able to articulate a fuller spectrum of voice-like sonic properties, while the lower ranks are constrained by the more limited spectral range of their vibrations.

Within this ordered landscape, al-Fārābī distinguishes dance and cadenced mime (*"mimica cadenzata"*) as musical arts whose rank corresponds to the degree to which their bodily movements can be made to function like musical sound. His key argument turns on the physics and temporality of vibration. The movement of the eyebrows, feet, and other parts of the body is said to be susceptible to producing a vibration; moreover, when it comes into contact with a body, it can generate a sound. Yet the *"mimica cadenzata"* is singled out as the most imperfect: its gestures (eyebrows, shoulders, head, and other parts) suggest the production of musical notes more than they genuinely produce them. What makes mimicry imperfect, according to al-Fārābī, is that the gestures do not necessarily yield the persistence and duration that characterize *"note-like"* sound. By contrast, rhythmic percussion (hand-clapping, rattles, tambourine-like instruments, dance, rhythmic foot-battles) requires that vibration necessarily generates a sound, even though the sound may still lack the note's persistence.

The hierarchy therefore depends on a graduated model of sonic likeness: voice-like sound possesses the most

complete set of musical qualities, while instruments and body-based percussive arts progressively lose properties such as duration, persistence, and the full capacity to function as *"notes."* al-Fārābī explains that musical instruments such as the four-string *'ūd*, the long-neck *tunbūr*, and the Khorasan instrument can produce vibrations that terminate in a sound; nevertheless, even these are placed below voice because they do not *"reunite all the qualities of the voice"* in the same way. In the same interpretive register, dance and mimetic gestures occupy a position near the boundary between movement and music: they may share rhythmic temporality and percussive structure with musical performance, but they remain structurally less perfect than vocal articulation and less note-like than instrument-generated sounds.

The conceptual consequence is that dance is understood through musical ontology: body movements become components of an ordered musical system governed by rational perfection. In al-Fārābī's implied chain of rational refinement, philosophy stands above poetry; poetry above music; music above voice; voice above instruments; instruments above dance; and dance above cadenced mimicry. This is not simply a value judgment but a cognitive map of what kinds of embodied actions can legitimately be integrated into musical artistry. Dance belongs in the music domain because it is capable of producing vibrations and sounds and of being regulated by measurable time intervals; it is excluded from the highest rank because its bodily vibrations do not fully replicate the voice's note-like persistence and polyvalent expressive range.

Finally, the passage's internal logic is synthesized by Shiloah's editorial-theoretical reconstruction, which organizes al-Fārābī's hierarchy into a two-group model and explicitly takes dance and cadenced mimicry as ranked sub-entries within the instrumental voice-to-dance continuum (Sales 2025). In this way, al-Fārābī's hierarchy provides the first systematic bridge from music theory to choreutic practice: dance becomes intelligible as a musical-ontological category—regulated, timed, and vibration-based—whose pre-expressive requirement is not only bodily fluency but the capacity to align movement with musical time and voice-oriented sonic criteria (al-Fārābī 1930–31; Sales 2025).

5.ob. al-Mas'ūdī and Iconographic Evidence: The Dancer's Competencies and Visual Representations

Al-Mas'ūdī's testimony emerges from a specific social scene: a courtly *bazm* (convivial session) in which the caliph al-Mu'tamid invites his guests to join the assembly and then directs a cantor with a pointed request—*"Describe the dance and its genres, the qualities of the dancers and their roles."* This framing matters for how dance is represented as an art-

discourse. It suggests that the dancer's practice is not merely entertainment but an object of description, classification, and evaluative expertise within a highly literate environment. In this context, the dancer is required to embody a set of competencies that are both corporal and musical, and dance is described as structured by technical foundations rather than as spontaneous improvisation.

The cantors' answer begins by stressing geographic and cultural variation while simultaneously asserting a shared technical basis: "eight rhythms" underwrite the art in their world. The list includes *khafif*, *ramal*, *al-hazaj*, *khafif al-ramal*, the second *khafif al-ṭaqīl* and its *ṭaqīl*, followed by *ṭaqīl al-khafif* and the *ṭaqīl* of that latter. Yet the text also becomes problematic at the interface between musical theory and choreutic rhythm: Shiloah observes that the author seems to confuse the general theory of "eight rhythmic modes" with those rhythms applicable to dance, which may instead correspond to poetic metres (Shiloah 1962). The result is interpretive tension rather than incoherence: the ambiguity itself points to the deep entanglement of poetic, musical, and corporeal timing within the courtly performing arts.

From these rhythmic premises, the account moves to an explicit catalogue of dancerly competencies. The dancer and danceress must possess natural talent, physical beauty, grace, amiability, an innate sense of rhythm, and a profound knowledge of music. The body itself is specified in proportionate terms: a small and well-proportioned figure; a long neck; a narrow waist; flexible hips. The performer must also master breathing (respiration control), maintain calm, show perseverance and patience in pursuit of the intended objectives, and render the fingers of the hands and feet flexible. These are pre-expressive capacities, not optional stylistic flourishes. The performer is further required to interpret multiple roles, to know the *ibl* and the *raqs al-kurra* (or *kurraj*), and to be able to turn on oneself with feet planted firmly on the ground. Even the kinetic grammar of steps is described in two types: one corresponding to the rhythm of the music and executed by rising up; the other performed "against" the regularity of the rhythm and executed by striking the ground.

Shiloah's commentary, as transmitted and synthesised by Sales (2025), strengthens the conclusion that these elements indicate a fully evolved art requiring long training and difficult preparation rather than popular improvisation. The art is said to include "a natural disposition" leading dancers to meditate on their own craft and become masters of it. This interpretive emphasis implies a professionalisation of embodied technique: even if a dancer may possess innate

disposition, the competencies listed—respiration, sustained calm, controlled finger and foot flexibility, multiple roles, named repertoires (*ibl*, *raqs al-kurra/kurraj*), and specific turning with planted feet—presuppose pedagogy and iterative practice.

Named repertoires also surface as crucial evidence of definitional stability. The *ibl* ("of the camels") remains enigmatic, but its placement in the list implies canonical knowledge. The *raqs al-kurra*, by contrast, may be closer to the popular than to the purely courtly sphere, and Ibn Ḳaldūn is cited in the broader argument as describing its use of horse simulacra and hobby-horse devices in dance-like combat. Sales' comparative framing then allows these repertoires to be situated within a broader intercultural possibility space, including possible Persian influence (Sales 2025; Shiloah 1962).

In addition to textual competency lists, the chapter's findings are reinforced by iconographic evidence. At Qusayr 'Amra, the fresco dancer is described as having the left arm raised and the right arm slightly flexed, with legs in a dance step and the head inclined; the swirling folds of the skirt recall late-Roman and Byzantine stylemes, providing a visual analogue for the torsional and flowing dynamics that the text implies. Most centrally for Abbasid court identity, the "Samarra Dancers" from the Jawsaq al-Khaqani palace are introduced as emblematic evidence: Herzfeld's reconstruction frames the figures as dancers with long braids, narrow waist, stylised curls, long-sleeved garments with a wide lower section, and a hip belt; crucially, they are shown in a symmetrical placement with a mirrored cup-pouring gesture. Yet Hoffman (2008) is invoked to argue against a purely "oriental" reading of Samarra paintings: the Abbasid imagery should not be understood as a dramatic rupture with predecessors, meaning that iconography—like choreutic technique—can be read as a hybrid continuity in court culture (al-Mas'ūdī 1874; Sales 2025; Shiloah 1962; Hoffman 2008).

5.1 Professionalisation of the Artist-Dancer

Abbasid court dance, as reconstructed from al-Mas'ūdī's competency-oriented testimony, presupposes the formation of a performer who is professional (or at least semi-professional) and multi-competent. The dancer is not approached as a mono-specialised technical specialist (*rāqīṣa*) operating in isolation from other performing arts; rather, the figure is structurally associated with singing and music, such that dance functions as one dimension within a wider performer competence profile (Sales 2025). This integrated model is essential for understanding why medieval dance appears not as an informal entertainment but as an art whose effectiveness depends on a network of skills.

The competency list reconstructed by Sales from al-Mas'ūdī's account includes, first, natural talent and physical beauty, followed by grace and an innate sense of rhythm; these are presented not as superficial characteristics but as

preconditions for a performer whose movements must remain rhythmically exact. Second, the performer requires deep musical knowledge: the capacity to understand musical organisation is not external to dance but internal to its execution and timing. Third, a proportioned body is described in terms that suggest both aesthetic and functional discipline – long neck, narrow waist, and flexible hips – indicating that bodily morphology contributes to technical articulation. Fourth, controlled breathing and perseverance are treated as necessities for sustained performance quality, implying that stamina and breath regulation belong to the core of choreutic competence rather than being incidental.

Fifth, the dancer's formation includes finger flexibility and a controlled command of the hands and feet, as well as the ability to execute complex rhythmic articulation. Sales extends this competency framework by emphasising that “the medieval world did not know the frenzy of specialisation that is the symbol of our time” (Sales 2025). In other words, the historical performer is trained within an integrated performing economy in which dance, song, and percussive rhythmic execution are inseparable domains of expertise.

A further structural marker confirms this integrated professionalism: the *rāqīṣa* is associated with singing and music, which implies that the dancer must coordinate movement with vocal and rhythmic components. In the Abbasid court context this integrated capacity becomes a pre-expressive requirement: the performer must be able to transition among modes of embodied rhetoric (movement), vocal delivery (song), and sonic production (percussion) without losing the governing rhythmic unity. The comparison with *qiyān/jāriya* traditions strengthens this interpretation because such traditions also document multi-competent performance labour, though arranged within different social distributions (Nielson 2022; Sales 2025). Consequently, professionalisation in this context is best understood as multi-competent artistry rather than as narrow virtuosity. The dancer's professional status is enacted through coordinated competencies that make the body capable of functioning as a rhythmic and musical instrument within a courtly, music-centred performative system (Sales 2025).

5.2 The Body as Sonic and Percussive Extension

The dancer's body in Abbasid court performance can be reconstructed as a sonic-percussive extension: a medium through which vibration is produced and structured in relation to musical time (Sales 2025). The pre-expressive requirement here is not only bodily expressivity but precise control over how movement generates sound. Sales develops this idea by classifying dancer-produced

sound according to whether it is generated “pure” through the body's own contact dynamics or is produced “with instruments” introduced into performance, and by whether the sound originates in upper-body actions or in lower-body actions (Sales 2025).

The first category is upper-body pure percussion, including clapping and finger-snaps. These actions depend on controlled contact and rapid release: they translate fine motor coordination into percussive sonic outcomes. The second category is lower-body pure percussion, such as foot-stamps and heel-strikes. Here, sound emerges from weight transfer, impact timing, and the rhythmic organisation of steps; the feet become the primary resonators that translate choreutic trajectory into percussive pulse.

The third category is upper-body with instrument, including finger cymbals and zills, which extend the body's capacity to generate timbrally articulated rhythmic patterns. The fourth category is lower-body with instrument, such as ankle bells, which integrate movement into a continuous sonic layer as the performer navigates choreutic space.

This quadripartition clarifies that Abbasid dance requires an integrated sound-making capacity: the dancer must be able to produce both a percussive core and a controlled, instrument-mediated timbral variation. The theoretical support for this reconstruction is linked to al-Fārābī's concept that bodily movement produces vibrations equivalent in structure to musical vibrations; in that view, movement is susceptible to producing vibration and, through contact with bodies, can also produce sound (al-Fārābī 1930–31; Sales 2025). The dancer's bodily technique thus functions as an ontological analogue to musical vibration rather than as a decorative accompaniment.

Bayatly provides an especially concrete micro-technical analogue for reading how a specific bodily action yields sound. Her description of the finger snap explains that it is executed through complex finger positions and frictional sliding, producing sound in a resonant cavity formed between the fingers (Bayatly 1996; Sales 2025). Read through Sales's theoretical frame, this micro-technical detail exemplifies how the body's internal geometry and friction dynamics can generate structured sonic events. The finger snap is therefore not reducible to a gesture of emphasis; it is a sound-producing mechanism requiring precise coordination.

Taken together, these categories support a key result: the body is not merely expressive but functionally percussive. Abbasid court dance can be reconstructed as an art that demands a dancer's ability to modulate percussive output – pure and instrumentally extended – so that movement

and rhythm cohere with musical organisation. In pre-expressive terms, this means training that develops sonic timing, contact precision, and resonance control as intrinsic components of choreutic competence (Sales 2025).

5.3 Mimetic and Pantomimic Dance

Within al-Fārābī's music-theoretical horizon, mimetic and pantomimic dance can be situated as part of a graded continuum of musical intelligibility. Sales reconstructs the concept of *mimica cadenzata* (cadenced mimicry) as a lowest sub-rank within musical art: gestures are discussed in relation to their ability to suggest musical note-like articulation (Sales 2025; al-Fārābī 1930–31). Yet the pre-expressive interpretation developed in this article is that Abbasid court pantomimic gesture cannot be reduced to mere imitation; it must be understood as regulated bodily rhetoric.

The key theoretical premise is the relationship between gesture and temporal structure. The gestures associated with cadenced mimicry are linked to musical timing but are considered imperfect insofar as they may not fully deliver the persistence and note-like duration characteristic of voice or fully instrument-generated sound. However, this ranking does not entail that gesture lacks expressive authority; rather, it implies that the primary analytic criterion is sonic likeness to the note-structure of musical sound. When viewed as bodily rhetoric, pantomimic gesture becomes a technique for narrating, articulating meaning, and structuring affect within rhythmic time.

This interpretive claim is reinforced by a classical comparative parallel offered by Lucian of Samosata in *Peri Orcheseos*. There, the dancer's capacity to render narrative through gesture is presented as a form of eloquence (Lucian of Samosata 1992; Sales 2025). The point of this reference is not to claim direct Abbasid copying of Greek theory, but to suggest that gesture-based bodily articulation can be analysed as rhetorical competence. In this perspective, pantomimic dance is a communicative technology that translates narrative, symbolic content, or affective orientation into timed bodily forms.

At court, mimetic dance may also have carried narrative and symbolic gesture associated with the *qasida* tradition and with the medieval symbolic universe's allegorical imagination. Such an orientation is consistent with Sales's overarching premise that the medieval world is and remains symbolic in type, and therefore that performance practices are not only sensory events but interpretable carriers of layered meaning (Sales 2025). Mimetic and pantomimic dance thus belongs to the pre-

expressive field insofar as it requires the performer to coordinate gesture with rhythmic organisation while sustaining coherent symbolic rhetoric.

5.4 Defined Repertoires and Specific Technical Abilities

Abbasid court dance can be reconstructed as a practice of defined repertoires and technically specific abilities, rather than as improvised movement without formal constraints (Sales 2025). Named dances and recurring technical procedures indicate that the art was teachable, transmissible, and characterised by a disciplined relationship between body technique and musical rhythm. Sales treats these named repertorial items and technical skills as pre-expressive requirements: they define what the artist must be able to do in order to participate in court dance as an established art.

Three repertorial/technical markers play a central role. First is the *ibl* ("of the camels"), described as enigmatic yet canonical. Although the term remains difficult to interpret fully from the evidence available, its canonical character indicates that a specific choreography or movement-logic was recognised as a referential dance form within the court repertoire (Sales 2025). Second is *raqs al-kurra/kurraj*, linked by Sales to hobby-horse simulacra described by Ibn Khaldūn, with the possibility of Persian influence. Even when the precise genealogy is uncertain, the linkage suggests that this repertoire corresponded to performative forms with recognisable movement character and rhythmic structure within the broader Persianate world.

Third is the technique of turning on planted feet, presented as a procedure shared with Central Asian dance traditions. This points to a pre-expressive requirement that is less about generic dancing and more about a particular mechanics of rotation: the feet remain planted while the body articulates the turn, implying a disciplined distribution of weight and an exact relationship between rotational dynamics and rhythmic timing.

The competence list also distinguishes two types of rhythmic step: one rising with the beat and one striking against it (al-Mas'ūdī 1874; Sales 2025). This distinction indicates an advanced rhythmic literacy and suggests that dancers could modulate their bodily accentuation relative to the pulse, thereby producing rhythmic tension and resolution.

Sales's interpretive synthesis, supported by Shiloah's commentary, treats these competencies as evidence for an art requiring "long training and difficult preparation, not popular improvisation" (Shiloah 1962; Sales 2025). The implication is that the court dancer's repertoire is structured through pedagogy, where named dances and rhythmic mechanics form a stable technical canon.

5.5 The Organic Relationship between Music and Dance

In Abbasid court culture, music and dance can be reconstructed not as two adjacent arts but as one integrated practice in which musical organisation and choreutic execution are mutually constitutive (Sales 2025). This integration is a central result of Sales's synthesis and follows from al-Fārābī's placement of dance within musical ontology: dance is ranked and conceptualised through its capacity to produce vibrations and to align bodily action with musical time (al-Fārābī 1930–31; Sales 2025). The result is that the dancer is not merely performing to music but participating in music's ontological field.

The organic character of the relationship is additionally supported by al-Mas'ūdī's competency-based testimony. In this model, the *rāqīṣa* is always associated with singing and music; performers are described as knowing how to dance, sing, and beat the rhythm on various percussion instruments (Sales 2025). This phrasing implies that the performer must coordinate multiple sonic channels – vocal and percussive – while simultaneously producing choreutic rhythm. Dance is

therefore one operational dimension within a composite musical practice.

Caton et al.'s analysis of the *bazm* as a unified performative occasion reinforces this model: music, poetry, and movement are co-constitutive within the performative scene, meaning that the occasion cannot be decomposed into independent arts without losing its structural logic (Caton et al. 1986; Sales 2025). Read in the Abbasid context, this model provides a way to interpret why dance-related data in medieval sources so often appear embedded in musicological and poetic discourse.

The epistemological conclusion is that dance philosophy is organically connected and inseparable from music philosophy in the medieval symbolic universe (Sales 2025). The pre-expressive requirement arising here is therefore not simply that dancers can move to a beat. Instead, it is that they can function as rhythmic, percussive, and vocal agents within a music-centred ontology of vibration and time.

Table 1. The Five Thematic Nuclei of Pre-Expressive Requirements in Abbasid Court Dance

Nucleus	Primary Source Evidence	Key Pre-Expressive Concept
5.1 Professionalisation of the artist-dancer	al-Mas'ūdī 1874 (competency list; <i>raqīsa</i> associated with singing/music); Sales 2025	Multi-competent performer (dance + song + rhythmic percussion); anti-mono-specialisation
5.2 The body as sonic/percussive extension	al-Fārābī 1930–31 (movement produces vibration/sound); Bayatly 1996 (finger snap micro-technique); Sales 2025	Body as percussion/vibration-producing instrument; controlled contact and resonance
5.3 Mimetic and pantomimic dance	al-Fārābī 1930–31 (mimica cadenzata as ranked mime); Lucian of Samosata 1992; Sales 2025	Timed bodily rhetoric; gesture as regulated communication, not mere imitation
5.4 Defined repertoires and technical abilities	al-Mas'ūdī 1874 (ibl; <i>raqs al-kurra/kurraj</i> ; planted-foot turns; step types); Shiloah 1962; Sales 2025	Named, teachable repertoire; rhythmic accent control; difficult preparation
5.5 Organic relation between music and dance	al-Fārābī 1930–31 (dance within music ontology); Sales 2025; Caton et al. 1986	One integrated performative system; embodied activation of musical philosophy

Table 2. Classification of Dancer-Produced Sound in Abbasid Court Performance

Category	Type	Body Region	Example / Instrument
Pure percussion	Upper-body pure	Upper body	clapping; finger-snap
Pure percussion	Lower-body pure	Lower body	foot-stamp; heel-strike
With instrument	Upper-body with instrument	Upper body	finger cymbals; zills
With instrument	Lower-body with	Lower body	ankle bells

	instrument		
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6. Discussion

The five-nucleus model proposed in this study should be understood as a single integrated pre-expressive system rather than as five separable discoveries. Professionalisation (5.1) is not merely a social label attached to Abbasid performers; it presupposes a reliable sonic-body technique (5.2), because the ability to sustain rhythm, articulate percussive nuances, and coordinate bodily vibration is what makes a performer artistically accountable within a courtly entertainment setting. That technique, in turn, generates the conditions for mimetic rhetoric (5.3): gesture becomes rhythmically organised bodily “speech,” able to structure meaning without requiring choreographic notation or later theatrical scripting. Yet mimetic rhetoric cannot stabilise itself indefinitely without a stable repertoire (5.4) – that is, without canonical or at least teachable dance forms and named abilities that allow a dancer to reproduce and refine performative intelligibility across sessions. Finally, these four dimensions are held together by an organic music–dance unity (5.5), whereby dance is intelligible as an extension of musical practice – an art whose ontological place is within music’s own hierarchy rather than outside it. In Sales’s reconstruction, this interdependence is precisely what makes the Abbasid dancer an integrated performer rather than a mono-specialised technician, and it also justifies treating pre-expressive requirements as a system: the “whole” explains why its parts reinforce one another, and why the model remains philosophically coherent (Sales 2025; al-Fārābī 1930–31; al-Mas‘ūdī 1874).

At the epistemological level, reconstructing medieval Arabic dance from non-choreographic sources compels a methodological reorientation. The absence of notated choreography does not entail the absence of a sophisticated dance art; rather, it indicates that the medieval symbolic universe encoded dance competency inside adjacent discourses – philosophy, musicology, historiography, and iconography – each of which preserved different aspects of performative knowledge. Al-Fārābī’s contribution represents one mode of encoding: dance is situated within a theoretical music hierarchy, and bodily movement is treated as a factor whose vibrations are structurally comparable to musical vibrations. In parallel, al-Mas‘ūdī’s testimony encodes dance knowledge through competency description: the performer is characterised by an integrated profile of abilities – talent, grace, rhythm, musical knowledge, and concrete technical skills. These are not redundant accounts but complementary registers of the same underlying artistic competence. Where theoretical hierarchy clarifies the place of

dance in relation to voice, instruments, poetry, and mimetic art, the competency list clarifies what a dancer must be able to do – what kinds of embodied capacities are required to make the hierarchical placement practically effective. As a result, the dance historian does not “read choreography” that is not present; instead, one infers pre-expressive requirements from the way medieval authors organise knowledge about music and performance. The medieval symbolic universe, far from leaving dance undocumented, integrates it into a broader system of intelligibility, and this integration is exactly what makes dance recoverable despite the non-existence of choreographic notation (Sales 2025; Shiloah 1962; Gutas 2002).

This also clarifies why the dancer-philosopher approach is not a subjective indulgence but a structured epistemic constraint. A common objection is that embodied practice risks becoming an impressionistic lens, projecting contemporary motor intuitions onto historical descriptions. Sales’s method answers this objection by treating embodied knowledge as a plausibility filter: the researcher’s corporeal experience enables a technical reading of textual claims – distinguishing, for example, what kinds of bodily uses are plausible as percussive supports of rhythm, and what kinds of gestural “rhetoric” would require specific training rather than mere spontaneity. Embodiment therefore limits interpretive arbitrariness because it obliges the analyst to test whether the reconstructed requirements can be realised through learnable technique. The dancer-philosopher position thus functions as an epistemological interface: practice does not replace texts, and texts do not replace practice; rather, each discipline constrains the other. In this sense, Barba and Savarese’s pre-expressive concept offers parallel validation, because it similarly treats skill-structure as something that can be analysed across cultural contexts without reducing performance to culturally specific surface codes alone. The Abbasid case can therefore be approached with the expectation that a repeatable, technically grounded layer exists beneath the apparent variability of surface gestures and repertoires, and that this layer is reconstructable through a careful combination of embodied plausibility and textual inference (Barba and Savarese 1988; Sales 2025; Sales 2006).

The iconographic evidence strengthens this inference process precisely because it adds dimensions that textual competency descriptions do not fully supply. Visual representations of dancers in Umayyad and Abbasid contexts – the fresco evidence from Qusayr‘ Amra and the Samarra depictions – cannot by themselves reconstruct the

sequence of steps. Nevertheless, they corroborate that bodily arrangement, spatial placement, and gestural composition were culturally salient, and they show that the dancer's competency was not only sonic and temporal but also spatially articulated. Texts explain what capacities are required for performance to be effective; images show how the body occupies space when those capacities are enacted. This difference matters for the model because mimetic rhetoric (5.3) and stable repertoire (5.4) depend on the dancer's ability to produce repeatable bodily forms that can be visually recognised as “the same” performance capacity enacted across instances. Visual evidence therefore does not simply illustrate the model; it supplies an additional parameter – spatial and gestural legibility – that textual sources alone cannot fully provide. Moreover, Hoffman's argument that Samarra paintings express hybrid court aesthetics rather than being reducible either to a purely “oriental” or Hellenistic lineage supports the broader methodological principle that medieval performance is embedded in courts where multiple aesthetic grammars coexist – aligning with the internal logic of the five nuclei (Hoffman 2008; Sales 2025).

Within the broader field, the five-nucleus model complements rather than replaces existing scholarship. Prior research has fruitfully foregrounded social and gendered dimensions of court entertainment, broader historical narratives of Arab-Islamic music and dance, and the iconographic study of performance figures. Yet such work can remain focused on descriptive categories – who performed, in which setting, and how visual or social features circulated – without specifying the pre-expressive technical system that would explain how those performances were made possible at the level of training, bodily vibration, rhythmic organisation, and repertoire stability. By offering a philosophically grounded vocabulary of pre-expressive requirements, this model fills that explanatory gap, clarifying how dance, in the Abbasid court context, belongs to the same epistemic order as music theory and performance knowledge (Shiloah 1962; Bayatly 1996; Henni-Chebra and Poché 2000; Nielson 2022).

7. Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

This article synthesises the pre-expressive model of Abbasid court dance by articulating five thematic nuclei through a reconstruction grounded in al-Fārābī's music-theoretical hierarchy and al-Mas'ūdī's competency-focused testimony, read within Sales's interpretive framework (Sales 2025). The results contribute to the historiography of pre-Islamic and Islamic performing arts by shifting the analytic question from “what steps were performed?” to “what conditions of embodiment made dance a musically intelligible

art?” Professionalisation emerges as multi-competent artistry rather than mono-specialised dancing; the body is reconstructed as a sonic-percussive instrument; mimetic and pantomimic gesture is understood as timed bodily rhetoric; defined repertoires and technical abilities show teachable canonisation and disciplined rhythmicity; and the music-dance relation appears as an integrated performative system grounded in musical ontology (al-Fārābī 1930–31; al-Mas'ūdī 1874; Sales 2025).

The implications are threefold. For performance studies, the five-nucleus model offers a theoretically grounded vocabulary for non-Western pre-expressive technique. It supports analysis that connects embodied skill-structures to philosophical and musicological discourses, rather than isolating dance as an aesthetic surface. For Islamic studies, the reconstruction demonstrates that Abbasid court culture sustained a philosophically integrated performing art of high complexity, in which dance is structurally embedded in musical knowledge and poetic refinement. For performance pedagogy, the dancer-philosopher approach provides a methodological alternative for contemporary training: instead of treating history as distant content, it treats embodied practice as a site where philosophical inquiry and technical articulation become mutually clarifying (Sales 2006; Sales 2025).

Accordingly, the article recommends (i) further iconographic research on Umayyad and Abbasid palace frescoes to clarify how visual schemes encode choreutic mechanics and performer posture; (ii) codicological work on manuscript traditions for al-Fārābī's *Kitāb al-mūsīqī al-kabīr* to strengthen the philological basis for dance-relevant categories; and (iii) comparative study of the *ibl* and *raqs al-kurra/kurraj* repertoires in relation to Central Asian and Iranian court dance lineages, with careful control over analogy and continuity (Shiloah 1962; Sales 2025). In this way, medieval Arabic dance becomes not only a historical object but a living resource for embodied artistic research, demonstrating how poetic language can generate stageable contemplative states that remain faithful to the medieval symbolic horizon (Sales 2025; Barba and Savarese 1988; Shiloah 1962).

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