THE GREAT TURK GENIUS AMIR KUSRAW
AND HIS ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN MUSIC

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In the annals of the history of the South Assian Subcontinent, Amir Khusraw stands out as a great personality of his times. He was a distinguished courtier, eminent literature a great poet par excellence, an unsurpassed chronicler, and an accomplished musician. Enough is known and recorded about his accomplishments. In the following pages, it is proposed to consider his contribution in the field of music.

Born of Turkish parents, Amir Khusraw was conscious of his Turk descent. His father, Sayf al-Din Mahmud was a distinguished Turk soldier who, after his arrival in Delhi, became an army officer under Sultan Shams al-Din Iltutmish (1211-1236 A.D.). Khusraw was born to him in 651/1253 while he was in service at Patiyâlı (the Etah district, U.P., India). In contrast to his father who had come to Hindostan from outside, Khusraw was born and bred up on the soil of Hindostan and, therefore, he considered himself to be a Hindostani (of Hindostan). And yet, he would identify himself as a Turk, even though a "Hindostani Turk" (Turk of Hindostan). He affirmed in his two memorable verses¹ which purport to mean:

I am a Turk but a Hindostani Turk and, therefore
I marvel in Hindvi, and not in Arabic;
I am a parrot of Hind, and so if you want to appreciate me
Ask for and listen from me sweet notes in Hindvi.

So much affirmation of his identity postulates that he was accomplished in Turkish cultural tradition with the best of assimilation from the local Hindostani environment. Nowhere was this synthesis more pronounced than in his accomplishments in music.

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N.B. Unless indicated otherwise, all the textual quotations are from the and section of the Third Treatise of Rasî‘il al-'Ijâz.

(Introduction to Diwan-i Ghurrat al-Kamal, the Panjab University Library Mss.).
Amir Khusrau's name is a legend in the history of Hindostani music. His creative contribution was so great that both the written record as well as the oral tradition have continued to extol him, to this day, as a genius who stood shoulders above his contemporaries and whose like was not born during the course of the subsequent centuries. He is generally regarded as the heralder of a new era in the history of the 'Classical Hindostani Music' as it is known and understood to this day.

With all this applause and recognition and the continued commemoration of his name through centuries, Amir Khusrau's real contribution in music is not, and cannot be, fully known for want of adequate authentic record. He had written three volumes on music, and had these survived, we would have been more sure of his specific contributions to the theory and practice of music. What is known now is but incidental to his writings on other subjects, except for his brief but brilliant discourse on music which, being a primary source of authentic information, is of great value in understanding Amir Khusrau's ideas on music.

The Second Section in the Third Treatise of his monumental work on rhetorics and exposition of literary style, entitled Rasâ’il al-Ijâz,\(^2\) is the subject of a 'discourse on differentiation in the fundamental and the subsidiary principles of music' (‘Inshi’āb ‘Usūl wa Furū‘-i Mūsāqāt). Though the Discourse primarily aims at producing a piece of creative prose in music terminology, it simultaneously throws into bold relief the perspective which has given birth to it. It was Amir Khusrau's intimate knowledge of the historical development of music and his actual experience of the contemporary music scene which inspired this Discourse. Each term and phrase representing a music figure, concept, technique or form is used artistically to produce music panorama in words. The author does not stop to explain the significance of any term or phrase which he uses: he takes it for granted that his reader understands the music concepts underlying the terms used by him. For, without such an understanding, his excellence and accomplishment in terms of professional knowledge and mastery in music can hardly be appreciated.

\(^2\) Rasâ’il al-Ijâz (Treatise on Miracle in Literary Style) also known as ‘Ijâz-i Khusravi (Khusrau's Miracle) is composed of five treatises, each divided into chapters or sections. It is mainly a work in Rhetorics and Exposition of Literary Style, but while expressing himself on any topic the author not only demonstrates his ability and art in the use of words and idioms appropriate to the subject but also recreates the very environment reminiscent of the contemporary scene. It is here that one gets a glimpse into the historical perspective and the contemporary music practice of Amir Khusrau's own times.
The most important by-product of this superb exercise in artistic expression is the music panorama which it creates and which brings to light both the back-ground of the previous music tradition and also the contemporary achievements. As such, this Discourse which was under composition on 7 Shawwal, 716 H.3 (beginning of January 1317 A.D.), becomes, in effect, an important document on the historical development of music in the Hindostan sub-continent by the turn of the 13th century A.D.

Among others, the Discourse contains significant observations on (i) the nature and theory of music, (ii) the past tradition, (iii) the contemporary scene and practice, (iv) the level of achievement in technique and performance, and (v) the need for further education.

Theory and Nature of Music

The main observations on the fundamentals of music are as follows:

Music is a science (‘ilm), very vast in scope, and extremely technical in nature. The subtleties of this science are too delicate to be mastered by an individual. Its principles were defined early by the learned men of Rum5 (i.e. Greek/Byzantine philosophers). The theory of the rhythmic modes (‘ilm-i ‘usul) is important: the ‘usul extending to four, pardah to twelve and ibresham to six: these are the basic ones, all the rest being the branch modes (furū) derived from them.6

It is important to note that Amir Khusrau considered music to be essentially a science (‘ilm). He has used the word ‘ilm eight times in this Discourse in the sense of a ‘field of study’, ‘a science’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘education’. The importance attached by him to the theory of rhythmic modes shows that according to him the science of music had essentially a mathematical basis. Long before Amir Khusrau, the eight Modes (ustūl) of the Byzantine theorists and the eight Modes of the Arab-Persian system had already laid down a mathematical basis for music.7 Amir Khusrau’s

restatement of the ‘usūl and furū’ system of the fretting ratios was a confirmation of the scientific basis of Music.

**Knowledge of Music Traditions and Criticism**

Amir Khusrau had an intimate knowledge of the music tradition of Hindostan and of the Arab-Persian system. Having been born in Hindostan and having a natural talent and aptitude for music from his childhood, he grew up with the indigenous system and mastered it thoroughly. On the other hand, as a personal and cultural pursuit, he studied the Arab-Persian system in detail and acquired a thorough mastery over it.

(a) *The Arab-Persian Tradition.* To underline its historical continuity, he refers to the Greek/Byzantine theorists who had first defined the principles of music. Then he speaks of the great exponents among ‘the Arabs and the Persians’, ‘the experts of Iraq and Isphahan’, for their creative contributions in the domain of music. Among the Arab masters, he refers to the renowned musicians of Baghdad and Egypt. Of the Persians, he specifically mentions the two early masters, Nikesa and Barbad and the renowned contemporary musicians of ‘Bākharz and Nahāvand’. The name of ‘Abdul Momin is mentioned figuratively, but he could be none else than the great music theorist Abd-al-Momin b. Sa‘īd al-Din b. ‘Izz al-Din Muhyi al-Din b. Nī‘mat b. Qābūs Washmīr Jurjani who had flourished during the Ghurid period in the twelfth century A.D., just 50 years before Amir Khusrau was born. He had written an important work on music entitled *Bahjat al-Rūh* during the reign of Mu‘izz al-Din Muhammad Ghuri (1173-1206 A.D.).

Amir Khusrau’s repeated mention of the pardah would indicate that he was fully conversant with the development of the Rhythmic Modes first mentioned by al-Kindi (d. 874) and al-Farabi (d. 950). The naming and manipulation of the rhythmic modes and fretting ratios such as Ibrešam, Si-Pardah, Sarâ-Pardah, Dastak, Khafif, Usul-i Thaqīl, Basīt, Zîr-i Khirad and Zîr-i Buzurg shows that these were fully known in the contemporary music circles. The Melodic Modes, mentioned earlier by Ibn Sina (d. 1037),

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5 مشكل سازان عرب وعجم ... إستادان سياهان وعراق.
6 غويند كان بغداد ومصر.
7 پژوهای پارسی از لحنی که در چنین نگستگی گرفته آنند که بارید را زخم و انگشت بریغند.
8 خیاب گران با خزر و وهاوند.
and their artistic performance also come under reference. From amongst the basic Modes, Rahâvvî, Husaini, Râst, BûsalTk, Ushshâq, Hejâz, Irâq, Sefâhân (Isfahân), Nawâ, Buzurg, Mukhâlif are specifically named. Subsidiary Modes (melodic/rhythmic) such as Zâwal, Khurâsâni, Shârik, Nahâvand, Bâkharz and Marâghah are also mentioned.

Though well-versed in the Arab-Persian tradition, Amir Khusrau probably held a different view from the traditional ‘doctrine of harmony of spheres’ according to which music notes (naghmât) and melodies (alhân) originated in the movement of spheres and stars. It would follow from this doctrine that all music being co-extensive with the fixed movements of the Spheres, must conform to some set modes and stereotypes. Amir Khusrau mentions dawâir-i aflâk in this context, but he makes a significant statement elsewhere which purports to mean than the world of man's creative experience is far more extensive than the limited scope of the Moving Spheres. “In wise judgment” says he, “this Science (of Music) is more extensive in scope than the expanse of the Celestial Spheres because there (in the spheres) are only nine pardâhs while here (in the human world) there are twelve.”

(b) The Hindostani Tradition. Amir Khusrau was fully conversant with the indigenous music tradition of Hindostan. He was all praise for the high artistic talents of some of the contemporary Indian masters (Kalâvantân-i-Hindi), but was very critical of Hindu musicians in general because their level of understanding and achievement was poor. They had learnt to perpetuate the centuries-old tradition through hearsay, but had hardly and knowledge of the scientific principles. This needs to be explained in order to see the significance of Amir Khusrau’s criticism.

The Hindus had an ancient and rich tradition of music going back to the early singing of the Vedic hymns. Having originated as a form of worship, music among the Hindus became sacrosanct, and it was in temples that it developed during the course of centuries. The ‘music forms' developed by the early rishis and the pundits in homage to the different deities came to be preserved as a religious heritage and handed down from

13 در دانان این علم از عرصه سپهر و مسیع تراست ازان جهت که آنها نه پرده ایست و اینجا دوازده.
14 See below ft. n. 19.
15 جو هندو نوازد عجب رود خوش یخند عجب رود بر دست او... Also see ft. n. 16.
generation to generation. The whole tradition, in its earlier oral and the later recorded form, was based essentially on hearsay, represented by the different legacies (mutts) ascribed either to gods (because of their very ancient origin) or to their early originators and perpetuators, both mythical and real. The different regions had their own rishis and pundits with their own locally developed, named and preserved music forms (rāgas). In the different regional or institutional traditions, the ‘same name’ of a rāga did not necessarily mean the ‘same performance’. In absence of a scientific / mathematical basis, the rāgas could not be exactly structured or defined. Not that scientific or mathematical studies were lacking at any given period; these were rather highly developed in ancient India; and yet it is a great paradox of the traditional Hindu music that application of mathematical concepts to it could not be conceived by the early masters. Says Sir William Jones:

“Let us proceed to the Indian system (of music), which is minutely explained in a great number of Sanskrit books by authors who leave arithmetic and geometry to their astronomers, and properly discourse on music as an art confined to the pleasures of imagination.”

This was mainly because music among the Hindus was sacrosanct and non-secular, and as such, it was to be preserved and perpetuated as a sacred legacy of the rishis and sages rather than to be developed as a secular art permitting innovation, or as a science subject to mathematical reasoning.

Amir Khusrau was the first to give his criticism of this aspect of the traditional Hindu music and of the Hindu musicians. The indigenous music tradition, though ancient and rich in variety, had lacked a scientific basis; and the Hindu musician though talented was like a craftsman who, on the basis of hearsay, had learnt to copy by pattern and to reproduce faithfully the set models without any idea of the underlying principles. In a significant pronouncement, Amir Khusrau observed:

It is the theory of the classical Greek/Byzantine masters to go by the underlying principles of this subtle science. They formulated principles to differentiate the fretting ratios. The Hindostani musicians hardly understand this, and are mostly ignorant of it.

The poor Hindus have hardly any knowledge of the principles. This criticism was not based on religious or racial differences, it was rather an objective judgement of an accomplished master who was anxious to emphasise and establish scientific basis for music.

The Discourse, in its vivid imagery, depicts the contemporary music scene in detail. It presents a very lively and life-like description of the court musicians, organizers and conductors, individual reforming artists, expert instrumentalists and of the colourful music festivals.

(a) The mention of the symbolic names of talented musicians such as the late Khalifa Husaini, Kâmîl al-Zamân Badruddin, Kâmîlat al-Zamân Turmtay-Khatun, Khwaja Latif, Qawwâl, Daud Jabali, Sha'bân Qamari etc. and references to expert instrumentalists (sâzîngân/surâîdgârî) indicate that there were a number of accomplished musicians in Amir Khusrau's time. As a profession, contemporary music had undoubtedly reached a high level of attainment. Speaking figuratively, the spring of music was in full bloom and thousands of nightingales were singing in the garden of Delhi in this music spring of Hindostan.'

(b) An important contemporary development underlined in the Discourse is visits by the expert musicians from outside. Because of the high level of local attainment. Delhi had become a place of pilgrimage for musicians from outside of Hindostan. Amir Khusrau pays rich tribute to the professional talents of the Hindostani musicians (Kalâvantân-i Hindî) who could very well compete with their contemporaries in any other part of the world: nay, they would excel and even instruct the champions elsewhere. The name and fame of these master-musicians of Hindostan had travelled far and wide, with the result that some of the renowned musi-
cicians from outside, particularly from Iran and Central Asia, were now coming to Delhi.20

(c) Most of the following musical instruments mentioned in the Discours, were being played with great skill at that time: Barbat (lute), Tanbur (pandore/tambourine), Tanbur-i Zawalânah (the Ghaznian pandore), Rud and Ajabrûd (psaltery), 'Ud (lute), Duff (tambourine), Nay (reed flute), Duhl (drum), Duhlak (small drum), Qânûn (dulcimer/harp/psaltery), Nai (flute), Shah-nai (clarion), Nai Nâî'rah (trumpet), Chang (harp), Rabab (rebeck), Mashkak (a small bagpipe (?), Avâvan (?), Nawâlak (?), Khistiti (?), Surfi (?) and Batiyah-i Hindi (?). There were groups of specialists for each instrument such as Barbat-nawâzan, Nai-nawâzan, Rud-nawâzan, Changiyan, Rababiyan or Rabab-Suraidgan, Duhl-zanan, Duhlak-zanan, Tanburiyan or Tanbur-zanan and Churrah-bazan (?). The mention of Amir-i Ajabrûd, Amir-i Nai, Amir-i Changi would indicate that each group formed an orchestra by itself and had organizers/conductors of their own.

(d) A mention is made of the royal court musicians—the ‘King’s Musicians’ (mutribân-i Badshah), and of the Chief Organizer (amir-i mutribân). Other musicians outside the capital and in the provinces had also received due recognition giving birth to the idea that there should be a central functionary to organize and administer all the musicians both at the Court and in the country.21

(e) ‘Royal Music Festivals’22 with tasteful etiquette23 were the fashion of the day. For such grand functions, there was a special conductor/organizer known as. ‘Amir Shâdi wa Tarab. Among participants were the leading vocalists and instrumentalists, and the most distinguished stars would grace these royal festivals.24 As an example, two master musicians under the improvised names of Kâmîlat al-Zamân Turmtay-Khatun and Kâmîl al-Zamân Badruddin are presented to the reader with a vivid description of their superb performances and artistic achievements. Tributes paid

20 جنری آمیر مطربان خضریت و نواحی واقعی می‌کرد
21 جشن های سلطان - مجلس سلطنت - برم شاهی - مجلس همان
22 طریق مجلس هنر پسند ما
23 نوازش برم آرایان مجلس سلطنت
to Turmtay-Khatun indicate the very high professional status enjoyed by female musicians.

**Presentation, Technique and Artistic Excellence**

Achievement of excellence both in vocal and instrumental music, is amply underlined throughout the Discourse. Specific references and the relevant terminology used also reflect the highly developed modal concepts, and excellence in technique and artistic performance.

The vocalists consisted of two main categories: the accomplished singers in general (*mutriban/guyindgan*), and the specialists who excelled in particular styles. The latter consisted of (i) experts in the indigenous Hindostani style (*Kalavantan-i Hindi*), (ii) those who excelled in the Persian ghazal style (*Parsi Zubanan in ghazal-hai-Parsi*), and (iii) the *qawwalan* specializing in the presentation of *Qaol* or *Samâ*; as distinct from *Ghina*. Reverential references to those who listened to *Qaol* indicate that it was a devotional form of music which the learned men of piety and the sufi saints preferred to listen. The *qaol* might have had its early origin in the Arabic mode of singing (*qaol-hai-Hejazi*), but this form of presentation had been so very highly developed in the local circles that the masters of this art (*qawwalan*) could compete with their renowned contemporaries in Baghdad and Egypt. The greatest exponent of this performance is represented by the symbolic personality of Khwaja Latif Qawâl.

Among the artistic techniques employed by the expert vocalists, mention is made of *tarannum* (psalming or sound modulation) and *tarânah* (trilling or voice modulation). The *qawwals* improvised a highly artistic rhythmic accompaniment with the resounding echo of the clapping of hands, just as the expert instrumentalists achieved it through the tonic resonance of their instruments represented by the *tarannum* of Chang.
The performance was based on a professional knowledge of the underlying concepts which are indicated by the mention of naghmät (Notes), lahan (Melody), maqâm (Principal Mode), awâzhâ (Secondary Modes), Shu'ub or Fûrû (Branch Modes), asâbic (Melodic Modes or Formulas), usuîl (Rhythmic modes), and jadval (scale?). The performance was to be presented in a recognized form, technique and style. Masalak probably signified an 'individual style' of performance. Tarîq and turaq³⁰ possibly represented the ways of rendering a melody in different rhythms, one of which was tariq-i Sabuki.³¹ The term rawîsh would seem to indicate the earlier concept of majrâ, i.e. the 'Course' of the Mode, with each 'course' being distinguished by its Tonic (the base Note). Accordingly, the terms Du-bahrah and Si-bahrah possibly stood for the two different types of 'Courses'.³²

Mastery in skill and excellence in performance consisted in: (a) being able to play apart the fine constituent notes of a (melodic/rhythmic) mode and again to recompose and integrate them;³³ (b) to change the modes by ad-

³⁹ Cf. Farmer ('Arabian Music'): âsba.⁶ (arabic) (pl. âsâbic (Asabi)) = melodic modal formula.
³⁰ According to the terminology used before Amir Khusrau, turaq or taraq (sing, tariq) meant 'melodic modes', while turaq (sing, turqa) meant 'modes' as well as 'rhythms' (Cf. Farmer, 'Arabian Music').
³¹ The concept of tariq-i sabuki following expression is possibly that of the presentation in a low pitch, a low key-note or a tonic, or slow succession of rhythm.
³² This interpretation may need consideration. Amir Khusrau marvels at the musicians' attainment who:

In case, 'روش' is equated with the earlier concept of majrâ, i.e. the 'Course', then 'روش' and 'روش' may be interpreted as the two different species of the 'Course'. The following classification suggested by Farmer (Arabian Music, pp. 71-72) is relevant in this regard:

"The melodic modes ('asabi') were classified according to their 'Course' (majra), as either in the binsir (third finger, i.e. with the Major Third) or Wusta (middle finger, i.e. with the Minor Third). The 'courses' had their species named after their tonics (mabadi), such as mutlaq (open string), sabbaba (first finger), yusta (second finger), binsir (third finger)."

³³ شعّه های بهم در یافته راکه از پرده گن نگ عرصه قردنیم چون باد صبا یکی را آز یکی
پی آسیب جدا کرده وغچه وار بار بهم یوشته
ویمان ابیرشم های چون موی باربک زمه زمزم که چون دندانه شانه موشگاف است، موی
در می فرق کرده وبازدهم یافته بهدشت طبع دو عرصه را ازیبی دیکر جدتاً توانست کرد یابه
تار ابیرشم دو پرده را باهم توانست دوخت.
justing the fretting ratios⁴⁴ (c) to change the tonic structures and bring about a transition from one mode to another;⁴⁵ (e) to re-set an instrument from DU BAHRĀH (the Major Third) to SI BAHRĀH (the Minor Third) Course so that the one Branch Mode would change into another Branch Mode.⁴⁶

Need for Music Education

To be able to develop an understanding of the underlying principles and gain a mastery in practical skill and performance, it was but necessary to be properly educated in Music. It required teaching and instructing the young to produce accomplished artists. Those who had not been educated, and sang and played by pattern, were much below the standard. It is on this account that Amir Khusrau criticised even those who had attained the rank of ‘King’s Musicians’, specially the Rabab and the Chang players who boasted a great deal; but had hardly any knowledge of the underlying principles:

We have also listened to the voices of the kings’ musicians. Most of them hardly know anything. They should be given education to come up to the standard so that they are able to construct complicated instruments and frame the finest melodies.⁴⁷
The achievement goals thus laid down by Amir Khusrau obviously called for a high standard of music education. It would seem that instruction in music was being imparted, but Amir Khusrau stood for raising the standards. A reference to the budding talents among the youngsters whose attainment was high indicates that music as a profession was attracting younger pupils and that the quality of training imparted to them was satisfactory.  

Amir Khusrau's Personal Attainments

Amir Khusrau's own personality is writ large in the Discourse which he has authored. Throughout, it unfolds his own creative genius in Music. More specifically, those expressions which are couched in ‘first person’, even though put into the mouths of others, underline his own professional attainments. These are to be discerned as follows:

(a) As a vocal singer he was endowed with a voice which was superb both at high and low pitch. “In its height our voice goes beyond Venus.”

(b) He had achieved the highest artistic skill in instrumental music to be able to manipulate the fretting ratios and to play apart and again integrate the 'notes' into the differing 'courses'.

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Also in the Fifth Treatise (Risalah-i Khamis), of Rasail al-Tjaz he proposes, in a witty and lighter vein, corrective measures for those instrumentalists who brag about their excellence but are ignorant of the principles:

> آواز ماکه در بلندی از زمینه زهره بگذرد اگرچه خراشیده شود اما بیفتد و روش نشکند. 

> احسنت زهی بلندی که‌ک یک‌اواز افاندا و وز نشکند.

> ما توانای زاده‌سم باربک چومی دلی دوره بیگانه بیمه بر دورهم.  

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38. "In its height our voice goes beyond Venus."

39. "In its height our voice goes beyond Venus."

40. "He had achieved the highest artistic skill in instrumental music to be able to manipulate the fretting ratios and to play apart and again integrate the 'notes' into the differing 'courses'."
He had a sound knowledge of the nature and structure of most of the musical instruments, and he could set right any of the defective instruments.\textsuperscript{41}

Being a great genius, even the top-most musicians of his time turned to him for guidance and instruction. "The musicians also play before us and learn and get seasoned, so that they do not commit the mistakes of ordinary players."\textsuperscript{42} He taught some of the great stars of his time to play specific forms of music. "We showed her (Turmtay-Khatun) the way towards the playing of Shahānah".\textsuperscript{43}

\textbf{Maslaki Khwish} would signify that he had a distinctive style of his own.

He structured new 'courses', and innovated new modes, both principal and subsidiary.\textsuperscript{44}

His creative compositions, his criticism, his guidance and instruction, his immense popularity in music circles and his own music assemblies which were attended by both the apprentices and the more accomplished artists, had an all-pervading influence. He had heralded a new era in music, and the modes and melodies of this new music resounded all over and inspired all.\textsuperscript{45}

\section*{Conclusion}

An evaluation of Amir Khusrau's contribution, in its all dimensions, in the field of music can be made only after a thorough study of all his...
works and any other authentic record that may become available. He wrote this Discourse in the first quarter of the 14th century A.D. (716 H./1317 A.D.), and in so far as he underlined the concept of music as a science and emphasised the need for its continued development through education, he is to be regarded as a great savant in the history of world music and a genius of unequalled stature in the history of music in the Hindostan sub-continent.

He was the first great theorist and performing artist, talked of music as a science. Not only in this Discourse, but also in his well-known Qita‘ he refers thrice to the ‘Science of Music’ (‘Ilm-i Müsiqui) on which he had written three volumes. In this Qita‘, he gives a comparison between Poetry and Music and adjudges Poetry to be superior to Music. This was the judgement of a great poet and a literary genius and, though a sound one, it was pronounced mainly on an intellectual level. At the level of ‘feeling’, Amir Khusrau was essentially a musician. For, in an aesthetic mood he invokes the Mutrib (musician) more often than the Saqi (cup bearer) and, according to him, even after his death, if some one were to lend an ear to his grave, he would hear not the echo of his verse but the sweet music of a superb melody.

In his A’inah-i Sikandari (Ed. M. Saeed Ahmad Faruqi, Aligarh 1917), Amir Khusrau calls out the Saqi only once but invokes the Mutrib again and again to the extent that Khusrau may rightly be regarded as the innovator of Mutrib Nameh in poetic composition which, perhaps, no one followed up later. Some of his typical invocations:

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