

A MUSICAL INTERLUDE

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Sometime during 821, an elegant man disembarked at the port of Algeciras. He was accompanied by his wife, eight sons and two daughters. The inhabitants of Algeciras were surprised and a little amused to see the arrival of this gentleman, who was clearly distinguished, with a carefully trimmed henna-dyed beard, his eyes lined with black, wearing a leather hat, and playing an instrument. An intense aroma of flowers emanated from him and his wives and children. His name was ibn al-Hassan ibn 'Ala ibn Naffa, and he had arrived from Tunis on the invitation of the Umayyad Emir, al-Hakam I of Cordoba. The locals ran to give him the news: the Emir had just died. For a few days ibn Naffa did not know what to do. He had had to leave Tunis, where he played in the Aghalbid court, in some haste. Apparently, he had sung a song that offended the Sultan. Fortunately an emissary soon arrived from the new Emir, Abderrahman II, to say that his father's invitation would be honoured, and ibn Naffa was invited to live in Cordoba. He accepted the invitation. Ben Naffa came to be better known by his nickname: Ziryab, the singing blackbird, either because his music resembled a bird's, or for his dark complexion.

Although Ziryab's origins are disputed, he was probably Kurdish. We know that he played at the court of the Abbasid Caliphs during the reigns of Harun al-Rashid (766–809) and his son al-Mamun (786–833). In the eighth century Baghdad had a thriving musical culture. The courts of the Abbasid Caliphs had developed a custom (which didn't please everyone) of playing music in a hall that was adjacent to the court of the Caliph, separated only by a veil. This music hall was managed by the guild of the palace musicians, known as *sitara*. Baghdad was endowed with a number of schools of music, but without doubt the most prominent was that of Ibrahim Al-Mausili (742–804) and his son Ishaq al-Mawsili (767–850). Besides being one of the most renowned musicians of his time, Ishaq also wrote a book that collected

a large number of songs of the era, *The Compendium of Songs*, which became an indispensable guide for his successors. The dispute between Ishaq and Caliph Harun al-Rashid's brother, Ibrahim al-Mahdi (779–838), an exceptional musician, gives us an idea of the intellectual liveliness of the period. For Ibrahim there were no musical rules, only free interpretation and creation. He was heavily criticised by Ishaq and other musicians for the innovations and simplifications he introduced to the rhythms. But despite their differences, the two men remained friends and exchanged a lengthy correspondence, each arguing for his particular point of view.

The musical culture of Baghdad was a product of frequent contact and cultural exchange with other civilisations. One of the main characteristics of Arab culture during the pre-Islamic and early Islamic period was the primordial importance accorded to poetry as the basic support system for the music. The Arabs had always given enormous importance to their complex and conceptually rich language, and admired literary and oral expression, the principal vehicle of their culture. But their music was elementary, had no harmony, and was exclusively homophonic. The primitive metric of the Arab Bedouins was enriched and acquired melodies through Persian and Byzantine influence. The rhythm went through a series of transformations, and gradually the music was intrinsically infused with poetry. A new and distinct form of music appeared from this amalgam of Arab, Persian and Greek components.

In Damascus, during the Umayyad period, the royal court employed numerous singers, poets and musicians. Initially, the enterprise of singing and music was an elite activity, limited to a few: rulers, court officials and the wealthy. But soon popular musical forms began to reach a much larger audience. Amongst the most common forms was the *thaqil*, a slow, heavy rhythm that soon gave way to the *haza*, a happier and lighter cadence. Music acquired mass popularity during the Abbasid period in Baghdad. The Pythagorean musical scale was adopted; and the classic *qasida* composed of a series of verses of a balanced structure and rhythm, conferring a certain monotony, made room for the *ghazal*, a genre of love song widely embraced. As music became popular, it started to play an important part in the lives of Muslims, not only as entertainment but also as a religious vehicle. Hymns to the Prophet Muhammad were set to music; and music was played during the birth of a child and at major feasts, and accompanied

the troops on the battlefield. Music was also used for therapeutic purposes, to improve psychological wellbeing and adjust emotional mood.

Not surprisingly, scholars and philosophers began to develop theories of music. The first philosopher to undertake a serious study of the subject was Al-Kindi (801–873), a prominent figure at Baghdad's House of Wisdom. He is said to have written fifteen books on the theory of music, although only five have survived. He regarded music as a vehicle for connecting man to the cosmos and he encouraged its use in therapy. He was followed by al-Farabi (872–950), who in his *The Great Book of Music* explores the emotional power of music, provides a comprehensive study of intervals and their combinations, and gives an account of the main melodic instruments in use in his time and the scales produced by them. Ibn Sina (980–1037) developed musical theory further, providing a detailed and elaborate treatment of rhythm. Even al-Ghazzali (1058–1111), a staunch critic of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, conceded in *The Revival of Religious Sciences* that music is an important vehicle for reaching mystical union with God. He made a distinction between the sensual and spiritual perception of music, and argued that songs (*ghina*), melody and rhythm had a beneficial effect on the soul.

Ziryab makes an appearance in Baghdad against this background of theoretical study and music's emerging popularity. After a brilliant debut recital before Harun al-Rashid, he became a prominent addition to the court musicians. He became a student of Ishaq al-Mawsili, and all went well for some years. Then something happened; Muslim historians give us different accounts. In one account, Ishaq became jealous of the quality of his performances and rapidly rising reputation, and threatened his potential rival. In another account, a performance provoked anger from his patron. Either way, Ziryab had to flee Baghdad in some haste.

Baghdad's loss was al-Andalus' gain. Ziryab revolutionised Andalusian customs, making his mark not only on music, but also in the culinary arts, fashion and aesthetics. He set a high standard in musical accomplishment as well as in elegant dress and etiquette. He founded an important school of music in which generations of students were trained. His five sons and both daughters became distinguished musicians, who, along with the students he trained, ensured that his school continued for centuries. Its legacy was a huge repertoire of compositions.

Ziryab is credited with many musical innovations. He established rules for classical music performances still followed to this day in, for example, the orchestral structure of the twenty-four *nubes*. He introduced to al-Andalus musical forms which had been codified by Ishaq al-Mawsili in Baghdad, and described in their complexity first by al-Kindi then al-Farabi. He is responsible for the emergence of the *nabwa*, the suite form characteristic of the classical tradition, in which lyrics of both classical and colloquial Arabic are sung by a soloist or in chorus – a musical genre still very popular in Andalusia. Besides being a singer, Ziryab also played the oud, the unfretted lute, the signature string instrument of Arab music and predecessor of the modern guitar. To the four existing strings of the lute, he is said to have added a fifth. He also made his own lutes, with the chords made of silk and even, legend has it, lion intestine. He substituted the pick, which until then had been made of wood, for one made from an eagle's feather; this is still used today in the countries of the Maghreb.

For Ziryab, music was an integral element of the cosmic scheme. He was greatly influenced by al-Kindi, who believed that the four strings of the lute corresponded to the four humours of the body in Greek medicine. The first corresponded to bile and was yellow; the second was red and corresponded to blood; the third, white for phlegm; and the fourth, black, corresponding to black bile. What was missing, according to Ziryab, was the string that corresponded to the soul. He therefore added an extra string in the middle and painted it red in the belief that the soul resided in the blood. The great musician attributed his talent to inspiration by Jinn, who, he claimed, came to visit him at night. He would be seen playing late at night, often into the early hours of the morning, surrounded by a group of students.

But Ziryab was not the only great musical figure, nor Cordoba the only city where great musicians proliferated. Other cities of al-Andalus – Valencia, Malaga and Seville – were also alive with music. Seville was particularly renowned for its craftsmen who refined or invented musical instruments. Muhammad al-Mu'tamid (r.1069–1091), the ruler of Seville, was himself a renowned poet, and two musicians from his court acquired great fame: Abu Bakr ibn Zaydun (1003–1070) and ibn Hamdis (c.1056–c.1133). The latter, forced to flee from his native Sicily, settled in Seville and from then on was known as 'The Sicilian'. Other *taifa* (city state) rulers who fostered music included Muhammad al-Mardanis (1124–1172) of

Valencia and Murcia, al-Mutawakkil (r.1073–1094) of Badajoz, and ibn Razin (r.1012–1044) of Santa María (Albarracín).

While rulers provided patronage and promoted music, the polymaths and scholars developed musical theory. In his treatise *The Classification of the Sciences*, the great litterateur and psychologist ibn Hazm (994–1064) explained the existence of three types of music which provoked specific emotional states: one type offered valour to the fearful; another transformed the avaricious into the generous; and finally, a third type united souls. The celebrated mystic ibn 'Arabi of Murcia (1165–1240) developed a theory of musical mysticism in the *Book of Answers*. Even ibn Rushd (1126–1198), the great philosopher of al-Andalus, wrote about music. But without doubt the most distinguished musical theorist of al-Andalus is ibn Bajja of Zaragoza (1095–1138). Besides being a mathematician, psychologist, philosopher and natural scientist, ibn Bajja was an excellent musician and the composer of many songs. He combined Christian and Muslim songs to create a style unique to al-Andalus; his songs are sung even today. His exceptional theoretical works are said to surpass the writings of al-Farabi.

Al-Andalus witnessed a conscious effort to popularise music and ensure it reached all segments of society. Around the tenth century, when the original Andalusian caliphate splintered into smaller city states, two forms of popular poetry were set to music. The new strophic poems of intertwined rhythms were called the *muwassaha* and the *zejel*. The *muwassaha* (adorned with an embroidered girdle) was composed of six stanzas, each consisting of four or five mono-rhymed verses, the rhythm changing in each stanza. It was recited in classical Arabic, except the refrain or *jarcha*, which was recited in Romance dialect Arabic. The *zejel*, recited in Arabic dialect, was a popular version of the *muwassaha*; its best known exponent was the poet ibn Quzman (1078–1170), who lived the life of a troubadour.

These new musical forms gained a great following not only in al-Andalus but also in the Muslim East, in Aleppo, Damascus and Cairo. Centuries of cultural exchange ensured that the music of al-Andalus reached other parts of the Muslim world. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the transmission was largely carried out by the learned men of al-Andalus who travelled widely and were appointed to influential positions in Cairo, Baghdad and Fes. A typical example is the astronomer, chemist and physician Abu al-Salt (1068–1134), who travelled to Alexandria and Cairo, and even-

tually ended up in Tunis, where he introduced Andalusian music to the court. Indeed, all Andalusian musical traditions were taken up by the closest neighbours in the Maghreb. There were strong relationships between city-states in al-Andalus and major cities in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Thus Seville influenced Tunis, where music of Andalusian origin is called Ma'luf; Granada influenced Tetuan and Fes, where Andalusian music received the name of al 'ala; and Cordoba influenced Algeria, where its music came to be known as al-Gharnati. Morocco also produced its own version of *muwassaha*, made of double couplets and called 'Rhymes of the City'. After 1492, when waves of exiles from al-Andalus arrived in North Africa, the impact of Andalusian music was even stronger. The Muslims and Jews of al-Andalus zealously guarded and preserved their musical traditions. Those who remained in Spain continued to make music in their own style until speaking and singing in Arabic were officially banned in the sixteenth century.

In these circumstances, music was not written down but orally transmitted, and there was always a danger that the tradition would be lost. Of the twenty-four *nubas* that existed in al-Andalus, for example, only eleven were conserved in Morocco. This was largely thanks to poet and musician ibn al-Hussein al-Haik, who was born in the Moroccan city of Tetuan and lived during the eighteenth century. Like other musicians, al-Haik depended on oral transmission instead of written scores. So he sat about compiling the eleven *nubas* he knew. *The Songbook of al-Haik*, the most important source of classical Andalusian music, contains the musical notations of the song, as well as the names of the authors of the poems and melodies. Written in 1789, the *Songbook* has been handed down to generation after generation.

By the eleventh century, al-Andalus was a centre for the manufacture of musical instruments and an exporter of musical and poetic ideas north into Europe. Its instruments spread to France to be played by troubadours, a class of musicians and lyrical poets of knightly rank, and *trouverses*, a school of poets which flourished from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, composers of such works as *Chansons de Geste* and the *Songs of Roland*. Europe adopted and adapted Andalusian musical instruments such as the *rebab*, ancestor of the violin, the *quitara*, which became the guitar in English, and the *neqreh*, naker, as well as numerous percussion and wind instruments. An extensive musical vocabulary of Arabic origin was adopted in European

languages such as French and English: 'lute (*oud*), rebec (*rabab*) and nakers (*naqqara*)', writes British music historian Owen Wright, 'are only the most obvious of a whole series of linguistic borrowings demonstrating that a significant proportion of the medieval European instrumentarium was made up of instruments either directly of Spanish-Arab provenance or sufficiently affected by similar types used in Muslim Spain, for an Arabic name to be adopted in place of an indigenous one'. *Oud* became the principal vehicle for European music throughout the Renaissance. Other instruments, such as the drum (*al-tabal*), frame drum (*al-duff*), trumpet (*al-nafir*) and hornpipe (*al-buq*), were also adopted. 'Centuries of close contact', Wright says, made these instruments 'thoroughly familiar, and it is sensible to assume that along with them were adopted for the most part their characteristic sounds and playing techniques'.

The music of al-Andalus is alive today; classical Andalusian musical orchestras can be heard throughout the Maghreb, in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya. Traditional instruments such as the *oud*, *rabab* and *darbouka* (goblet drums) are still used, but the piano, cello and clarinet have been added to the ensemble. While playing the *nuba*, the instruments revolve around the principal *oud*. However, the Moroccan lute is different from lutes used in other parts of the Muslim world; following Ziryab, it has five strings. Voice and instruments complement each other; each phrase (*bit*) is taken up in the same movement by the instruments, although at times the voice sings solo. An echo of a rich history, and a living history too.