

Musk and Amber - Part I

The Fine Arts of Andalusian Spain

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When I was in Tunisia in June 1990 I learned a classical Andalusian form of dance done to music that dates back to medieval Islamic Spain and is completely different from the Tunisian folk music I have been used to. Out of a need to understand the motivation and context for performing this dance, I began to look into the history of the Arabs in Spain, the culture they produced, and the effect it had on the great cities of North Africa. This is the first of a three-part article. The first part will give an overview of the history of the Arabs in Spain and the development of the poetic form known as *muwashshah*. The second part will concentrate on the role the singing (and dancing) slave girl had in disseminating this new music and poetry. It also will examine the end of Arab domination in Spain and the persistence of their cultural influence on the Christians who reconquered it. For those that like to blend Spanish and Middle Eastern dance, this survey will be of interest since it is the true intersection between Arab and Spanish culture. The third part will look at the overall influence of Andalusian Spain on Tunisia and how this influence is interpreted in the music, dance style and costuming in the repertoire of the National Troupe of Tunisia.

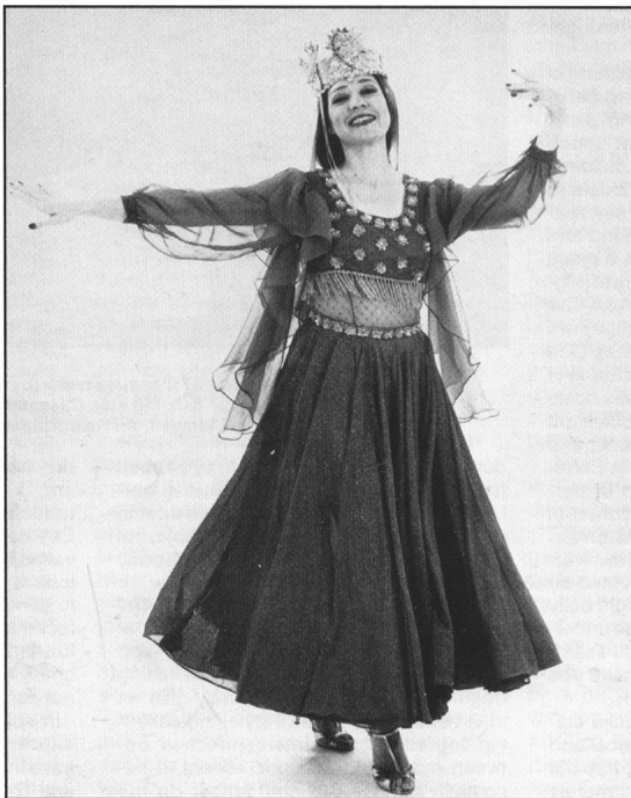


Photo courtesy of Barbara Siegel

Author Habiba seen in a costume *a la Andalusia* designed in the style worn by the National Troupe of Tunisia.

The Arabs were in Spain for 800 years, from the 8th through the 15th century. Under their domination a new, Western Arab culture flourished that differed from the Eastern tradition found in Baghdad. The new culture drew on elements already present in Spain and lasted beyond the end of Arab political domination, influencing the music, poetry, art and architecture. In the area of music, the inheritors were flamenco and the European troubadour tradition. Although most of the written history concerns the achievements of male musicians and poets, traces can be seen in no uncertain terms of the anonymous slave girl. This unnamed and uncelebrated creature, who both sang and danced, had a major role in the brilliant artistic climate that flourished in the courts of Andalusian Spain. She also had a major role in disseminating this culture to North Africa and across the Arab world.

The Arabs first landed in Spain in 710 A.D.¹, but it was the breakup of the Umayyad dynasty based in Damascus that led to the first major incursion. They were able to reestablish themselves in Cordoba. The Umayyad dynasty in Cordoba (736-1031) eventually laid claim to the caliphate. They were one of three dynasties that claimed to be legitimate successors to the Prophet. The Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad (749-1258) and the Fatimid caliph-

ate in Cairo (909-1171) were the other major power centers in the Arab world.

After the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba ended early in the 11th century several Berber dynasties from North Africa succeeded the Umayyads. Religious reform was their motive, and cultural development was not encouraged. First came the Almoravids (1056-1147) and the Almohads (1130-1269). After this, Andalusian Spain broke up into competing states that included the Morinids from Morocco (1196-1465) and the Hafsids from Tunisia (1228-1574).² The great cities were Cordoba, Seville, Valencia, and Granada.

In the end it was internal fragmentation and pressure from the Christian north that defeated them. While the Spanish went to great lengths to destroy traces of Islamic influence, the cultural legacy left by the Arabs influenced the arts all over Europe.

The cultural climate of Andalus was fostered by its diversity. It was the only time in history that the three great religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity coexisted with respect and tolerance. Five lan-

guages were common in the region. Andalusian Arabic and the Romance dialect that was to become Spanish were the spoken languages. There were three written languages in use, classical Arabic, Latin and Hebrew.³ Throughout the Arabic period in Spain, the Christian minority often assimilated and adopted the customs of the Arabs. They were called Mozarabs, coming from the word *musta'rib* (a person who adopts the customs of the Arabs). Their Romance dialect is called Mozarabic.⁴

The fruits of this cultural melting pot were transplanted to North Africa by the massive migrations resulting from political upheavals and the eventual fragmentation of Andalus over hundreds of years. In the 10th -12th centuries many refugees went from Seville to Tunis. In the 12th century refugees fled Cordoba and Valencia to Tlemcen and Fez, respectively. In the 15th century refugees fled from the last Arab political entity to fall, Granada. They went to Fez and Tetouan.⁵

The history of classical dance must be gleaned from chance references in the history of music by the men who wrote it. The dominant centers of power in the Islamic world gave rise to the two great traditions in Arab art music. The term "art music" refers to composed, serious music as opposed to traditional, anonymous folk music. The center of eastern art music was Abbassid Baghdad and the center of the western tradition was Umayyad Spain.⁶

Music flourished in spite of the hostility of orthodox Islam to art music.

While Eastern Arab music reflects Persian and Turkish influence, Western Arab music is the preserve of North African countries that each have their own tradition of classical music. There was a great deal of cultural exchange between North Africa and Andalus in the golden age. The classical music of the Maghreb is considered a true survival of Andalusian music.

This music is called *musiqā Andalusīyya*⁷ throughout the whole Maghrib. It is also called *ma'luf* (familiar, usual) in Tunisia and Libya. It is described as a "suite or series of vocal and instrumental movements based on a single melodic mode."⁸ This suite is also called *nawbah*.⁹ It means "turn" because originally it indicated the order of performers.

As has been said, the Andalusian tradition was new. It gave rise to a whole new form of music free from the waves of Persian and Turkish influence that affected Eastern Arab music. There are three types of *nawbah* today, Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian. A full performance is about one and a half to two hours. There is an abbreviated form called *mhat*. It is the living inheritor of the Andalusian tradition.

This new tradition in music started with a Persian tenor named 'Alī ibn Nafī'. His nickname, Ziryab, means "blackbird," a reference to his eloquence and the darkness of his skin.¹⁰ A dangerous rivalry developed between him and his teacher, Ishaq al-Mawsili, at the court of Harun al-Rashid in Baghdad. Ziryab had to flee. After stopping in Tunisia, he was invited to Cordoba under the patronage of 'Abd al-Rahman II (822-852). He arrived in 822 A.D. Until this point the Damascus musical tradition was dominant, brought by the Umayyads. He was quite a celebrity and was reputed personally to know 10,000 songs. He established new tastes in music, brought the Perso-Arabic system of music to Spain, added a fifth string to the *oud*, set style in fashion and manners and founded schools of music in Cordoba and other cities.¹¹ His sons carried on his influence and spread his work to North Africa. It is widely believed that his musical innovations inspired the birth of the

uniquely Andalusian poetical form, the *muwashshah*.¹² Another distinguishing feature of music of this period was that it was associated with mystical concepts. Music was connected with cosmology and the music of the spheres.¹³

While the concept of the *nawba*, or "turn," was known in the Abbasid court in Baghdad as a fixed order for appearances of performers at court, it was Ziryab who established the particular sequence for different types of songs from slow to fast.¹⁴ This can be found in the *nawba* today.

After Ziryab the next musical innovator to come along was Ibn Bajja, the first to combine songs of the Christians with those of the East.¹⁵

Along with musical innovations most of the Andalusian *nawbat* had as lyrics a new kind of poetry, called the *muwashshah* (pl. *muwashshahat*), written just to be set to music. These medieval Andalusian poems were a product of the Western Arab world and were never comfortably composed out of Andalusia and North Africa. A 12th Century Tunisian writer says that at first the *muwashshahat* were set to Christian melodies and then set to the style of Arab camel drivers.¹⁶ The development of this new form of music and poetry, therefore, owed much to the blending of Arab and indigenous Romance tradition. Later, after the political upheavals and final expulsion from Spain of the Arabs and Jews, the musical tradition remained to influence the Mediterranean troubadour tradition, not to mention its influence on the development of flamenco. The music of the *muwashshahat* were transmitted and preserved orally. There was no system of notation at the time.

This new form had a staged development. When the Arabs arrived there was already a Christian and Romance folksong tradition. It was the custom of the time for women to sing *cantica amatoria*, poems about the feelings of women, at old Christian and popular festivals. As a women's art form expressing the feelings of women it was frowned on by the church. The poetry of women and the poetry of dancing was considered obscene and diabolical. Evidence shows that it was expelled from the church by means of sermons and canons of the council.¹⁷ At some moment before the



Egypt's Reda Troupe in dance number, "Al-Mowachahat." Dance and costuming inspired by the Andalusian period.

10th Century, illiterate Arab poets began to compose new songs in colloquial Arabic to the old Romance tunes. These new songs were called *zajals*. Then, court poets, such as Muhammad ibn Mahmud al-Qabiri in the late 9th or early 10th centuries began to compose in classical Arabic and adapted the *zajal* form. Al-Qabiri is credited with being the inventor of the *muwashshah*.¹⁸ Here is a clear example of a popular art influencing art in the great houses.

The *muwashshah* is a strophic poem. In this form, not every line rhymes, but there is a pattern of rhyme throughout the poem. Common themes concerned erotic love, praise of noble persons, and "wine" songs. The subject matter was frivolous, at first not considered serious poetry. The most unusual feature of the *muwashshah* is the treatment of the end, called the *kharija*. The *kharija* incorporates intact portions of the older lyrics in colloquial Arabic or Romance dialect that were the models for these classical poems.¹⁹ The *kharija* abruptly introduces a speaker, not the author. Therefore, the end of the poem is spoken by someone other than the poet. It is most often a woman who is quoted in Romance dialect. Boys or drunkards are also quoted, but in the erotic ones, it is love-sick girls that are most often quoted. Poems that have Arabic *kharijas* generally have other themes than love. The body of the poem often characterizes the beloved as a gazelle, a symbol of the temptress. Ibn Sana al-Mulk (1155-1211), a 12th Century Egyptian *washshah* (composer of *muwashshahs*) wrote a textbook and anthology on the *muwashshah* entitled "*Dar al-tiraz*" (House of Embroidery). He said, "The *kharija* is the spice of the *muwashshah*, it's salt and sugar, it's musk and amber."²⁰ Below are two *muwashshahs*, one attributed to Abn al-Labbana (d.1113) and the other by Ibn 'Ubadah. They were both collected by Ibn Sana al Mulk.

He who has charged the eyes with cutting swords of Indian metal
And has made sweet basil grow on the side of his cheek
Has inflicted tears and sleeplessness upon the one who is madly in love.

Is there any way to keep silent
For the lover burdened with tears which reveal, as they
flow

forth, the secret he hides
Concerning one who wears no jewels, yet is adorned, who
is outwardly naive and overpowers me with large black
eyes?

Oh, I'd give my father as ransom for a black-eyed one who is like
the full moon

He reveals a gem whose kiss is delightful.
His flowerlike cheek blushes at just a thought,
So how can I be absolved?

A speckled serpent crept over the brazilwood, so don't
kiss it!

By magic he appointed an army of Ethiopians together with
Nabateans, to kill heroes.

The time has come to emanate light, like the lord of the mountain,
Like a full moon in darkness, with a body as slim as a reed,
Like a branch of beryl in a rounded hillock of camphor.

By the soul of an abandoned one
I ransom him, even though it makes me an orphan.

In a sealed place are the teeth of his mouth,
and they have been set in order
Like pearls on strings, with perfumed spaces between,
providing my wine and my cool water.

Just as you have been endowed with beauty, oh, Ahmad,
So is command devoted to you, oh, delicate one.

Your slave is in love with you and subjugated.
Are you going to reprimand me?

Or will you have mercy and prevent the wasting away of
the one in love if he becomes ill with grief?

Woe unto me! I am imprisoned in a sea of fears whose
shore is far away. I can only cling to the waves.

Sometimes a young girl appears like the full moon rising.
What a breast on a branch of laurel!

Her leaves are a garment more red than the rose.
She spent the night while singing,

"My darling, make up your mind. Arise! Hurry and
kiss my mouth. Come embrace

My breast and raise my anklets to my earrings.
My husband is busy."²¹

I'm ready to give my father as ransom for a
precious one who is attached to my soul.
I loved a new moon incomparable in its beauty. The eyes and long
lovely neck of the gazelle are modeled after it.
He swaggered in his beauty, which desires no increase, a full moon
shining in perfect proportion.
Elegance adorned him and his figure was slender.
He is a full moon that triumphs with sheer magic. The down on his
cheek is curved over jasmine.
A lily was placed beside a well-guarded rose whenever he came into
view, trailing his beautiful train behind.
He appeared to me as a creature worthy of excessive
passion.
My eyes live just to attend him. If only my soul had feathers, I would
fly to him.
Beauty has made his eyes like swords and his glances are arrows
feathered with legitimate magic.
He has a slender shape, and the heart is aroused by desire.
He intended to leave me when I yielded to love, and I squandered
my
patience in spite of his prolonged rejection.
Water of beauty moves on the page of his cheek. his teeth put to
shame
the symmetry of a pearl.
His mouth is a delicate box, worthy of a kiss.
When he cloaked himself in a stylish robe, I wanted to kiss his
delicious red lips.
So he spoke in verse, playing the role of one who refuses, and coyly
inclined with the sweetest expression:
"I say, by God, you will never taste the sugarplum!"²²

This was a time of great flowering of Jewish music and secular
poetry. A great body of music and poetry comes down to us
preserved in the Sephardic tradition. The great poet Judah Halevi
(1075-1141), among others, wrote *muwashshahat*.

There are hundreds of songs that are in the living tradition of
Arab-Andalusian music. With some reservations scholars think
that *musiqat Andalusiiyya* we hear today does not differ too much
from what we might have heard in medieval Andalus.²³ Here is an
example of the opening lines of a *muwashshah* by Ibn Sahl
(d.1251) that has been preserved in anthologies and has remained
in the popular repertoire all the way to the present. It is still sung
in Tunisia today.

Does the protected fawn know he inflamed / the heart of a lover
in which he dwelt,

So that it burns and throbs just like / the firebrand teased by the
east wind?²⁴



1. Albert Hourani, *A history of the Arab peoples*. Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 41. 2. *Ibid.*, p.84-85 3. *Ibid.*, p.194 4. Linda Fish Compton, *Andalusian lyrical poetry and Old Spanish love songs: the muwashshah and its kharija*. New York University Press, 1976, p.xiv. 5. *The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians*, v.1, p.525. 6. *Ibid.*, v.1, p.514. 7. Lois Ibsen al Faruqi, *An annotated glossary of Arabic musical terms*. Westport, Ct., Greenwood Press, 1981, p.210. 8. *Ibid.*, p.234. 10. *Ibid.*, p.403. 11. *Groves*, v.1, p.525. 12. Compton, p.117. 13. *Groves*, v.1, p. 524. 14. *Ibid.*, p.520. 15. Benjamin M. Liu and James T. Monroe, *Ten hispano-arabic strophic songs in the modern oral tradition: music and texts*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989, p.42. 16. *Ibid.*, p.6. 17. Samuel Miklos Stern, *Hispano-Arabic strophic poetry*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974, p.62. 18. *Ibid.*, p.38; Compton, p.113. 19. Liu, p.8. 20. Stern, p.34. 21. Compton, p.22. 22. *Ibid.*, p.18. 23. Liu, p.33. 24. *Ibid.*, p.63