

Musk and Amber -

Part II

The Fine Arts of Andalusian Spain

By Barbara Siegel (Habiba)

In the last part I wrote about the Islamic period in Spain and the development of a new, Western Arab musical tradition. Slave girls, accomplished in music and dance had a role in the creation and dissemination of this music. In this second of three parts I concentrate on the role of the slave girl and the legacy of Andalusian Spain to Spanish Christian culture.

There is evidence that female performers had a significant role in the development of Andalusian music. A 13th century Tunisian writer says that Ibn Bajja, the first Arab musician to combine the songs of the Christians and the Arabs, came up with his new musical form after secluding himself for several years with "skilled singing girls."¹ In accounts of musical performances at court, women prominently appeared as singers and dancers. Court music of the day was primarily vocal. While Eastern Arab music was mostly written for a single voice, Western Arab music was mostly written for a chorus.

Muwashshahat were performed by a chorus or by a chorus alternating with a soloist. The voices were accompanied by a small group of instruments, called a *takht* (dais or platform) or a *firqah* (party or group). Men's voices alternated with women's. The instruments used were *deff* (tambourine), *tablah* (drum), *oud* (lute), *kaman* (bowed stringed instrument).² The ruler was customarily separated from the musicians by a curtain.

A great deal of what we know about music in Andalus comes from an 13th Century music treatise by Ahmad al-Tifasi (1184-1253) entitled "*Muta'at al-Asma' fi 'ilm al-sama'*" (Pleasure to the ears: on the art of music). Al-Tifasi says that slave girls from Seville were expert singers and dancers and were sold for very high prices throughout the Maghrib and the rest of the Arab world. These anonymous artists had a major role in popularizing the Andalusian repertoire across the Arab world. In references they are called *qayna* (pl. *qiyan*, slave girl), or *jariya* (pl. *jar*, singing slave girl). Before the ascendancy of Andalusian culture, Baghdad was the place to find the singing slave girl. Tunisian rulers in 905 A.D. sent to Baghdad for "30,000 dinars worth of *jawari* for the sultan's



Photo courtesy of Barbara Siegel

Habiba models traditional undergarments from Nabeul: Shirt (*kamis*) and pantaloons (*serwal*) worn with cork-soled shoes (*gorg*). An elaborate vest would be worn over this.

pleasure-town of ar-Raqqada."³ Later, according to al-Tifasi, Seville was the center for training these women. Al-Tifasi says:

"Today this form of singing is especially prevalent among Andalusian cities, in Seville, where there are expert old women who teach singing to slave girls they own, as well as to salaried half-Arab female servants of theirs. The [slave girls] are sold from Seville to all the kings of the Maghrib and Ifriqiya, and each of those slave girls is sold for one thousand Maghribi dinars; either more or less, according to her singing, not [for the beauty of] her face. She is never sold without an accompanying register containing all [of the songs] she has memorized, most of which consist, essentially, of those poems we have mentioned. . . For this reason, those [slave girls] are, among [Andalusians], sold with a warranty, the absence of which necessarily lowers the price of sale. Among them, a singing girl is required to have an elegant handwriting, and to display what she has memorized to one who can certify to her mastery of the Arabic language. Her buyer reads what is in the register and shows her whatever part of it he wishes, whereupon she will sing it to the instrument specified in her sale. Sometimes she is an expert in all instruments, and in all kind of dance and shadow play, and comes with her instrument, along with [an en-

tourage of] slave girls to beat the drum and play the reed for her. She is then called a 'consummate' artist and sold for many thousands of Maghribi dinars."⁴

Lura JaFran Jones, in her survey on women and music in Tunisia states:

"The historical *qiyan* of Tunisia and other Arab kingdoms were female slaves imported from (often non-Arab) centers of musical culture or Arab women especially trained in singing and playing the 'oud... by famous (generally male) musicians. They typically fetched a very high price, but also served as gifts between the wealthy and powerful. There were also *qiyan* in taverns and public houses of amusement. Lacking protection, they bore a heavy share of orthodox invective."⁵



Photo courtesy of Barbara Siegel

Andalusian costume worn by troupe on the island of Djerba in the south of Tunisia. Notice the Tunis-style wedding hat, lace pantaloons, and shirt.

Arab sociologists have seen a model in these women. They had a great deal more opportunity for education and freedom as performers unimaginable for the ladies of good family. A Tunisian sociologist said that these slave girls were "vanguards of female liberation in the Arab world."⁶ There were also self-employed respectable singers who performed at weddings and celebrations as well as lower level performers who played at taverns and public houses of amusement. These last may or may not have been slaves.

Actual evidence of these performers only comes in a negative manner from the "railings of pious shayks."⁷ Obviously the art of women fares no better in Islam than Christianity. In part I. of this article we saw that the Church condemned women's songs and dance in pre-Islamic Spain.

Although by the end of the 13th Century the Arabs were driven almost completely out of Spain, the musicians and poets continued to wield influence and flourish for hundreds of years. When the Almohads were driven back to North Africa in 1225, Granada was the only area under Arab rule.

King Alfonso X (the Wise) of Castille and Leon (1221-1284) was a poet and musician himself. He called himself a troubadour and welcomed artists of every tradition at court including Arab artists.⁸ Alfonso's court is famous for producing one of the greatest bodies of medieval music and poetry, the "Cantigas De Santa Maria." It is a collection of 400 songs and 80 miniatures depicting musicians and musical instruments. It shows European, Arab and Jewish musicians, some of them women, in court and rustic settings. The songs have as their common theme the glorification of Virgin Mary and have a pilgrimage setting. The characters in the songs face

moral dilemmas and social problems. The glorification of Mary was not incompatible with the Islamic reverence for women. Mary was a revered person in Islam as well. After Alfonso's death there is a written record that there were 27 salaried musicians employed by his son at court. Thirteen were Arabs, and two of these were women. The women commonly played the harp, psaltery or lute.⁹

When Granada fell to the Christians in 1492, Jews were expelled and Muslim expulsions continued into the 16th century. In 1500 the practice of Islam was forbidden and the only choice was to convert or flee. A total of 2,000,000 Moriscos (Andalusian Arabs) were expelled.¹⁰ ♦

In the next article Habiba follows the study of Andalusian music and dance across the sea to Tunisia where the legacy of Seville is alive. She will talk about her experience studying Andalusian dance with her teacher, Habib Trabelsi, from the National Troupe.

1. Benjamin M. Liu and James T. Monroe, *Ten Hispano-Arab strophic songs in the modern oral tradition: music and texts*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989, p.42

2. *Ibid.*, p.17-18

3. Lura JaFran Jones, "A sociohistorical perspective on Tunisian women as professional musicians," in *Women and Music in Cross-cultural Perspective*, edited by Ellen Koskoff, New York, Greenwood Press, p.70.

4. Liu, p.37-38

5. Jones, p.70

6. *Ibid.*, p.71

7. *Ibid.*, p.72

8. Zoltan Falvy, *Mediterranean Culture and Troubadour Music*. Budapest, Akademiai Kiado, 1986, p.39-40

9. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, v.3, p.728

10. Khalid Duran, "Andalusia's Nostalgia for Progress and Harmonious Heresy," *Middle East Report*, Sept/Oct. 1992, no. 178, vol. 22, no.5, p.20