

# The Arab Confrontation with European Music: The Question Revisited

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THERE WAS a time, not too long ago, when a Westerner's initial brief encounter with Arab music hardly generated love at first hearing. But as against this tourist type of contact, stands another type of contact, that between two cultures, which due to their long exposure to each other have experienced various interactions or/and mutual influence. Such a situation exists in the contacts between Arabs and Latin Christians during the high Middle Ages by way of the Crusading Kingdoms and by way of Muslim rule in Spain and Sicily, when Muslim culture was in full flower. Spain then offered an extremely interesting instance of cultural exchange and innovation. Yet the tendency to emphasize its unilateral nature prevailed. This tendency divided scholars between supporters and opponents of Arab influence on medieval European music. During the first decades of the twentieth century debate was intense. In 1912, Julián Ribera y Tarragó (1858–1934) launched the discussion in a lecture on the outstanding Arab poet ibn Quzman (d. 1160). Ribera contended that the two poetic genres *zajal* and *muwashshah*, originating in Muslim Spain, had exerted considerable influence on the lyrics of the troubadours in Provence as well as the rest of Europe.<sup>1</sup>

H. G. Farmer, a strong supporter of Ribera's views, not only committed himself to this thesis, but soon

also became the champion and leading proponent of the superiority of Arab musical culture and the medieval European indebtedness to it.

## II

Concerning the Crusaders who were in direct contact with Muslims for two centuries, what came of that situation? Farmer contends that "In the actual military array proper of Western Europe only trumpets and horns were used until the 14th century. When the crusaders took the field against the Saracen...in the opposing Saracen army there was a much wider range of instruments including the trumpet (*nafir*), horn (*būq*), reedpipe (*zmr*), kettledrum (*naqqārāt*), cymbals (*ṣunūj*), shawm (*ṣurnāy*), and bells (*jalājil*). Further, their players were organized into a band, which played unceasingly during the conflict for tactical purposes. As a result of the impingement of oriental ideas on the Occident we find the latter adopting this new use of military music together with such instruments as the *anafil*, *tabor*, *naker* and *sonajas*, whose very names tell of their Arabic origin."<sup>2</sup> Another author who treated the same

Peninsula (before 1492)," *Round Table IV International Conference of IMS, Madrid 1992* (chair Amnon Shiloah) with the participation of: L. J. Plenkers, J. Pacholczyk, Ch. Poché and Ismael Fernández de la Cuesta, in: *Revista de Musicología* vol. 16/1 (1993), 351–395.

<sup>2</sup>H. G. Farmer, *Military Music*, London, 1950, p. 10; *idem*, "Crusading Martial Music," *Music & Letters* 30 (1949); *idem*, "Oriental Influences on Occidental Military Music," *Islamic Culture* 15 (1941), 235–238.

<sup>1</sup>See Ribera y Tarragó, *Discursos leídos ante la Real Academia Española*, Madrid, 1912; *idem*, *Historia de la música medieval y su influencia en la española*, Madrid, 1927; "The Meeting of Christian, Jewish and Muslim musical cultures in the Iberian

issue was E. A. Bowles, in "Eastern influences on the use of trumpets and drums during the Middle Ages,"<sup>3</sup> an article largely based on references to music in Crusader chronicles. Bowles argues that until the first Crusade the West "had as wind instruments only animal horns and crude metal tubes of conical bore without developed mouthpieces or well-defined bells. Drums were seldom mentioned. But the exposure of the Crusader forces to the Saracen... led to the wholesale importation and adaptation of Islamic prototypes of instruments."<sup>4</sup> Thus, Bowles also notes that the interest echoed in contemporary accounts was confined to the Saracen military bands and their overwhelming effect. He concludes: "The instruments were soon appropriated as essential ingredients of feudal pomp and ceremony."<sup>5</sup> Bowles remarks in a note that "Farmer minimizes the cultural influence during the Crusades by reference to what he wrote in his book: *Historical Facts for the Arabian Musical Influence*."<sup>6</sup> Bowles argues: "the fact remains that outside areas under Muslim domination, there is no documentary evidence for the conscious adoption of Saracen musical instruments and performance practices by the European nobility prior to the Crusading era."<sup>7</sup> However Farmer, like other scholars, was speaking of the absence of intellectual contact in the full sense. Indeed, this, for instance, was also the opinion held by Charles Haskins. In his classical account of Arabic influence in his book *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*,<sup>8</sup> he considered that the contacts between Christian Europe and the Arab world at the time of the Crusaders owed very little to the Crusaders themselves, saying "It was by the way of Spain and Sicily rather than by way of the crusading kingdoms that superior Muslim culture reached the West, because the crusaders were men of action, not men of learning." Haskins argued that the learning went one way, and that the Muslim world did not obtain from the West any intellectual stimulus to match that which it exported to an interested

Latin Christendom.<sup>9</sup> Haskins thus refers essentially to the intellectual contact, not dwelling on the possible detailed influence of military music. Indeed, it is an accepted fact that when in the twelfth century the Latin world began to absorb Near East learning the numerous pioneers of the new knowledge turned chiefly to Spain where they sought instruction in mathematics, astronomy, astrology, medicine and philosophy.<sup>10</sup> This was due to the preservation of most of the important Greek scientific texts in Arabic translations. Although the Arabs did not alter the foundations of Greek science, they made several important contributions within the general framework. One should keep in mind for instance the commentaries on and the translations of works by Aristotle, whom Al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā both called "second master." Ibn Sinā's Canon of Medicine was an authoritative work in Europe until almost modern times. The August Herzog Bibliothek has 65 Arabic works translated into Latin in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Another instance of the quest for the Greek intellectual heritage transmitted by Arabs appeared, though on a smaller scale, in the humanistic era. Thus Marin Mersenne, an admirer of ancient Greek music theory, intended to include in *L'Harmonie Universelle* (published in 1636) an Arabic treatise on music with the hope to disclose the foundations of ancient Greek music theory; he finally was led to abandon his project.<sup>11</sup>

### III

H. G. Farmer, who laid the foundations of modern Arab music scholarship, tackled the problem of the Arabian influence in his first real contribution to the issue: *Clues for the Arabian Influence on Musical Theory* (London, 1925).<sup>12</sup> At the outset of this study, Farmer deplores the absence of music from the number of Arab sciences considered by scholars as having influenced Western Europe. However the borrowing of instruments given Latinized names tells of their Arabic origin: lute, naker, rebec, guitar, adufe, anafil and pandore; the Western borrowing of the lute's tablature whose existence in Arabic theory was

<sup>3</sup> E. A. Bowles, "Eastern influences on the use of trumpets and drums during the Middle Ages," *Anuario Musical* 26 (1971), 1-28.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup> H. G. Farmer, *Historical Facts for the Arabian Musical Influence*, London 1930, chap. 1, p. 2-9

<sup>7</sup> Bowles, p. 4, n. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Charles H. Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*, Cambridge Mass., 1927, chap. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>11</sup> See A. Shiloah and A. Berthier, "À propos d'un petit livre arabe sur la musique," *Revue de Musicologie* 71 (1986), 164-177.

<sup>12</sup> Under the same title, published in *JRAS* (1925), 61-80.

acknowledged by Jaime Villanueva (*Viaje literario a las iglesias de España*, XI). *The art of playing the lambutum (?) and other similar instruments, invented by Fulan, a Moor of the kingdom of Granada* describes the phonetic system of the tablature whose invention is ascribed to certain *Fulān*, which in Arabic means somebody [i. e. anonymous]:<sup>13</sup> "Prior to the Arab contact, European music as exemplified in plainchant, which arguably used notes of equal values; with Arabs it was quite different, and whilst one performer might play the melody in its plain form, an accompanying performer would figurate the melody by means of appoggiatura and grace notes." Farmer concludes that magadizing, which means doubling notes with their octaves, and organizing, which means doubling with fourth or fifth, were the first step in the advance toward the harmonic system. "Who was it that took the first step, could it have been the Arabs?"<sup>14</sup>

However, in theory, I have found reference to the compositional procedures he mentions in the Arabic treatise of Thabit ibn Qurra, who ascribed the procedures in question to the Greeks.<sup>15</sup> Farmer goes a step further, concluding "many of the song forms and dance forms of the minstrelsy of Medieval Europe can be traced to the Arabs."<sup>16</sup>

He observes, "No one has yet attempted to demonstrate how far Arabian musical science influenced Western Europe."<sup>17</sup>

Despite his efforts to defend the cause of the neglected science of music, the evidence he reports is meager; the only original Arabic work on music one can cite in the context of transmitted influence (Al-Fārābī's *Iḥṣā' al-'ulūm* (=The classification of sciences) includes a chapter defining the division, objectives and fundamentals of the science of music.<sup>18</sup> With the exception of the translations of this work,<sup>19</sup> there are no extant Latin translations or compilations from the Arabic to help us. Aware of the weakness of this point, Farmer asked, "What is the evidence that European musical theorists borrowed

from the Arabian culture sources?" His answer was that "it is obvious that we cannot derive testimony from any Latin compilations or translations from the Arabic save the aforementioned Classification of sciences. We are compelled therefore to fall back on such hints of the Arabian contact as appear in the Latin treatises. These may not, of course, have been borrowed direct from actual Arabic writings or from Latin translations from the Arabic, but may have been transmitted *viva voce*."<sup>20</sup>

When it was published, Farmer's argument met with both enthusiasm and ridicule. His chief opponent, Kathleen Schlesinger, debated the issue in the *Musical Standard*;<sup>21</sup> Farmer replied with another work, his: *Historical Facts for the Arabian Musical Influence*.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV

Moving now to the influence of Arab music on African music in lands become Islamic, let us refer to an example reported by Kwabena Nketia in his book on African music published in 1974. Nketia writes: "In the major part of the Islamic sub-Saharan region, the adjustment to the influence of Arabian music is not as radical as it is generally admitted. In certain cases even the Koran cantillation in Arabic did not succeed in acquainting the apprentices with Arabian music." Concerning the supposed borrowing of some musical instruments Nketia adds: "Generally speaking the different types of Arabian instruments have simply furnished models for manufacturing local equivalences. It follows that certain instruments, like the one-stringed fiddle occur in different sizes, forms and timbres."<sup>23</sup>

Four years after the appearance of Nketia's book, a German scholar, Arthur Simon, referring to his researches on two Brotherhoods in Nubia and Sudan writes: "The first ritual... could serve as an example for Islamic influence on an African ethnic group, whose secular music nevertheless has remained typically Nubian, with preference for pentatonic melodies in the dancing songs. The second example is from a *Qādiriyya* group at Ummdurman, whose members come from different ethnic groups in the

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 67; also *An Old Moorish Tutor: Being Four Arab texts from unique Manuscripts*, Glasgow 1933.

<sup>14</sup> "Clues," 63-65.

<sup>15</sup> See A. Shiloah, *The Theory of Music in Arabic Writings*, series Bx of the RISM, Munich, 1979, 348-49.

<sup>16</sup> "Clues," p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> See A. Shiloah, "The Theory," p. 102-103.

<sup>19</sup> See H. G. Farmer, *Al-Fārābī's Arabic-Latin Writings on Music*, Glasgow, 1934 (London 1965).

<sup>20</sup> "Clues," p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> K. Schlesinger, *Is European Musical Theory Indebted to the Arabs?* London, 1925.

<sup>22</sup> See above, note 6.

<sup>23</sup> J. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa*, New York, Norton 1974, p. 10.

Sudan. Their ritual, being accompanied by several percussion instruments, showed some striking influences of African drumming and is, on the contrary, an example of the Africanization of Islamic features." Simon concludes: "in regions where Islam is present, influences might go back to the religious practices of Islam like that of the Brotherhoods; but as we can see, its range of influence on secular music and its tonal structure is limited."<sup>24</sup>

Bernard Lewis, in his book *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*<sup>25</sup> in the chapter dealing with European artistic influences writes: "The music of an alien culture, it would seem, is more difficult to penetrate than its art, Western interest in the arts of Asia and Africa is far greater than in the music of these continents. Similarly, Muslims appreciated and even produced Western art long before they were able to listen to Western music. Indeed, until comparatively recent times, both interest and influence were virtually nil. The earlier travelers to Europe make very few references on any music they might have heard. Thus, Ibrāhīm ibn Ya'qūb, speaking of Schleswig, notes that:

I have never heard worse singing than that of the people of Schleswig. It is humming that comes out of their throats, like the barking of dogs, but more beastlike."<sup>25</sup>

In the same spirit, the simile of barking is evoked in the writings of not a few Europeans upon hearing Oriental music. For instance, in August 1648, the French traveler M. B. de Monconys attended a dervish ceremony in Cairo, which he described thus:

"They all danced for more than an hour, shouting and screaming horribly; they whirled violently at such dizzying speed that their dance went beyond anything the wildest imagination can conceive at a witches' Sabbath... their voices changed frequently from screaming of enraged wolves to the barking of dogs"<sup>26</sup>

Such conclusions dovetail nicely with the judgment on oriental music pronounced by Hector Berlioz: "They call music what we call charivari."

Bernard Lewis writes further: "The first encounter of Oriental people with European music did not produce a much different judgment, as for instance

the remark made by the Ottoman envoy Vasif, who was in Spain in 1780: 'All the great men, by order of the king, invited us to meals, and we suffered the tedium of their kind of music.'<sup>27</sup> On the occasion of the inauguration of the Percussion Forum in Autumn 1985 (Centre Pompidou, Paris), *Le Monde* published an extensive interview with Pierre Boulez. Asked about the oriental influence on Western music, Boulez said: "Should we import those instruments [Oriental percussion instruments in present day orchestras] together with their pertinent music, or just integrate them in our culture? Certain instruments may pass without difficulty from one culture to another when they are not carriers of a strong hierarchy, or when they can be easily disconnected or discharged from it... However, the badly thought-out importation of non-European instruments is for me comparable to the trade in spices. As long as these instruments have not been integrated in a rather intelligent and firm way, their use will escape our mind; this is because these instruments belong to civilizations different from ours, and a civilization cannot be easily domesticated."<sup>28</sup> In other words, music is always firmly anchored in a culture and its system of values, and the musical system itself is based on a series of concepts and codes, which determine its practice and behavior, defining music as a phenomenon of life among other phenomena.

Something in these remarks seems to have an affinity with the following and last example, which concerns ideas expressed by Fāris Shidiāq, alias Aḥmad Fāris, a Lebanese Maronite. Born in Lebanon in 1804, he left the country at the age of 26, moving to Egypt where he taught American missionaries. Four years later he went to Malta in the service of Protestant missionaries and became there himself a Protestant. In 1848 we find him in London where he collaborated with Dr. Lee in the translation of the Bible into Arabic. After a short sojourn in France, he was invited by the Bey of Tunis to go to Tunis where he worked as editor of an official paper and converted to Islam, adopting the name Ahmad. In 1857 he reached Istanbul where he died in 1887.

This colorful personality wrote a number of philological works and also two Arabic books on Malta and Europe, published in Tunisia in 1855. His book on Malta contains a chapter on music titled "On the

<sup>24</sup> A. Simon, "Islamic Influence," in: *Report of the 12th Congress of the International Musicological Society, Berkeley 1977*, The American Musicological Society, 1981, 17-18.

<sup>25</sup> B. Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, London, 1982; 262.

<sup>26</sup> M. B. de Monconys, *Journal des Voyages de Monconys*, 3 tomes, Lyon 1665-6, tome II, 217.

<sup>27</sup> B. Lewis, *Muslim Discovery*, 272.

<sup>28</sup> *Le Monde*, special issue, 14 November 1984, 4.

music of the Maltese and of others."<sup>29</sup> The following discussion is a compilation putting forth the major points and ideas dealt with by al-Shidiāq. Pierre Cachia published an English translation of the full chapter with commentary.<sup>30</sup> The chapter begins with general considerations about music and its nature, and the virtue of its oral transmission as well as its retention in the disciple's memory, as against the reliance of Europeans on sense and sight meaning the use of notation, which no longer depends on memory. Then he claims that melodies which move the Arabs leave the Europeans unmoved and vice versa, European melodies move only those who became accustomed to them. Concerning the highly emotional character of Arab music al-Shidiāq refers to the rich gamut of expressions obtained by the variety of musical modes made to stir particular ethical and emotional feelings in the listener's soul, such as the mode *raṣd* said to move deeply, the *sikā* which causes joy, the *bayāt* which stirs sorrow and the *hijāzī* which makes one tender. Then he proceeds with a comparison through five essential aspects, claiming: "The two musical cultures differ on a number of counts: One is that the French have no free music unbound by those graphic signs of theirs to which any verse may be sung. So that if you suggest to one of them that he should sing a couple of lines extempore, as is done among us... he cannot do it."<sup>31</sup> This opinion may imply that the notation in Western music is a hampering factor, contributing to the weakening of the faculty of improvisation, which distinguishes Arab music.

The second difference concerns polyphonic rendering in Western music: "if ten of their singers assemble in order to sing a stanzaic poem, some will tackle one part of it in one mode, the other another part in a different mode; if for example the song is in *raṣd* [the mode called *raṣd*, but he means the first degree of the mode] one will sing part of it in this mode in a loud voice, another will sing a part in the mode called *nawā* [the first degree of *nawā=sol*] in a delicate voice, yet another a part in the higher octave in a high voice, so that the listener hears it in different modes. This they call harmony, meaning

the blending of voices in singing. This way of singing has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages reside in the fact that the listener hears at one and the same time one poem in different modes by different voices, which is as if he heard one poem in all the different metres of prosody. The disadvantages are in fact that one's hearing cannot fully register all the points of emission of these various sounds. In my opinion, this kind of music is more felicitously rendered by instruments than by human voices."<sup>32</sup>

In his third point the author extols Arab singing, which is entirely distinguished by tenderness and love. This characteristic is designated by the Arab word *tarab* usually assigning strong reaction to music and to recitation of poems. The fourth point deals with the wealth of modal scales in Arabic music as against the dull modality in Western music. The author remarks that despite their immense technological achievements the Europeans cannot compete with that richness. Yet, he adds, scrupulously, one cannot excel in everything. Finally he enumerates those features which are denied to Western music, including prosodic metres, rhetorical eloquence, and the capacity to pronounce guttural letters.

The fifth point refers to pitch microtonality in Arabic music, which allows subtle nuances.

In conclusion the author says: "Some of the great achievements of Western art music do not correspond to our taste and sensibility, others are beyond our capacity to compete with them."

The last remark, despite its naïve character, expresses quite sharply the opinions and feelings of a literary personality who speaks of Western music not merely as an accidental visitor, but as a person who for years has been exposed to Western music and culture. It seems that the predominant idea in his account is that the two cultures involved are founded on different musical and cultural systems. Hence, one may assume that both sides may find it difficult to identify with or to appreciate the music of the other. The author admits that long habit might bring a listener closer to a culture other than his own, but he never voices the possibility of adoption or borrowing. Though he does not touch the question of influence, we can use his observations together with others above mentioned to confirm what has been suggested in this article.

<sup>29</sup> The Tunisian edition, p. 48-55.

<sup>30</sup> P. Cachia, "19th Century Arab Observations on European Music," *Ethnomusicology*, 17/1 (1973), 41-50.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.