Music in the World of Islam

A Socio-cultural study

Amnon Shiloah

SCOLAR PRESS

Published in Great Britain by
Scolar Press
Gower House
Croft Road
Aldershot
Hants GU11 3HR
England

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Shiloah, Amnon
Music in the world of Islam: a socio-cultural study
I. Title
306.4840917671

ISBN 0 85967 961 6

Typeset in Sabon by Raven Typesetters, Chester and printed in Great Britain by Biddles Ltd, Guildford

2 The Rise of Islam

Muḥammad, founder of Islam, was born *circa* 570 AD in prosperous Mecca where the more settled population, influenced to some extent by both Judaism and Christianity, possessed an aura of *ḥilm* (urbanity). A great deal of the prestige and prosperity enjoyed by Mecca was undoubtedly due to the *Ka'ba* – the shrine. This small cube-shaped building with the celebrated black stone set in its south-east corner was said to have been built by Adam in replication of a celestial archetype. Under the powerful tribe of Quraish, the lords of the *Ka'ba*, the shrine had been elevated to the status of an Arabian pantheon, venerated by Arab tribesmen who came there to worship and to trade. Muḥammad belonged to the dissident Hashimite branch of the Quraishi clan; his prophetic message and revelations met with resistance among the Quraish leaders. In 622 AD he and his followers were forced to migrate to Yathrib, later called Medina (city) of the prophet. The migration (*ḥidjra*) of Muḥammad and the founding that same year of the Islamic community (*al-umma*) mark the beginning of the Islamic era. Thanks to his ability, strong personality and enthusiastic followers, in less than two years Muḥammad became the supreme leader. After Mecca had been subdued and the Meccans assured that their city would not suffer discrimination under the new religion, the way was open for the spread of Islam.

Following Muḥammad's sudden death in 632, Abū Bakr was elected as *khalīfa* (successor); he and his three elected successors: 'Umar (634), 'Uthmān (644) and 'Alī (656), were known as *rāshidūn* (Orthodox caliphs). Under their leadership the tribes summoned to the banners of Islam launched a formidable series of conquests. Within 12 years, the armies of Islam took possession of Syria, Iraq, Persia, Armenia, Egypt and Cyrenaica. At the same time, however, the growing dissension between the followers of the third caliph 'Uthmān and those of the fourth, 'Alī – Muḥammad's son-in-law – gave rise to the great religious parties that still exist: the *Sunnī* (originally followers of 'Uthmān) and the *Shī'ī* (who originally supported 'Alī).

Development of a new musical style in the cities of Ḥidjāz

Soon after the far-flung, rapid conquests of Islam, the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which were concentrations of political and religious power under the Orthodox caliphs' austere regimes, began to develop into important centres of rich musical life. This activity was instrumental in establishing the foundations of the future Great Tradition and was associated entirely with celebrating a life of pleasure. An aristocratic élite, enriched by booty and an influx of great wealth, avidly sought luxury and amusement best expressed in music and song. High society was thus indulging in a kind of escapism to help cope with the anxiety caused by the sudden dramatic changes. Another determining factor in the development of the new style was the presence of thousands of slaves who had been sent to Ḥidjāz; undoubtedly, there were many qualified artists and talented musicians among them. They brought their arts and crafts into captivity with them, transplanting the refined cultures of the conquered peoples. The combined circumstances of urbanization, economic expansion, a growing passion for music on the part of the Arab élite class and the presence of talented artists proficient in the arts of their previous cultural milieu, gave decisive impetus to the crystallization of a new art music suited to the new aspirations and values. Patronized and generously rewarded by the élite, the best singers and instrumentalists could thus demonstrate their finest achievements.

Despite the vehement attacks of the strict theologists, Medina became a centre of fashion, elegance, frivolous poetry and exciting music. Referring to this paradoxical development in the two holy cities, Pellat writes: 'Whereas one might expect the places where the Prophet had lived to produce a form of religious poetry paralleling the pious activities of their inhabitants, what the literature brings us is the celebration of a life of pleasure' (Pellat 28: 144). In fact the new religion does not seem to have been a source of inspiration for those who first adhered to it, except perhaps in folk creativity that is unknown to us. Patriotic, heroic or Islamic songs were nonexistent in this period, and all energies were invested in one favourite theme – love. Love was sung in countless ways with the aim of stirring a whole gamut of feelings. This love poetry, set to appropriate melodies, had roots in the amatory prelude (*nasīb*) of the pre-Islamic *qaṣīda*. But the changes affecting the ancient poetry had repercussions not so much on its structure as on its content.

In this respect it should be remembered that the celebrated poets were still the Bedouins, whereas most of the musicians belonged to the conquered nations and naturally had less feeling for Bedouin culture. Consequently, though they endeavoured to satisfy their patrons' taste, the musicians were more open to change and to deviation from familiar musical norms. Then

too, they could have influenced the transformation of Bedouin poetic themes into urban themes. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the support and encouragement of the idle amusement-seeking aristocracy played an important role in this development. It is interesting to note that the lion's share of patronage was extended by emancipated women of high society, who at that time were mixing freely with the opposite sex. Not yet totally cloistered, cultivated patronesses endowed with fine literary taste transformed their houses into salons where eloquence and extemporaneity reigned, and the greatest poets and musicians were encouraged to display their talent, competing with one another.

The salon was known under its Arabic appellation *madjlis,* which means both meeting-place and the session held there. This type of *madjlis,* was comparable to the Sassanian model but lacked its defined protocol. Regular entertainment sessions were organized, the assembled people giving themselves up to *ṭarab* (emotion and delight) evoked by the songs. Hence, at the salon the musician was an indispensable personality, capable of stirring the most blissful passions. Moreover, in addition to possessing a musical gift, he was perceived to be an agreeable conversationalist with a lively mind, and occasionally was a skilful poet.

It should be noted that most of the musicians, protégés of the Grand Ladies, belonged to the class of freemen-clients – *mawla* (pl. *mawālī*). The status of client was given to non-Arab Muslims by the noble tribes with a view to integrating them into the level of society that formed the Arabian ruling class. This was an extension of the principle of 'clientship' which had been practised by tribal society in pre-Islamic Arabia.

Many well-known female and male musicians of early Islam were *mawālī.* They were of varied origin, but most were Persians. After gaining their freedom, at least two of the known female musicians, 'Azza al-Maylā' (d. ca 705) and Djamīla (d. 720) established salons of their own in the manner of the high society patronesses. All Arab biographical sources concord in extolling 'Azza al-maylā's beauty, her supple waist and graceful walk, because of which she was called *al-Maylā'*. She belonged to the class of freed slaves and had great innate musical talent, enhanced by a superb voice and impressive skill in playing musical instruments. 'Azza studied with the songstresses Rā'iqa, Sīrīn and Zerneb from whom she learned the repertory of old Arab songs. She also learned Persian airs from Sā'ib Khāthir and Nashīṭ, both renowned performers of Persian music. Combining old and new in her art, 'Azza was called 'queen of singers' by her contemporaries (Caussin de Perceval 88: 401–409).

Djamīla was also a freewoman and, like 'Azza, was extolled not only for her high artistic achievements, but also as educator of celebrated male musicians. One of Djamīla's famous pupils, Ma'bad (d. 743), son of a negro, said of her: 'in the art of music Djamīla is the tree and we are the branches'.

Djamīla's pilgrimage from Medina to Mecca was the occasion of a great musical event which contemporary accounts commented on extensively. Her highly colourful cortege included all the principal musicians of the time, as well as 50 singing-girls. It is said about one of her distinguished pupils, ibn 'Ā'isha, who possessed a voice of extraordinary quality, that he so ravished the crowd attracted by his singing that the cortege was detained for a long time. On the way back to Medina there were three days of musical *fêtes* during which the travellers were regaled with songs of entertaining character that may not have been altogether compatible with piety (Caussin de Perceval 88: 453–545). They were probably very different from the proclamations and functional folkloristic songs typical of those performed during earlier pagan pilgrimages to the shrine of *al-Ka'ba*. Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406) described that pre-Islamic chanting, generally called *tahlīl*, as *taghbīr* (religious cantillation).

The galaxy of musicians of this period includes such famous names as ibn Misdjaḥ who, after a *voyage d'étude* to Persia and Byzantium, proceeded to reform the art of music; his pupil ibn Muḥriz, who also studied with 'Azza al-Maylā'; Ṭuways, who claimed to have been the first male musician under Islam, and al-Gharīḍ, an effeminate artist (*mukhannath*) who had been taught by women to sing elegies and was known for his charming, heart-rending artistry. The particular attributes distinguishing the two latter musicians are significant in that they imply the emergence of a new type of artist, probably rare or entirely unknown in the pre-Islamic period. Here we find reference to the first male musician and then to the effeminate quality of a singer, due to his having been taught by songstresses. Since the latter was not an isolated case and the sources mention a class of effeminate artists known as the *mukhannathūn* (Farmer 95: 44–45), it may be assumed that the *qyaynas* art exerted a notable influence on this class of male musicians. Moreover, Farmer claims that 'during the "Days of Idolatry" music as a profession was for the largest part in the hands of the women-folk and slave girls, at any rate in al-Ḥidjāz and the peninsula generally'; he adds that the male professional musician 'was quite common in Persia and al-Ḥīra, whilst in Byzantium and Syria he had had a place from time immemorial' (Farmer 95: 44).

These musicians and others may be looked upon as contributing to the crystallization of the new art in which the Persian element was predominant. It is very likely that during this phase Persian influence was an extension of the living tradition in al-Ḥīra. In addition to the fact that Nashīṭ and Sā'ib Khāthir first sang in Persian, and 'Azza al-Maylā' as well as others learned from them, al-Ḥīra probably continued under Islam to be a musical centre that provided a model for musicians, poets and their patrons.

The bulk of our information on the music and musicians of this period comes from the monumental work: *Kitāb al-aghānī* (Book of Songs) by the

Arab historian, man of letters and poet Abū'l-Faradj al-Iṣfahānī who was born in Iṣfahān (Persia) in 897 and died in Baghdad in 967. The Book of Songs is one of the most celebrated works in all Arabic literature. By the author's own testimony he spent 50 years on the 21 volumes of this monumental work. It contains a collection of poems from the pre-Islamic period to the ninth century, all of which had been set to music, and includes biographical details about authors, composers, singers, instrumentalists and writers on music (Sawa 143: 20–32). He indicated the origin of each song and its melodic and rhythmic mode, referring to the modal theory of the *aṣābiʿ* (fingers) and *madjārī* (courses) attributed to the famous musician Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī (Farmer 453; Shawqi 73; Rajab 116; Shiloah 303: 30). The Book of Songs constitutes a mine of information on the history of music, musical life and musical aesthetics; the author also quotes long passages from earlier writers whose works have not been preserved for posterity. In addition to his *Kitāb al-aghāni*, al-Iṣfahānī wrote ten other works related to music, all unfortunately lost.

Distinctive concepts and aspects of the developing art

The urbanization that characterized the transitional period, as well as the high status enjoyed by musicians at that time, brought about the intensification and increased importance of musical activity which consequently started to develop its own means of expression.

An intimate link between poetry and music was still considered essential, but a shift took place in the balance between them. The earlier melodious recitation, chanting and simple melodic setting gradually evolved into more refined and sophisticated musical features that affected the quality of melody and rhythm as well as the instrumental accompaniment. Melodic instruments, mainly from the family of strings, were added to the rhythm marked by the drums and *qaḍīb* (a wand that stressed beat). However, the freedom henceforth given to the musician's imagination remained bound to restrictions imposed by the poetic text and its structure. The quest for an ideal new balance between the musical and poetic components therefore gave rise to conflicting tendencies leading to a quarrel, as it were, between *ancients et modernes*.

In this quarrel, the repercussions of which would be felt at a later period, musicians of different artistic views and temperaments were involved. Thus, for instance, the disagreement between Ibn Suraydj and al-Gharīḍ concerned the question of varying degree of refinement (*ẓarf*) which in its extreme form could subjugate poetry to music and disturb an ideal balance (Bencheich 124: 130). As against al-Gharīḍ's art which represented modernistic refinement with its predilection for light rhythms, Ibn Suraydj with

his heavy style advocated the old ideals, expressed in his recourse to the archaic *ramal* rhythm that was similar to the *radjaz* and camel-song *ḥudā'*. His approach is summarized succinctly in his definition of an excellent singer. Mālik ibn abī'l-Samaḥ (d. ca 754) asked Ibn Suraydj what the qualities of the perfect musician were. He replied: 'The musician who enriches the melodies, has long breath, gives proper proportions to the measures, emphasises the pronunciation, respects grammatical inflections, holds long notes for their full value, separates short notes distinctly and, finally, uses the various rhythmical modes correctly; such a musician is considered perfect'. Mālik ibn abī'l-Samaḥ added: 'I reported this statement to Ma'bad, who declared: "If there were a Koran of music it could not be otherwise."' (Caussin de Perceval 88: 497–500).

The background to the quarrel was the adoption during this period of a more artistic musical genre called *al-ghinā' al-mutqan,* the introduction of which is ascribed to the Persian slave Nashīṭ. One of its innovative aspects seems to have been the application of rhythmic patterns and constructions that were independent of the poetic metre. Therefore, the question of degree of closeness to the metric principle and the possibility of blurring it was decisive.

Another important aspect was the growing awareness of the potential expressiveness of the human voice and its multiple nuances. There is good reason for the musical nomenclature that assigns various meanings to the term *ṣawt*; it may designate sound, voice or, occasionally, song; in the living traditions of the Persian Gulf, *ṣawt* indicates a musical genre. In pre-Islamic times, knowledge of the voice emitting magical sound through the myriad intonations of song, or even in solemn recitation, was instinctive. Now, however, the knowledge of voice became a major concern for both sacred and secular music. Symbolizing the life force and serving as a medium of communication between human beings, Arab authors considered the voice a reflection of the human soul's mysteries and feelings. For the mystics it symbolizes divine life, and puts man in vibrating resonance with the celestial and universal. A rich palette of timbres enables the musician's voice to express his diverse moods and the subtlety of his being (Shiloah 345: 92–93). Such an approach found particular emphasis in the recurring discussion and definition of the 'beautiful' voice (*al-ṣawt al-ḥasan*) in the literature of both secular and sacred music.

The powerful effect of a beautiful voice may even have medical properties. The Andalusian writer and poet ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 940), in the chapter on music in his encyclopedic work *al-'Iqd al-farīd* (The Unique Necklace), refers to the experts in medicine who claim that a beautiful voice infiltrates into the human body and flows in the veins, causing purification of the blood, delighting the heart and elevating the soul.

It should be remembered in this respect that song, combining both poetic

and musical expression, was considered the summit of music's hierarchy. Hence, *ghinā'* (singing) became the general designation of art music, while the term *mūsīqī*, borrowed from the Greek, was reserved for the science of music. The primacy thereby given to vocal music has been a distinguishing mark of Arabian music throughout its history.

As noted previously, music is identified with the sweet tenderness of love, an emotion it expresses, imprinting its effect on the listener's soul. Among the various definitions of a perfect musician one finds: he who is moved and causes his listeners to be moved. Thus, in addition to a beautiful voice, tenderness and keen sensitivity often recur as basic qualities required from an excellent musician. An apt example is the anecdote praising the sweetness and tenderness that were characteristic of ibn Djāmi''s songs. It is said that the famous musician Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī, despite his good nature, suggested that the Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd falsify a letter announcing the death of ibn Djāmi''s beloved wife who dwelt far away in Ḥidjāz. This would stir his profound love and elicit manifestations of his sorrow. The suggestion was accepted and such a letter was prepared. Upon learning the sad news, ibn Djāmi' was deeply afflicted. Confronted with his great suffering, the compassionate caliph told him that the letter had been sent in jest and asked him to sing. Ibn Djāmi' then sang in a manner that expressed all the pain he had experienced (Caussin de Perceval 88: 526–546).

The emotion stirred in the listener's soul, as well as its various effects, is called *ṭarab*. The term that had originally been used to designate emotion elicited by the fine recitation of a beautiful poem, was applied to the feelings roused by music. As such, it refers to a wide range of emotional reactions, from subtle delight to strong excitement and even ecstasy. In the course of time the term became synonymous with music and its derivatives: *muṭrib* (musician) and *'ālāt al-ṭarab* (musical instruments) (Shiloah 68: 213–214).

Voluptuous musical and poetic pleasure was a notable characteristic of Sassanian music, designated by a term that in Arabic is equivalent to *lahw* (pastime, amusement). The *lahw* in Arab literature is usually linked to its derivative *malāhī*, which figuratively signifies musical instruments, and in a broader sense is used as synonymous with music. Thus, associatively we reach an important concept that links art music to entertainment. This bond was largely exploited in attacks against music led by theologians and jurists – an important theme that we shall discuss in detail below.

A study of the sources reveals that the term *malāhī*, either alone or linked to *lahw*, appears in the title of eight musical works, seven of which appeared in the third/ninth century. It is interesting to note that, parallel to the positive use of these terms in connection with art music and instruments, they acquire the negative connotation of diversion or forbidden pleasure in the context of tracts opposing music. The work that became a model for following generations is *Dhamm al-malāhī* (The Condemnation of Malāhī) by Ibn

abī'l-Dunyā (894). This is a diatribe against music, musical instruments, games and other kinds of amusement. The sharpest barbs in this attack were directed against the stringed instruments, which in the eyes of the theologians symbolized the new art and contributed to enhancing a life of pleasure (Robson 50). The two major instruments that paralleled the advent of professional musicians were the *ṭunbūr*, a long-necked lute and the *'ūd*, a short-necked lute that in the course of time became the symbol *par excellence* of Arab art music, being endowed with the title 'king of instruments'. The literature of that time describes this classical instrument as having four strings; the names given to them are indicative of the cultural fusion that occurred: the Persian names *zīr* and *bamm* were assigned to the first and fourth strings, and the Arabic *mathna* and *mathlath* to the second and third.

The foregoing can be represented as an equation: art music = urban milieu = prosperous and idle aristocracy = entertainment. This equation corresponds roughly to the theory advanced by the great historian and sociologist ibn Khaldūn. The following significant statement appears in the chapter on music of his *Muqaddima* (Prolegomena): '. . . It should be known that singing originates in a civilisation when it becomes abundant and (people) progress from necessities to conveniences, and then to luxuries. . . . It is in demand only by those who are free of all other worries and seek various ways of having pleasure' (Rosenthal 63: II, 401).