Music in the World of Islam

A Socio-cultural study

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3 The First Dynastic Caliphate

In 661 the elective, orthodox caliphate came to an end, and the house of Umayya, the first dynastic caliphate, emerged; it moved the seat of the caliphate from Arabia to Syria. Under Umayyad rule the Islamic empire extended eastward as far as the borders of India and China, westward to the Atlantic and Pyrenees. In this new environment, which bore the impress of political and administrative traditions of the ancient Middle Eastern empires, the ground was propitious for the establishment of an imperial governmental system based essentially on the model of the empire Islam had superseded.

The first Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiya (661–80), knowing the value of maintaining a façade of princely living, shrewdly turned his capital Damascus into a centre of pomp and power. Being of literary and artistic tastes, Mu'āwiya opened the court to the most talented poets and musicians. Most of the succeeding Umayyad caliphs continued in the same vein; they encouraged and patronized poets and musicians and treated them with generous bounty. Those who particularly need mention in this respect are: Yazīd I (680–83), al-Walīd I (705–15), Yazīd II (720–24) and al-Walīd II (743–44); they were all absorbed in pleasure and had a passion for music. Known for his libertinage, Al-Walīd II was himself a poet, excellent singer, performer on the *'ūd* (lute) and drum as well as composer. One of his songs includes the following verses:

> There is no true joy but lending ear to music
> or wine that leaves one sunk in stupor dense.

Eulogy, that had been a distinguishing mark of pre-Islamic poetry, was firmly re-established as a major genre. The musicians were encouraged to set eulogies and other poems to music with the aim of augmenting their potency. As a result of the official support of the rulers and the nobility, the considerable reward showered on the musicians and their emulation of each

other, the development of the new art was accelerated and it acquired a higher status. The rulers followed some of the procedures of the Sassanian kings, introducing among other customs the use of a thin curtain (*sitāra*) separating them from the performers. Some of the best known musicians turned their residences into schools of music where rich *dilettanti* came to develop their aptitude and where, in particular, talented slave girls who belonged to notables and wealthy men were trained in music and other cultural matters. Indeed the houses of the rich *bourgeoisie* competed with one another in attracting the best musicians to enhance their gatherings in which the singing-girls who lived in the house participated.

In the face of such eagerness for pleasure and things of the world, it is easy to understand the vexation of Muslim rigorists, who began to include music among the 'sins' of the Umayyads.

Whereas in Ḥidjāz contact with more advanced civilizations was usually via captives integrated as *mawālī* into the community of Muslims, in the new political and intellectual centres this contact expanded and became more direct. It accelerated and influenced the process of acculturation of both conquerors and conquered, due to the ethnic mixing resulting from increased intermarriage between Arabs and non-Arabs. Many qualified non-Arab converts were also indispensably involved in the administration and control of the conquered lands. In performing their duties, these converts had to comply with a stringent condition: they had to have good command of the official language – Arabic – even acquiring an expressive, artistic style exceeding the level of ordinary speech. On the other hand, the conquerors, despite their feeling of racial superiority as God's elect, were notable for a shrewdly pragmatic attitude toward adapting to and compromising with the cultures of the conquered. They thus abetted the transformation of the still disparate multinational and multireligious cultures into one unified and universally accepted civilization. In this spirit occurred improvements and innovations in the realm of music that affected song and singing techniques, melodic and rhythmic systems, instruments and instrumental accompaniments. The way was thus opened for the establishment of a Great Musical Tradition that crystallized under the Umayyads and reached its zenith under the 'Abbāsids.

The Great Musical Tradition

We borrow the concept of the Great Tradition from the study by R. Redfield and M. Singer, *The Cultural Roles of Cities*. This study propounds ideas concerning the part played by cities in the development, decline or transformation of cultures. A Great Tradition, according to the authors, 'describes a way of life and as such is a vehicle and standard for those who share it to

identify with others in a common civilisation' (Redfield and Singer 386: 220). However, to envisage the transformation of what were by inference 'Little Traditions' of non-urban cultures into an explicit and systematic 'Great Tradition', is not an entirely applicable approach to the Great Musical Tradition that emerged in urban centres under Islam. Considering its syncretic nature, one should rather speak of skilful fusion of selected elements from the previous Great Tradition of the conquered peoples with elements from the homogeneous Arab 'Little Tradition'. This synthesis, effected in a spirit of compromise, resulted in successful 'new arrangements' so conceived as to be considered by both conquerors and conquered as outgrowths of the old, as well as representative of orthogenesis. However, unlike other well-known Great Traditions, the Islamic musical tradition did not achieve the perfect systematization that would facilitate identification and definition of an official art with universally acceptable, immutable norms. That is due primarily to the particular unity of religious and secular in Islam. The caliphs, commanders of the faithful who held absolute sway, were in the main enthusiastic supporters of art music, making it an integral part of their regal life and a model of inspiration for the upper strata of society. Yet, obligated as they were to obey the rules of Islam and the sacred law (*sharī'a*) which regulated social as well as religious life, they were in open conflict with the *'ulamā'*, the learned expounders of Islamic religion and law who by virtue of their function were able to exercise considerable influence. Religious authorities from the beginning adopted a puritanical attitude, stressing scriptural revelation and observance of rules more than feelings. They disapproved of art music used to pass time, for entertainment and sensual pleasure. This disapproval diminished the prestige and distinction necessary for it to be accepted as an official systematized art.

It is interesting to note that the kind of systematization achieved in subsequent generations was rather of a philosophical, speculative and mathematical nature, owing to influence exerted by Greek theoretical writings translated into Arabic. The science of music to which these theoretical works were applied was classified among foreign areas of knowledge. Incidentally, in extolling music as a force for harmony and morality, philosophers were frequently led to denigrate its use as an agent with an intoxicating influence; in so doing they inadvertently gave support to similar views as expressed in attacks by religious authorities.

None of the sources provides us with pertinent analysis of the process that led to the establishment of what we have called the Great Tradition. However, reading the scattered evidence carefully, we do find references to the borrowing of elements from conquered cultures, and to the idea of fusion whereby the borrowed elements were grafted upon an Arabic tradition that had a character of its own. The best illustration of this is the account included in *Kitāb al-aghānī* concerning ibn Misdjaḥ (d. ca 169/785).

Often honoured as father of the new music under Islam, ibn Misdjaḥ travelled to Syria and Persia learning the theory and practice of Persian and Byzantine music; he incorporated much of this acquired knowledge into the Arabian song. Although he adopted new elements such as foreign musical modes, he rejected traits that were not suitable for Arabian music (Farmer 235: 236–239). Whether the account is authentic in all details or not, it can symbolize the process of fusion, the spirit of selectiveness and the very important process of Arabization that seems to have acted as a catalyst. In view of the great role played by Arabization as a general unifying factor in Islamic civilization, some clarification is needed, particularly as regards the musical aspects.

Arabization

It should be noted that during the epoch being discussed, there was a growing attachment among the urbanized conquerors to the past, to the things one carries in one's heart and wishes to preserve. This feeling was probably the source of the idea of Arabization as a means of cultural unification. One of its most prominent manifestations was the quest for and use of linguistic purity. This was a concern shared equally by readers of *Qur'ān*, grammarians and musicians. The trend was particularly notable at that time in the new garrison towns of Baṣra and Kūfa (Iraq). Unlike the old urban centres, these towns were dominated by Arabs who continued to lead a predominantly Bedouin life. Their famous market-places, similar to the pre-Islamic one in 'Ukāz, attracted admirers of classical poetry, philologists and musicians, flocking there to listen to poetry recited by *rāwīs* (reciters) who had prodigious memories.

The *rāwīs* institution goes back to the pre-Islamic era when every self-designated poet had his *rāwī*, who accompanied him everywhere, memorized his poems and handed them down to others, along with the circumstances of their composition. In this manner, the *rāwīs* ensured, to a large extent, the survival of ancient poetry through oral transmission, until the art of writing came into use at the beginning of the eighth century. After the advent of Islam, the *rāwīs*, instead of being attached to individual poets, began to form an independent class. Henceforth, the *rāwī* is a skilful reciter carrying in his memory thousands of various ancient verses. For instance, the well-known Ḥammād al-Rāwiya is said to have recited to the Caliph al-Walīd II, in one sitting, 2900 *qaṣīdas* by poets who flourished before Muḥammad. However, Ḥammād was accused by his contemporary Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabī of having introduced verses of his own into genuine compositions. In any event, the surviving *rāwīs* were eagerly sought because, for practical reasons, during this period pre-Islamic poetry became a subject of

great interest. The necessity of explaining the Sacred Text gave birth to the sciences of grammar and lexicography; philologists naturally found the best material in the pre-Islamic poems. The same held true for the musicians and the first readers of *Qur'ān* who sought to establish the rules of solemn recitation based on poetic language and its rendition. The musical expression that underlined the recitation through rhythmic accentuation, phonic relief, intensity and the establishment of the desired equilibrium between ideals and emotional values on the one hand and music and rhythm on the other, became a model for the experts in koranic reading and for composers of songs. The expressive, artistic manner of speech in many ways combined cantillation, art song and rhetoric (Talbi 209).

Their affinity is revealed in certain common terms. The root *ghy* from which *ghinā'* (art song and music) is derived, signifies to sing and also to prolong the voice in psalmody and chant, to enrich or to renounce. The root *lḥn* from which *laḥn* (melody, rhythm and mode) is derived, also means to chant in a manner pleasant to the listener's ear, elucidating a word, singling out its meaning and also making mistakes in recitation. Arab lexicography gives the verb *laḥḥana* the meaning of lecture that stirs emotion or is rendered emotionally. A synonym for *laḥḥana* is *gharrada*; the *taghrīd* (noun of action) is defined as a sound including emotion. The fact that, according to the above definitions, the verbal expression generates the musical, should not be considered as merely a lexicographer's speculation or interpretation; it actually reflects one of the fundamental concepts of the Great Musical Tradition. The juxtaposition of poetic features, recitation with its vocal nuances and timbres, cantillation, composition and performance of art song was indeed decisive for the desired process of Arabization; concomitantly, it also gave rise to the *tadjwīd* that codifies the various rules of cantillation, and establishes art song norms of composition and performance. *Tadjwīd* and art song were united in their search for impressive richness of vocal emissions and timbres designed to ensure linguistic purity in the transmission of both sacred and poetic texts (Shiloah 345: 91–92). Ibn Suraydj's definition of a perfect singer, cited above, illustrates this tendency and concern clearly; we shall return to this in Chapter 4.

The refinement and proliferation of the Great Tradition under the 'Abbāsids

In 750 the Umayyads were overthrown by the 'Abbāsids, another branch of the prophet's family, who in 763 moved the capital from Syria to Iraq where they constructed a new city on the west bank of the Tigris – Baghdad. The advent of the 'Abbāsid's caliphate (750–1258) was rather more than a change of dynasty; it affected all aspects of life and culture in the Muslim

empire. Due to the Persians' significant role in the revolution, they were privileged to occupy a prominent place in the new regime; their influence was strongly impressed on both government and culture. They played an important part in the new cosmopolitan group of Muslims of many races and they were decisive in the gradual termination of Arab racial supremacy within the empire. However, Arabic remained the official language and the medium of communication in government, commerce and education; it therefore remained a vital factor in the evolving culture.

The end of wars of conquest was another important factor that henceforth permitted much energy to be poured into economic expansion, trade, and the development of a sophisticated and diversified urban culture. The caliph exercised his authority through a vast and growing bureaucratic organization and, with a view to fostering cultural progress, he established the model of giving substantial support to a galaxy of *literati*, scholars, philosophers and talented artists. As a result von Grunebaum writes, 'the mere warrior ceases to be the ideal type, and the pen holds precedence over the sword' (von Grunebaum 19: 22). He added that, as a result of the changes, broad areas of psychological experience manifested themselves or became articulate, evoking more expansive and varied emotional experience in a richer and more comprehensive pattern.

The society wherein relationships were no longer dictated by tribal affiliation and there was a weakening of clientship bonds as well as rapid economic growth, gave rise to a wealthy class of genuine bourgeoisie. Like the sovereigns who adopted the model of the Sassanian court and ceremonies, the nobility and the new class of wealthy people became ardent patrons of the arts. During this epoch Baghdad attained its greatest magnificence as a city in which the arts and all areas of knowledge blossomed. Though it was not unique in this respect – many other great cities enjoyed splendid social life and intense cultural activities – Baghdad overshadowed all the others. This was particularly true under the brilliant, luxurious reigns of Hārūn al-Rashīd (786–809) and his son al-Ma'mūn (813–833), who was considered a great patron of learning.

Baghdad attracted many talented men from the provinces who were eager to make their mark on the new capital and to win fame and fortune. In this connection it should be noted that at the time the migration of artists, including of course musicians, was a major unifying factor. Indeed, whether seeking fame and better economic prospects, or invited by one of the many artistically inclined rulers, the migrating Arab and non-Arab artists helped both as performers and teachers to disseminate the new style and its fundamental norms. This extensive spread and diversification of the Great Musical Tradition via wandering artists differs from the process that marked the first phase of the new style in Ḥidjāz, where the new ideas came from non-Arab musicians brought in under coercion.

The ideal of learning

The portrait of the perfect musician as reflected in sources of the early 'Abbāsid period, known as the Golden Age, can be summarized as follows: he is gifted with an extraordinary natural bent for music, combining creative power and great ability as a performer; he is a singer and plays one or more instruments; he can write prose and verse; and, finally, he is a man of wide culture. The latter attribute conforms with the general deference to learning and the newly accepted standards for all human activities. This approach was outstanding particularly among the administrative secretaries – *kuttāb* (pl. of *kātib*) – who, during the first period of the 'Abbāsid caliphate, played an important role in the development of various aspects of culture, including music. The *kuttāb* controlled the economic and political management of the state and filled the high administrative positions. They were a dynamic element of the Persian-born establishment but tried to assimilate within the Arab aristocracy. This highly educated élite encouraged and patronized poets, *literati* and musicians; not a few of them also acquired fame in the world of letters and music. One of these, the qualified musician Yūnus al-Kātib (d. ca 765) who was a highly esteemed poet, wrote the first book on music: *Kitāb al-aghānī* (Book of Melodies).

The career of the *kātib* presupposed a solid education in all branches of knowledge, providing him with the intellectual tools necessary to accomplish his highly varied tasks. Hence a well-educated *kātib* signified a man imbued with the cultural pluralism reflected in the work known as *adab*, which integrated Arabic, Persian, Indian, Syriac and Hellenistic humanistic features. His cultural openness led him to embrace new literary and poetic orientations that to some extent disengaged themselves from the bonds of the traditional style.

The famous writer ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. ca 760), who started his career as a *kātib* under the Umayyads, was the author of a special cultural synthesis meant for the use of secretaries. He is chiefly remembered for his rendition in Arabic of a collection of the old Indian Fables of *Bidapai*.

For his Arabic translation, Ibn al-Muqaffa' used a Pahlavi, or Middle Persian adaptation of a work in Sanskrit made in the time of the Sassanian king Anushirvan Khusraw I (531–579). The work in its Pahlavi adaptation took its title *Kalilag u Dimnag* (rendered in Arabic *Kalīla wa-Dimna*), from corrupt forms of *Karataka* and *Damnaka*, the Sanskrit names of two jackals who dominate the opening narrative. The book was intended to instruct princes in the laws of polity by means of animal fables. The Arabic version of *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, one of the oldest prose works in the Arabic language, is regarded as a model of elegant style; it was also one of those books which inspired many Muslim artists whose miniatures illustrate a considerable number of manuscripts (CHAL 35: 50–53). Many such works are classified

as *adab* (CHAL 35: 16–30), a term that embodies various meanings. It is applied to works of diverse character and form. Charles Pellat distinguishes three basic types: 'According to whether it aims to instil ethical precepts, to provide its readers with a general education, or to lay down guiding principles for members of the various professions' (CHAL 35: 83). The prolific prose writer and freethinker al-Djāḥiẓ (d. 868–9) is considered the originator of the genre and practitioner of all three types. It is noteworthy that the various early references to music are all conceived in the spirit of the *adab* genre.

Literary and anecdotal writings on music

Many of al-Djāḥiẓ's works include either random or more consistent references to music, primarily non-technical in nature. In his masterpiece *Kitāb al-ḥayawān* (The Book of Animals), an anthology based on animals and leading rather unexpectedly into theology, metaphysics, sociology, and so forth, there are several thoughtful observations on music, performance practice, musicians, the place of music in human and animal life, characteristics of sounds and the effect of music on the souls of men and animals. His treatise *Risālat al-qiyān* (On the Singing-Girls), a favourite topic with authors in the first centuries of Islam, became a model defending this class of female musicians and the ideal they embodied in their synthesis of music, beauty and love. The treatise also deals with famous singing-girl favourites of Persian and Arab kings. The classification of musicians who belong to a professional class, and the rank they occupy in it, constitutes the topic of his other treatise *Ṭabaqāt al-mughannīn* (Book of the Classes of Singers). Al-Djāḥiẓ's recourse to the term *ṭabaqāt* is quite significant since it was in common use with respect to different branches of knowledge during that period. It made its first and foremost appearance in the framework of the *ḥadīth* (Traditions of the Prophet) which in the course of time acquired the force of law (see Chapter 4). Each *ḥadīth* is composed of a basic text, *matn*, the authenticity of which was guaranteed by a chain of witnesses. Due to the importance of the verifying details concerning the transmitters, a sizeable literature flourished which classified the transmitters into hierarchical groups, categories and generations – *ṭabaqāt*. In its application to other fields, namely to poets and musicians, the genre adopted criteria emphasizing values of rank and merit, again having recourse to a chain of transmitters. Thus, in a biographical item about a male singer, instrumentalist, singing-girl, or in the presentation of collections of songs by one or more musicians, one would invariably find a recurring pattern: a series of modular traditions or a series of events that conform to the nature of the narrative material. Each is introduced by a chain of transmitters and deals with practical details rather than general rules.

Most of the writings on music that belong to this category, including the most outstanding, The Book of Songs by Abū'l-Faradj al-Iṣfahānī, use another significant term – *khabar* and the technique associated with it, which is the oldest form of Muslim historiography. It consists, as F. Rosenthal writes,

> of a well-rounded description of a single event. . . . It does not imply any fixed point in time, nor is it ever restricted to mean an organically connected series of events. Each *khabar* is complete in itself and tolerates no reference to any kind of supplementary material. In its formulation there is preference for dramatic situation and colour as against sober fact. It is, then, primarily an artistic form of expression. (Rosenthal 26: 66)

This way of describing the distinctive traits, primacy and exclusivity of exceptional artists, tends to give the musician a kind of mythical aura.

It is regrettable that many writings of this sort by famous musicians such as Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī, Yūnus al-Kātib, Yaḥya al-Makkī and his son, 'Amr ibn Bāna and others, have not come down to us. We can however, learn something about them from the quotations included in *adab* and encyclopedic books, and particularly from the best and most comprehensive work of this kind – the *Kitāb al-aghānī* (Book of Songs) by the historian and man of letters Abū'l-Faradj al-Iṣfahānī. The inclusion of discussions on music and musicians in historical, encyclopedic, educational and entertaining writings of the epoch meant, above all, that in a society avid for knowledge the study of music became obligatory for every learned person; music was one of the topics frequently discussed by people in all walks of life. Moreover, such inclusion reflects the great passion of the ruling class, the nobility and wealthy people for music itself as an indispensable means of expression and communication. One may assume that these circumstances were among the major factors that led to the hostile attitude toward music adopted by not a few theologians and legalists, a topic that will be dealt with below.

The growing interest in written or oral discussions about music found expression in anecdotal and literary form, refined discussion at banquets, as well as in systematic, scientific treatment, which will be dealt with in Chapter 5.

The musician and his public

The courts of the caliphs and other sovereigns, the palaces of the nobility and the sumptuous houses of the wealthy bourgeoisie served as major venues in which the musician could display the best of his art. He was encouraged and highly rewarded by patrons fond of music and poetry, fine connoisseurs who were often proficient musicians themselves, such as the Caliph al-Wāthiq (842–47) and the prince Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī – who

after a brief reign (816–818) distinguished himself as one of the most important musicians of the age. The largest number of famous musicians simultaneously associated with one patron included 18 celebrities attached to the court of the legendary Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (786–809), not to mention the dozens of singing-girls who helped enhance the court's musical life. According to social conventions modelled after Sassanian etiquette, when performing, most of the musicians were separated from the caliph by the curtain *(sitāra)* mentioned above. Whenever an outstanding musician succeeded in stirring the caliph's emotions and curiosity, eunuchs would come from behind the curtain to learn more about the song and its performer, who would eventually be invited to a *tête-à-tête* with the caliph (Neubauer 114).

Such instances are recounted in a highly colourful manner in the *Kitāb al-aghānī*. According to one of them, ibn Djāmi' (d. 805) came all the way from Mecca to the court of Hārūn al-Rashīd in Baghdad in the hope of improving his economic situation. On the way he was charmed by the singing of a black woman who balanced a water jar on her head. He proceeded to spend all the money he had so that the woman would teach him the song. Before taking leave of him, she predicted that the song would bring him a thousandfold the amount he had spent on it. This prophecy comes true: after he repeats the song three times from behind the curtain, the Caliph Hārūn invites him to a *tête-à-tête* and favours him with a reward equal to a thousand times the amount he had given the black woman. This story may also symbolize the sweet tenderness that distinguished his art, which one of his contemporaries likened to honey (Caussin de Perceval 88: 526–546). As a court musician he was soon at odds with Hārūn's chief courtier and boon companion (*nadīm*) Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī (d. 804).

As regards the *nadīm* or drinking-partner, outstanding poets and musicians often became their patron's boon-companions as well as their entertainers and confidants, particularly when a patron developed a real interest in music or poetry. In works discussing the etiquette of wine and wine-parties, which necessarily included singing, playing on instruments and occasionally dancing, one finds the *nadīm's* code of conduct. There are also specialized treatises like the one written by the poet and astrologer Abū'l-Fatḥ Kushādjim (d. 971): *Kitāb adab al-nadīm* (Book on the Conduct of the Boon Companion). The fifth chapter in this treatise, which deals with the correct behaviour of a boon companion and features related to companionship, concerns listening to music in company and the resulting soul-satisfying pleasure.

Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī, who was elevated by Caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd to the foremost position and became his boon companion – hence his nickname, al-Nadīm – was considered the most versatile musician, singer and instrumentalist; he was also a prolific composer. He had 900 compositions to his

credit and, inspired by superhuman spirits, the *djinns*, he introduced the rhythmic mode of a light character *al-mākhūrī* (Caussin de Perceval 88: 546–566). Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī was involved in an artistic controversy with ibn Djāmiʿ, in which other court musicians took part. Among the supporters of Ibrāhīm were his son Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī (d. 850) and his brother-in-law Zalzal (d. 791), known as *al-ḍārib* (the instrumentalist) because as a lutanist he had no equal; Zalzal is also credited with the invention of a new type of *ʿūd* called the *ʿūd al-shabbūt*, and with defining the neutral third that was given the name *wusṭa* Zalzal. The supporters of Ibn Djāmiʿ included Mukhāriq (d. ca 845), a freed slave of Hārūn who won high favour in the courts of four caliphs, and ʿAqīd. The argument between the two rivals represented a confrontation between two tendencies, the Ancients and the Moderns; it became more vehement with the two famous rivals of the next generation, Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī and prince Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī.

Isḥāq is considered the greatest musician of all time and is regarded as the archetype of the perfect, widely cultured musician. In addition to his merit as singer, instrumentalist, composer, theorist and musicographer, he wrote poetry and prose. He was also so well-versed in jurisprudence and philology that Caliph al-Maʾmūn allowed him to appear in his court as an *adīb* (a master of *adab* matters) in the company of writers and scholars. It is said of him that he was outstanding in any assembly of scholars, excelling in entertaining conversation (Bencheikh 124). According to the sources, Isḥāq was very jealous of his art and rarely agreed to disclose its secrets. Due to his powerful influence, his opinion about the music of other artists was usually decisive for their career. The Moroccan man of letters and biographer al-Maqqarī (1591–1632) reports a colourful story that will be discussed in the section on Andalusian music in Chapter 6, according to which Isḥāq's highly gifted pupil had to leave the court, and Baghdad as well, as a result of his master's jealousy. As a typical product of the Baghdad milieu, Isḥāq also wrote as many as 39 works on music, most of which belong to the biographical type; they were dedicated to many famous musicians known up to his time. Unfortunately they have all been lost (Farmer 3: 3–5).

Baghdad-born prince Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī (779–839) was also one of the most accomplished and cultured musicians of his day. Although he belonged to the ruling class, he behaved and dressed like a genuine 'bohemian', passing much of his time in the company of poets, musicians and singing-girls. This 'romantic' figure became the leader of a modernistic school that attempted to free itself from the bonds of the strict rhythmic and melodic rules laid down by the Ancients. He advocated more artistic freedom and the giving of wider scope to the creative imagination. This was the very ground on which the controversy broke out between him and Isḥāq, who was committed to defending the values of the ancient and classical style. The latter reproached the modernists for having opposed the old

school's ideal of simplicity and promulgating a new style marked by a tendency to exuberant or excessive embellishment of the melodic line. Consequently, it was argued, the full significance of the text was blurred. The singer and lutanist 'Allūyah or 'Allawayh, whose grandfather was among the Persian prisoners taken by the Umayyad caliph al-Walīd and freed by him, sided with ibn al-Mahdī although he had been taught music by Isḥāq himself. He is said to have introduced characteristic Persian elements to his music. Another supporter of the modernists, 'Amr ibn Bāna, son of a noted *kātib* (scribe), was also among the former pupils of Isḥāq who was strongly supported by the lutanist Zalzal. The controversy found expression in various forms: challenging competitions were held, there were song tournaments with prizes for the winners and debates took place on aesthetic and technical questions. The argument is the subject of numerous accounts appearing mainly in *Kitāb al-aghānī*.

In a dialogue between Isḥāq and 'Allawayh, the latter informs Isḥāq that his rival, Prince Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī, reproaches him for having neglected to use a device called *taḥrīk al-ghinā'* (embellishing the song while composing). He emphasizes that the beauty of a song consists in its embellishment; the *taḥrīk*, says ibn al-Mahdī, provides the song with many notes. To this allegation Isḥāq replies: 'May we only transmit that we have learned in the same manner that it was taught to us'. In this way Isḥāq expressed his opposition to the excessively lavish embellishment of the melodic line. Another story relates that Isḥāq sent a messenger to taunt his rival ibn al-Mahdī for having pronounced a certain word incorrectly while performing a given song. Immediately guessing the nature of the mission, ibn al-Mahdī said to his guest: 'Tell him you do this (make music) academically while we do it for entertainment and harmless fun'.

This kind of argument took place not only in the caliph's court but in the dwellings of important personages of the ruling class and in the houses of the rich bourgeoisie as well. In the framework of literary sessions, banquets and sumptuous celebrations that brought together poets, scholars and notables, the musician was king; he enhanced the gathering with the finest fruits of his art and participated in the elegant conversation. In many instances, this was the occasion for him to present a first audition of his songs and to teach them to the singing-girls owned by the master of the house (Farmer 100).

The *qayna* (female musician) was an institution in itself, that in some ways dominated the musical scene of the age. As a rule she was a beautiful, gifted slave-girl whose owner endeavoured to provide her with the best education possible with a view to eventually selling her for a very high price. She received her musical training from the most famous musicians of the day; the same held true for all other branches of culture. Hence the accomplished *qayna* could extemporize verses, conduct gracious conversation

with guests and gladden their hearts with songs and instrumental music ('Amrūchī 109; 'Allāf 117).

Commerce in female musicians flourished and wealthy people would pay a fortune to acquire one or more of them. The greatest number of these girls was to be found in the caliph's courts. It is said that a hundred of them used to sing and play for the Caliph Hārūn; some of them were freed and gained access to very exalted social status. The prolific writer al-Djāḥiẓ provided a model of an accomplished *qayna* in a treatise dedicated to the singing-girls. He argued with those who adversely criticized possession of these girls and the gatherings with them spent in drinking and listening to music. The female-singers excelled as instrumentalists, particularly on the long-necked lute, the *ṭunbūr*, which was considered effeminate in character. They also distinguished themselves by the rapidity with which they learned and memorized new songs. This might have been the origin of Iṣḥāq's saying: 'Music is like a book that men conceive and women register'. It could also explain the stories according to which musicians subjected to an overwhelming, usually nocturnal, inspiration by *djinns* (supernatural powers) urgently summon their female-singers, to dictate the songs before they vanish from memory.

Many *qaynāt* gained celebrity and were greatly admired for their accomplishments. Among the well-known female singers, mention should be made of 'Urayb who acquired a tremendous reputation and received the highest praise from Iṣḥāq al-Mawṣilī. Then there was 'Ubayda, surnamed the *ṭunbūrīyya* because of her outstanding artistry on the *ṭunbūr;* Iṣḥāq said: 'In the art of *ṭunbūr* playing, anyone who seeks to go beyond 'Ubayda makes mere noise'. Shāriya was purchased, trained and freed by Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī, and later became his wife. Badhl was admired by Iṣḥāq al-Mawṣilī for her prodigious memory and the fabulous number of songs she retained. Her pupil Danānīr, a gifted poetess and musician who had also been trained by Ibrāhim al-Mawṣilī and his son Iṣḥāq, was the author of a Book of Songs (Stigelbauer 125).

Finally, brief mention should be made of the class of *ẓarīf* which indicates an elegant, cultivated type of poet and musician who seeks refinement (Bencheikh 124). Although not part of the privileged class, these mostly effeminate individuals of modest extraction were admitted everywhere and admired by all.