

The Role of Women in Musical Life

The Medieval Arabo-Islamic Courts

By Suzanne Meyers Sawa

Edward Lane, the great nineteenth century lexicographer of the Arabic language and a skilled observer of Egyptian society, remarked in his book *The Modern Egyptians*: "The Egyptians in general are excessively fond of music; and yet they regard the study of this fascinating art (like dancing) as unworthy to employ any portion of the time of a man of sense."¹ This attitude persists to the present day, and is particularly noticeable in the field of music history, a subject to my knowledge not taught in the conservatories of the Arab world. Especially for the medieval period, the "Golden Age of Islam," the sources available for study are rich and numerous indeed, and indicate an extraordinary amount of cultural activity in the courts. The importance of these sources for the study of the role of women in this cultural life cannot be overestimated. They supply overwhelming evidence of women's important roles as singers, instrumentalists, composers, educators, and as repositories and transmitters of a vast oral repertoire.

The stories I have chosen to illustrate these various functions come from the single most important source for the study of women's role in early Arabo-Islamic music: the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, or Book of Songs, of Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī, who lived from AD897-AD967. This anthology contains much lost material and forms the basis for many anthologies written from the tenth century onwards. In twenty-four volumes (approximately ten thousand pages) the *Book of Songs* is a unique source for the study of social, cultural, musical and literary histories. The fifteenth century historian Ibn Khaldūn called it "the register of the

Arabs. It comprises all that they had achieved in the past of excellence in every kind of poetry, history, music, et cetera. So far as I am aware, no other book can be put on a level with it in this respect..."²

More specifically, the *Book of Songs* is an anthology in anecdotal form covering the biographies and activities of poets and musicians, inside and outside the courts, from the fifth to the tenth centuries, in Arabia, Iraq, Syria and Persia. Al-Iṣbahānī spent fifty years compiling it, and followed in his narration of anecdotes the tradition of Muslim historiographers in using oral and written *isnād*, the notionally uninterrupted chain of authorities on which knowledge of an event is based. His sources are the now lost works of musicians who related musical events, the works of their descendants, correspondences exchanged between musicians which al-Iṣbahānī was close enough in time to find and write down, and oral accounts from living musicians and their descendants. Al-Iṣbahānī was careful in the choice of narrators, he compiled his material critically, and often collated sources. The fact that he was an active participant in cultural life as poet and performer further gave him credibility as a critical compiler.

According to al-Iṣbahānī, women were noted as bearers of a vast oral repertoire (you might say they functioned as human library collections!). The female songstress Rayyiq, who lived in the early ninth century A.D., tells this story of herself:

Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī [prince-musician, half brother of Hārūn al-Rashīd of Thousand and One Nights fame] became ill with a sickness which brought him near death. He began to remember his passion for singing and what he had

achieved in it, and he lamented [its passing]. One of those present said "Repent and burn your books of songs." He shook his head for a while, then said, "O fools! Suppose I were to burn the songbooks. What shall I do with Rayyiq? Should I kill her because she has memorized all that is in them?" (Kitāb al-Aghānī X: 125)

Women were known as transmitters of the repertoire as well, as is shown by this story of Iṣḥāq al-Mawṣilī, the most famous musician of the entire medieval Arab world, who died in A.D. 850:

Iṣḥāq thought highly of [the slave girls] and requested that they teach his own slave girls. One day he said to the Caliph al-Ma'mūn after [the singer] Mukhāriq had sung, making mistakes in his song, "O Prince of Believers, Mukhāriq has been carried away by his own voice and his performance was not good. So order him to visit the slave girls of al-Hārith ibn Buskhunnar [who was known for his well-trained slave girls] so that he returns to [the correct version of the song]." (KA XII: 48)

In other words, a male singer was being requested to visit some trained female singers in order to learn the proper version of a song and correct his faulty performance of it.

As composers women could be as prolific as men. Here, for example, is a story about the great songstress ʿArib, who died at the age of ninety-six in A.D. 890, and whose career spanned most of the ninth century and covered the reigns of several caliphs:

Yahyā ibn ʿAlī said: "Al-Muʿtamīd commanded me by God to listen to the song ʿArib had written. Then I took her notebooks and the papers in which she

had collected her songs, copied them down; and they numbered 1000."

'Ali ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz tells us, about Ibn Khurdaḥbih: "He asked 'Arīb about her composition, and she said: "At this time it has reached 1000 songs."

Muhammad ibn Ibrāhīm Qarīd tells us that he collected her songs from the collections of poems of Ibn al-Mu'tazz and Abī al-'Ubays ibn Hamdūn; and what he took from Bid'ah, her slave girl, who had been given to her by the Banū Hāshim. He compared them and they were 1125 songs. (KA X: 55)

As well, women were known for being able to compose on the spot, that is, to improvise. Here is a story about the half-sister of that famous caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd, 'Ulayyah:

Hammād ibn Iṣhāq said: "Al-Rashīd visited 'Ulayyah and said to her, "By God, O my sister, sing to me." So she said, "By your life, I will make a poem on you and set it to music." She at once said:

Your sister sacrificed for you, for you had bestowed a favour [on her]

Whose like we cannot reckon at any time in history,

Except for eternity, and this is your closeness, my lord,

Your closeness remains, and the remaining [days] are long.

I thank God for answering my supplication

And I see [that] my thanks for this are but little.

Then she immediately set a melody to it. Al-Rashīd felt tarab [that is, an acute emotion of joy or grief] and he drank on it the rest of the day. (KA X: 181)

A woman became a musician either through slavery or aristocratic birth. This produced three social types: slaves, freed slaves, and noblewomen. Although a slave could be freed for any reason, freedom was automatic for a slave girl who bore a child to her owner; the child was freed as well. Freed slaves often went on to fabulously lucrative careers; the prima donnas like 'Arīb had their own singing schools and owned slaves as well.

These slave girl [the Arabic word is *jāriya*, pl. *jawāri*] musicians were financially lucrative for those who undertook to train them and sell them, for great prices were paid for skilled practitioners of music. For example, 'Ulayyah bint al-Mahdī [remember she was the half-sister of Hārūn al-Rashīd] was the daughter of a female slave who was purchased for 100,000 dirhams, at a time when a good

income for a "middle-class" family was 300 dirhams per month.³

Like their male counterparts, women musicians were highly educated for the role of boon companion to the aristocracy and the upper classes, being trained not only in music, but in belles lettres, philosophy, grammar, and history. The *Kitāb al-Aghānī* illustrates these requisites in describing the renowned 'Arīb:

'Arīb was a skilled singer, and a good poetess. She was a good calligrapher, was well-spoken, and possessed the utmost in loveliness, beauty, and gracefulness. She had a beautiful figure, was an excellent lutenist, and reached perfection in craft [of composition], knowledge of the modal system [modes and strings] and in the narration of poetry and literature. (KA XXI: 54)

In another witness to the manifold skills of 'Arīb, Hammād ibn Iṣhāq, the son of the famous Iṣhāq al-Mawṣilī who was mentioned earlier, reported:

My father said to me, "I did not see a better women lutenist than 'Arīb, nor one better in craft or more beautiful of face, nor more charming, nor better in speech, nor more quick-witted, nor better at playing chess or backgammon, nor more complete of good qualities. I

did not see the like of her among other women. (KA XXI: 54)

Women were also able to criticize male counterparts, as shown in this story of Ibn Ṭāhir:

I brought al-Hishām with me to Samarra [at that time this city was the capital of the 'Abbasid empire instead of Baghdad] and brought him into [the Caliph] al-Mu'tazz who was drinking while 'Arīb was singing. Al-Mu'tazz said to him: "O Ibn Hisham, sing!" He replied: "I have repented of singing since the time my master [the Caliph] al-Mutawakkil was murdered." So 'Arīb said: "By God, you did well to repent when you did, for your singing had little intrinsic qualities, it lacked craft, perfection, and tarab." She caused all the people in the majlis [or gathering] to laugh at him; as a result he was very embarrassed. (KA XXI: 57-8)

Women were also compared favorably to men. The singer-composer Ibn al-Rabi' said: "There was not in all Islam a brother and sister better in singing than Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī and his sister 'Ulayyah, and she was considered better than he" (KA X: 163). In another account, Iṣhāq al-Mawṣilī, who was a very tough critic, and who spared not even the most talented



male composers of the time from his attacks on their craft, had only the highest praise for ʿArib (KA XXI: 56-57).

Aristocratic women, like aristocratic men, were not regarded as professionals, but as skilled dilettantes. Even this was not viewed positively, as musical skills for both men and women were not to be acknowledged publicly. In another story about the princess ʿUlayyah, Muhammad ibn Ismāʿil ibn Mūsā al-Hādī said:

I was at [the court] of al-Muʿtasim and there were [the singers] Mukhārīq and ʿAllūyah, and Muḥammad ibn al-Hārith and ʿAqīd. So ʿAqīd sang and I played ʿūd for him:

*My critics slept but I could not sleep
The slanderers took revenge on my sickness
So if I said there is not pain in me
My beloved would doubt my pain.*

Al-Muʿtasim felt *ṭarab* and said, "Who is the poet and composer?" All refrained from answering. So I said: "It is ʿUlayyah." They turned away from me, so that I knew my error, and that the people had not answered on purpose. I was silenced, and my state [of embarrassment] became clear. (KA X: 167)

In another story, Muḥammad ibn Jaʿfar ibn Yahyā ibn Khālīd reported:

When I was young I witnessed my father Jaʿfar while he was telling my grandfather Yahyā ibn Khālīd about some of what happened to him when he was alone with [Hārūn]al-Raṣhīd. He said, "O father, the Prince of Believers took me by the hand and drew near to a room, passing through it until we approached a closed room. It was opened for him. Then those servants who had been with us withdrew. Then we went to a closed room and he opened it with his [own] hand. [this means they were really alone — no servants to open the door]. We entered together and he closed it from the inside with his [own] hand. Then we came to a curtain, and he drew it aside. At its front was a closed majlis, so he sat down at the door of the majlis. Then Hārūn knocked at the door with his [own] hand and we heard a voice. He repeated the knock, then we heard the sound of an ʿūd playing. Then the Prince of Believers said to her after she had sung some songs, 'Sing my song' and that was:

*A male singer heard the wedding procession
And before him sang slave girls veiled and unveiled*

He robbed himself in coquetry and went out beating his duff [frame drum]

In a way that caused gladness and tarab

The women saw him and fell in love with him

So that they complained of their hardship, but he said that they lied.

He said, "I reached such a state of tarab, by God, that I felt like banging my head into the wall. Then [al-Raṣhīd] said, "Sing 'My believing and disbelieving have gone on [too] long'" and she sang

*My believing and disbelieving have gone on [too] long
I have not found fulfillment of a promise
People in love betray causing a breaking of the covenant
You will never see me after them complaining of love to the beloved.*

He said, "al-Raṣhīd danced and I danced with him. Then he said "Let's go, for I am afraid that we will do more than this." So we left. When we came to the corridor he grabbed my hand and said, "Do you know who this woman is?" I said, "No, O Prince of Believers." He said, "I know you will ask about her and will not conceal asking. I will tell you: she is ʿUlayyah bint al-Mahdī. By God, if you say this in front of anyone I will kill you." Then [the grandfather] said "By God, you've said it, and now he'll kill you!" (KA X: 178-180)

Although these aristocratic women faced limits to their public appearances, due to the restrictions of the harem system and the code of honour involving seclusion of women, they had access to resources which other classes might not have had. There is a wonderful anecdote about two noble women, the sisters-in-law ʿUlayyah and Zubaydah [the wife of Hārūn al-Raṣhīd, in this story called Umm Jaʿfar, "the mother of Jaʿfar"] who join forces in a successful attempt to cure Hārūn of over-infatuation with a slave girl:

Abū Hiffān said: "A slave girl was given to al-Raṣhīd, of extraordinary beauty and kamal [well-rounded, completeness]. He was alone with her for a day and brought all the singing girls in his palace, and he had a morning draught. Those who came to the drinking from among his singing girls and servants numbered about 2000, [and were dressed] in the most beautiful of all types of robes and jewels. News [of

this] reached Umm Jaʿfar and [she was distressed]. She sent a message to ʿUlayyah, complaining to her. ʿUlayyah sent back a message: "Do not be scared of this. By God, I'll make him return to you, for I am determined to create a poem and make a melody for it and teach it to my slave girls, so do not keep any slave girls, but send them to me, and dress them in all kinds of robes; then they will learn the tune with my slave girls. So Umm Jaʿfar did what ʿUlayyah ordered her to do. When the time of afternoon prayer came, before al-Raṣhīd had realized it, ʿUlayyah had left her chamber and Umm Jaʿfar had left her chamber with about 2000 of her slave girls and all the slave girls of the palace, wearing all types of clothes and all singing the melody which ʿUlayyah had composed:

*He deserted me
But my heart did not desert him
O my heart-breaker today
Who after me do you intend to be with?*

*Al-Raṣhīd felt *ṭarab*, and he rose and went up until he reached Umm Jaʿfar and ʿUlayyah; he had the utmost happiness and said: "O Masrūr [his chief executioner] do not leave a [single] dirham in the treasury but scatter [them around]. The amount [of money] which he distributed that day was six million dirhams. And there has not been seen a day like this." (KA X: 172-173)*

I hope that this essay will have given the reader a brief glimpse of the many important roles women played in the music of the medieval Arab world. Much more work remains to bring to light the history of these women, and their contributions to the history of music. I hope that you will agree with me that music is indeed worthy to employ the time of a man, or a woman, of sense!

¹ Edward Lane, *The Modern Egyptians* (New York: Dover), p. 353.

² Quoted in Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 32.

³ Ahsan, *Social Life Under the ʿAbbasids* (London & New York: Longman, 1979), p. 148.