Andalusian music by: Banning Eyre of Afropop Worldwide

Thumbnail History

In 711, a Berber general named Tariq bin Ziyad crossed the narrow strait that divides northern Morocco from southern Spain and established the first Arab claim on European land. With that bold act, Tariq gave this strategic strait its permanent name: Gibraltar. Over the next eight centuries, a succession of Arab, Berber and other Muslim leaders would control portions of what is now southern Spain. The people of these mostly Muslim territories, would become known as "Moors," an imprecise term referring generally to those who crossed the Gibraltar strait and their descendants. The lands the Moors controlled--from northern cities like Toledo, recaptured by Christian Europeans in the 11th century, to the core cities of Muslim Spain, Cordoba and Seville, to the south-eastern city of Granada, home of the spectacular Alhambra--became known collectively as Al Andalus.

The name Al Andalus originally referred to a largely forgotten people who inhabited southern Spain before 711, the Vandals. For the last 200 years of its remarkable eight-century history, Al Andalus was reduced to the territory surrounding Granada, and when Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella negotiated the surrender of Granada in 1492, Al Andalus came to its official end. But given the remarkable dealings and transference of culture that had gone on over the centuries, Al Andalus would never be forgotten. Indeed, its reverberations are still felt today, not only in Spain, but throughout much of the world.

In the 8th century, Al Andalus was ruled by the Arab Umayyad dynasty out of Damascus, Syria. The Umayyads inherited the Arab territories controlled by the Prophet Mohammed at the time of his death, but in 750, the Umayyads were deposed and systematically murdered by the ascendant Abbasids. Abd al-Rahman I, the only surviving Umayyad prince, fled the eastern Mediterranean into north Africa and later emerged in Al Andalus to establish a powerful European caliphate, with Cordoba as its capital. Abd Al-Rahman I and his Umayyad successors presided over many cultural achievements, including the construction of fabulous mosques and gardens, and also great musical and literary innovations. Music and poetry reached new pinnacles in Al Andalus as the latest ideas from Damascus and Baghdad (home of the Abbasids), as well as cultural centers in North Africa and Europe, came together in the best of times in a spirit of creative tolerance.

The towering cultural figure of this period is Ziryab (Blackbird), a brilliant singer, composer, and cultural maverick, who traveled from Baghdad to Cordoba and assumed a role of mythic proportions. It is hard to separate truth from legend here, but Ziryab is credited with introducing everything from toothpaste, deodorant, and haute cuisine to revolutionary new musical ideas into European culture. During this time, the notion of rhyme schemes was transferred from Arab poetry into European verse. Many--including Jews and Christians--spoke and wrote in Arabic at the time; it was the preferred language of poets in Al Andalus. Two poetic forms defined by their rhyme schemes--the classical muwashshah and the vernacular zajal--have survived as emblems of Andalusian literary and musical arts. But while many such texts are
The marriage of Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella united the kingdoms of Castille and Aragon and effectively established the state we now call Spain. Fired with the passion of the Crusades—a centuries-long campaign to recapture Jerusalem for Christians—the Catholic church had by then begun its bloody inquisition, torturing non-Catholics and killing those who could not be converted. Beginning in 1492, a series of expulsions sought to force Moors and all human remnants of Al Andalus out of Spain. First, the target was Jews, then Muslims, but by the early 17th century, even those who had converted to Christianity to comply with the Inquisition—the so-called Moriscos—were expelled from Spain.

**The European Legacy**

Despite efforts by some to diminish or erase Arab and Muslim legacies in Europe, Al Andalus left many enduring contributions behind. Many of Europe’s modern instruments were introduced by Arabs and Moors, from the bowed rebab—ancestor of all European bowed instruments—to the oud, which became the lute, various horns and flutes, and even timpani drums, which probably trace back to huge war drums mounted on the backs of camels and horses as they rode into battle. The 13th century Cantigas de Santa Maria, one of the oldest forms of notated music in Europe, were created at the behest of Alfonso X in Toledo, who is known to have had Jewish and Muslim musicians in his court. The surviving manuscript of the Cantigas includes detailed, miniature paintings of medieval instruments, in some cases played by ensembles that included both black and white musicians.

The qiyan, Andalusian girls trained in singing and music and sold at high prices in specialized markets, spread Andalusian music in to the courts of Europe. Many musicologists believe that they had an important influence on the trouvére and troubadour traditions—both the poetry and the music—which emerged in southern France in the 11th century and spread throughout Europe leading up to the Renaissance.

In the 16th century ghettos of Valencia and Granada, surviving Moriscos rubbed shoulders with a new group of immigrants from north India, the Roma (gitanos, or gypsies), and out of these neighborhoods, the music we know as flamenco emerged.

Despite all this, Europe was a Christian land after 1492, and many—including politicians, writers, historians, and scholars of music—have worked to deny the cultural contributions of Al Andalus their rightful due in modern Europe. In recent decades, that trend has shifted noticeably, as performers of Early Music have returned to the Cantigas, the songs of the troubadours, texts of Andalusian muwashshah and zajal and other sources, in an effort to re-create the music of Al Andalus. Among these groups are Calamus and Mudejar, both projects created by the ambitious Paniagua brothers of...
Spain, also the group Altramar in the United States and many others. Other musicians have taken inspiration from these same sources in order to create original modern music aimed more at evoking than recreating Andalusian music. These groups include the celebrated Spanish world music ensemble Radio Tarifa, who were inspired by radio broadcasts they heard from Morocco, across the famous Strait of Gibraltar, and also Compagnie Marc Loopouyt and Al Andalus, a wide-ranging ensemble started by Moroccan/Andalusian oud player Tarik Banzi and his American, flamenco guitarist wife Julia Banzi.

The North African and Mediterranean Legacy

Whereas performing Andalusian music in Europe requires investigation, imagination, and surmise to piece together pieces of an all-but-lost past, the picture is very different in places like Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Syria. In these places, communities have preserved and developed Andalusian music continuously since medieval times. Of course, the intervening centuries have wrought much change, and although musicians in each of these places may make claims to direct preservation of the old Andalusian forms, the differences between these various traditions suggest that there has been substantial evolution in all these cases.

The Moroccan Andalusian tradition is the oldest and has the most long-standing ties with the actual territory of Al Andalus. Northern Moroccan cities have whole communities of people who identify themselves as Andalusian. Many still have European surnames like Diaz, Torres, Medina, Molina, Borras, and Banzi. Andalusian orchestras in places like Fes, Tangiers and Tetouane have in some cases centuries-long careers. These ensembles combine old Arab instruments like the two-string, bowed rebab, the oud and the ney flute with European string instruments and Arab percussion. Their repertoire consists of a set of suites, or nuba, a form believed to have originated in the time of Ziryab. See our second interview with Andalusian scholar Dwight Reynolds for a detailed analysis of the differences between the nuba as played in Morocco and Algeria.

In Morocco, French colonial authorities saw a value in preserving and promoting Andalusian music, known locally as ala. After independence, the music was again officially sanctioned by the new Moroccan state. As a result, Moroccans have long been accustomed to hearing orchestral nuba performed at state functions, on state radio and television, and so on. This has helped keep the music alive, but it has also so associated Andalusian music with officialdom that young musicians interested in innovation and change tend to avoid it.

In Algeria, the reverse is true. The differences start with the French administrators, who controlled Algeria for a staggering 132 years and tried to crush Andalusian music traditions, and continue to the current day with its powerful religious conservatives, offended by Andalusian music's celebration of wine-drinking and love trysts. Algeria's Andalusian music, notably in the city of Tlemcen, has the energy of a forbidden, underground genre, a quality that actually attracts young musicians to the tradition. Andalusian music also survives in Tunisia, where it is called malouf, Libya, and to a much lesser extent in Egypt, in each case with distinct local differences. The older traditions have also inspired local genres sung in vernacular dialects, like malhun in Morocco, or hawzi in Algeria.

One of the most popular surviving Andalusian music
traditions exists in Syria, home of the first great Andalusian political figures. The music returned to cities like Damascus and Aleppo, where muwashshahat are still performed today. Influences of Persian and Ottoman (Turkish) music have had more of an imprint here, and musicologists consider Syrian Andalusian music to be still further from the actual music of Al Andalus than the north African varieties.

A major force in keeping Andalusian and Arab music generally alive from Morocco to Syria is its use in religious contexts, specifically in the Sufi lodge or mosque known as the zawiya. A scholar of Syrian music, Jonathan Shannon, told Afropop Worldwide, "With almost no exceptions, the major voices of the 20th century in Syria and in Egypt all had their basic training to properly chant the Koran--Koranic cantilation recitation. From Umm Kulthum to Abdel Wahab, Sayed Darwish in Egypt, you know these great masters of the 20th century--even Abdel Halim Hafez to some degree--to Syria: Sabah Fakhri, Sabri Moudallal, even young artists, Hamam Khairi a young friend of mine who sings the muwashshat, calls himself 'Ibn Zawiya,' Son of the Sufi lodge. Because these same modes, the maqamat are used inside the zawiya as they are in the regular secular repertoire. Oftentimes the same poetic texts are used, the same sorts of genres are found in the two domains. The only real difference is that musical instruments are not normally performed in Syria inside the mosque. So the real true conservatory, in the sense of something that is conserving and preserving traditions and training the young to become master musicians is not an ugly building where they teach music notation and so forth, but rather the mosque and zawiya--that's the true conservatory. And as people told me over and over in Syria, so long as there are children going to the zawiya, and attending the dhikr, which is this ritual invocation of God accompanied chants and so forth--so long as children are going to the zawiya and the dhikr, there's no need to fear about future of Arab music."

So whether it is revivalists or modernizers creating Andalusian, or Andalusian inspired music in Europe, orchestras performing nubas in Morocco, Algeria, or Tunisia, or singers learning religious in the Sufi lodge in Aleppo, Syria, Andalusian music remains a powerful force in world music today. For a more detailed discussion of all the subjects in this essay, read our two, extensive interviews with Andalusian music scholar Dwight Reynolds of the University of California in Santa Barbara: