

## Cantigas: An Interview with EMA

EMA: What made you decide to do a Cantigas recording with Arab musicians?

Joel Cohen: We know for a fact that Alfonso el Sabio, who styled himself “King of the Three Religions,” had many Jews and Muslims at his court. A census of the court after his death tell us that there were twenty-seven musicians in all: thirteen Christians, thirteen Muslims, and a Jew.

Now there have been any number of twentieth century recordings of medieval music from more northerly parts of Europe -- Provence, France, even Germany -- with some near-Eastern flavoring added to the performance mix. I think it was Tom Binkley who started this trend in the late 1950's or early 60's on his Telefunken recordings with the Studio der Frühen Musik. We were all tremendously invigorated by that pioneering work. Problem is, there is really no evidence of Muslim-Christian interchange in those parts of Europe. Performances of troubadour songs that use Arab drums and lutes can be wonderful and pleasing. I authored more than a few of these myself during my sinful youth. But they have no basis in historical fact.

In Spain, on the other hand, the evidence of cross-cultural interchange is really there. The catch is, we don't know how it applies in any concrete instance of a notated medieval melody. I was frustrated for a number of years -- I wanted to do a Cantigas project, but for that specific repertoire I didn't have just the musical talent I though was appropriate to fill in the missing elements. I didn't just want to stick a darbouk player from Boston or Berkeley in there and bang away. That approach had already been tried. So I put my Cantigas plans in the storage room.

EMA: What made you change your mind?

Joel Cohen: It was a concert of Moroccan music at the Longy School in Cambridge about five years ago. One of the two ensembles performing that night was the Abelkrim Rais Orchestra of Fez, one of the leading proponents of the traditional Arab-Andalusian repertoire. They played for about 45 minutes and I was blown away. I said to myself “these are the guys I want to work with.”

EMA: Was it really that simple?

Joel Cohen: I went backstage at intermission, intending to talk to the leader, Mohammed Briouel. There was a hefty, dark-skinned bodyguard at the door to the dressing room. “Sorry, you can't come in,” says he, moving to block the view. “My name is Joel Cohen,” I answer in French. Sudden big smile. “Aha, you're a Moroccan, come right in.” The rest, I guess, is history.

EMA: How did you prepare the project?

Joel Cohen: By going to Morocco four times. There were still classical record companies willing to take those kinds of risks in the 1990's, and my expenses were covered by Warner-Erato. For my first lesson in Arabic music I sat down with Mohammed, he had a violin and I a lute, he would play a phrase, I would imitate it until I got it right. I understand Koran is taught the same way.

Then I would bring in Cantigas melodies and Mohammed would learn them, quickly relating most of them to various parts of the Arab-Andalusian modal system. He affirms that most of the Cantigas melodies are entirely assimilable in style to the medieval Arabic noubas. Only rarely would he be

stumped. Once I showed him, without saying what I knew about it, one of the Cantigas melodies that derives from a trouvère song by Rogeret de Cambrai. He played it over a couple of times, frowned, and then said, "Sorry, it's not one of ours." This gave credence to the other things he was telling me.

Later, we rehearsed on location with the other cast members, who flew in from France or the U.S.

EMA: To move away from specifically musical issues, you're an American, and Jewish. Did you feel uncomfortable in Morocco?

Joel Cohen: On the contrary. To my initial surprise, I felt like I was coming home to a part of myself.

Of course, there is a sense of otherness at the outset. On top of that, I was there the first time (and once thereafter) during Ramadan. My hotel room window and balcony opened on a square with a mosque, and there were ceremonies and chanting, including loud trumpet blasts, late into the night. To be awakened at 4 A.M. by the trumpets of the Last Judgement is a surprising experience.

But the strangeness quickly gave way to the feeling that I had already been there in another incarnation. Perhaps it's my Semitic genes that were speaking to me. More rationally, it's the historical fact that Morocco's civilization is multi-cultural, incorporating Arabic, Berber, Spanish, black African, and Jewish elements. You feel all of that on the street, and in the human contacts you make there. Moroccan cities like Casablanca and Fez had big and well-integrated Jewish minorities, much like New York or pre-war Amsterdam.

And then I learned from my daily contacts that hospitality is one of the most sacred tenets of Islam. One is quickly made to feel like a member of the family. One restaurant owner in the medieval Medina of Fez got to where he wouldn't let me pay for dinner. Each time I came back, we would sit together in this magnificent, crumbling Andalusian courtyard, eat olives and eggplant paté, and listen to his cassette tapes of gnawa music. That's an ecstatic, religious, folk style from the South much influenced by black African culture. We would just enjoy the moment of being together and sensing the goodness of life -- it's a real Arab thing, they even have a word for this sense of shared pleasure and warmth, which goes to show, since we have no such term, how impoverished we Westerners are in some respects.

Back to the musical production. The same sense of fraternity grew rapidly among us "Occidental" cast members of the Cantigas production and the Moroccan musicians. There were both personal and professional reasons why we all hit it off so well. On the musical level, they are really interested in sharing their Andalusian heritage with the outside world. These guys did not discover medieval music at a summer workshop, or in graduate school -- they learned it, as Catholics used to do, as part of a lived heritage. The noubas music they play is, they claim, the court music of medieval Islamic Spain. By the way, I take that claim seriously. At any rate, when I explained that I was preparing a program of medieval Spanish music they all went, Cool, that's exactly the business we're already in. The fact that I was bringing another aspect of medieval Spain -- the Christian side -- to them was an element of bonding.

EMA: Did the Moroccans have problems with the Christian content of the poetry?

Joel Cohen: Hardly any. The Cantigas are all about the Virgin. Mary, or Meryam, is venerated by Muslims as the Virgin Mother of Jesus. Some of the most tender passages in the Koran are about her. Therefore, no problem.

I did go over the poems, line by line, with a solo singer who is also a consecrated Islamic cantor. He told me he had to believe in a sacred text before he could sing it. He objected to a couple of phrases about the divinity of Jesus, which we allowed him to omit, and sang all the rest as if he had been doing it all his life. Then one percussionist, also a Muslim cantor, suggested we add some Hebrew to the mix, and so we did and do in the concert production.

EMA: This does not sound very much like the fanaticism we read about in the papers.

Joel Cohen: Not at all. Yet this kind of tolerance is a reality, and a historic reality, not just a weird blip on the map. Islam across the centuries has provided, by and large, a more tolerant space for minority religions and beliefs than has Christianity.

The West has a skewed view of Islam. The bad P.R. goes back to the Crusades, and it has caused a lot of us to shut down towards one of this planet's major civilizations. We study ancient Greece and Rome, and the Italian Renaissance, and the French Enlightenment, but what do we know about the great centuries of Arab creativity? The philosophy, the music? Not enough, in my opinion.

EMA: So does your upcoming Cantigas tour in November have a political agenda?

Joel Cohen: That was the last thing on my mind when I started out to make a CD of a medieval manuscript. I just wanted to make a statement about the music, period.

But, as an anonymous troubadour once wrote, "S\*\*\* happens." We didn't choose this historical moment. Let's however try to bring something positive out of it. The reality of medieval Spain was that different ethnic groups and different religions coexisted and interacted for centuries in countless ways, many of which were fantastically fertile and positive. Without preaching about it, I want to show that these different people and faiths once managed to get along, that they still get along when the right conditions are present, and that the future of mankind had better be like this Cantigas production, because the alternatives are much less enjoyable.