

Orientalism and the Orient: An early music view, ca. 2000

Was there a near-Eastern or Arabic musical influence on European music of the Middle Ages? Few questions in the world of historical performance are as alluringly seductive as this one. And few have engendered a greater measure of polemic! We can take up this topic yet again in one of two ways: On the one hand, we can reflect on what happened, or what we can reconstrue to have happened, as part of the historical record in those distant centuries. On the other hand we can consider the question, closer to us in time, of what I shall call early-music Orientalism, a phenomenon that began to be noticed in concert performances and recordings starting in the late nineteen sixties. Most of what I want to say in this essay will have to do with our recent orientalist fascination, but I do want to begin with some observations about the historical record, or at any rate, our attempts to create a historical record.

Let us take it as a given the purely objective understanding of this historical topic can never be possible, and this for a variety of often-discussed reasons. On the other hand, we can certainly move beyond the usual clichés of the music marketplace (some of which I will discuss shortly) to arrive at a better understanding of European and near-Eastern musical interactions. To this end, the Utrecht Festival has invited a number of prominent Moroccan musicians to present concerts this year. To be sure, current Moroccan musical practice cannot be expected to replicate medieval traditions in every detail. But the claim of Moroccan classical musicians that they conserve the Arabic-Andalusian tradition of medieval Spain must be taken seriously. I for one believe that some important part of the European Iberic past is still present in the Moroccan repertoires of today.¹

Right now, however, I want to talk not about Moroccan musicians and their centuries-old repertoires, but about something more recent, and more controversial. I would like to examine the conscious attempts by modern-day Europeans and Americans to include Orientalizing elements into their performances of medieval European music.

I sometimes wonder if the numerous medieval consorts that enthusiastically incorporate ouds, darbouks, finger cymbals, and other such paraphernalia into their performances of troubadour songs or Italian laude are aware of themselves as descending from the romantic Orientalism of the nineteenth century. I know, it is currently fashionable to treat the early music movement as something radically modernist, akin somehow to Cubism and dodecaphony. To me, however, the orientalising of many ensembles since the days of Thomas Binkley, Andrea von Ramm, and the Studio der Frühen Musik is a kind of nostalgic romanticism.

Binkley, whose pioneering, Arabizing arrangements of medieval song repertoires began our modern performance-practice tradition, would probably have reacted with gruff anger at attempts to characterize him as a Romantic. Yet the roots of his aesthetic choices lay, I am convinced, in his extensive reading in European cultural history. Much of that nineteenth century historicism had a Romantic grounding.

1. A number of arguments support this claim, which deserves a fuller discussion than I can provide here. One key point, however: the Moroccans themselves (and I along with them) point to the diatonic nature of their modal system as they argue for its kinship with medieval European practices. The microtonality so prevalent in Arabic music east of Morocco and Algeria is absent from the Arabo-andalusian repertoire of the Western Maghreb. These scales resemble ours, and the melodies can be accurately notated in European staff notation..

This man was himself the son of an eminent historian, knew all about the formal and aesthetic parallels between classic Arabic poetry and the love songs of the Provençal troubadours. He was also searching for his own version of a meaningful past, as indeed most of us in the early music movement have been so searching. Binkley's verbal arguments for his experiments were couched in the language of modern scholarship and scientific method; yet, I argue, what drove him into the field was a romantic impulse. Early music as modernism? Perhaps. But relistening to some of those old Studio performances I am reminded less of Picasso than of Delacroix.

I want to move backwards from Binkley's orientalizing experiments in medieval monody to some of the books he has surely have read. Juan Ribera's *La Musica de las Cantigas* of 1922 was a peculiar mix of invaluable historical research and loopy fantasizing, of valuable scholarship and misty neo-19th century Romanticism. He claimed that the Cantigas melodies had a strong connection with Arabo-andalusian repertoire, a claim that some of us still believe to have merit. His musical transcriptions, however, including modern piano accompaniments, were in a class, and a planet, of their own. Ribera, like many an Orientalist before and since, like Binkley, like all of us in the field (let's be honest with ourselves!), mixed his own personal cocktail of objective knowledge and wish fulfillment.²

Now let me move forward in time from Tom Binkley's work, and to his experiments as simplified and further popularised by the Clemencic Consort in their immensely influential recordings of the 1970's. The Binkley and Clemencic recordings together established a new oral tradition, a kind of canon for the performance of medieval monody. Much of what we experience now as medieval music performance has a very great deal to do with these quite recent practices. Any number of younger ensembles went to those sound recordings for guidance and inspiration, creating thus a kind of closed-circuit medievalism with few roots in the actual past.

Moreover, an Arabism which might conceivably have some plausibility with regards to the music of Spain and Portugal was applied, somewhat indiscriminately, to the entire field of medieval monody. Let me give an example: I remember, about ten years ago, a conference on troubadour song that was held in Paris. Several French ensembles were invited to give examples of their work. Every single group that performed included an oriental instrumentarium featuring a large Persian drum. Why? There is not a single mention of drums, Persian or otherwise, in medieval sources relating to the troubadours. Nor is there a single medieval illumination portraying a troubadour declaiming to the accompaniment of a drum. But there had been a commercially successful vinyl album of troubadour songs in the mid-70's, featuring the arresting work of a gifted Iranian drummer, and that contemporary experiment set the tone for future work. Early-music Orientalism, an essentially self-referential field, was born. And the recent model was widely copied; only a few years back a movie whose scenario dealt with the French middle ages began with the time-and-place-evoking sound of...a Persian drum! This (false) consensus was thus even passed into the popular media. The historical record became less important than the current *idée reçue*... or, to paraphrase an American President, it depended on what your definition of 'was' was.

²A generation later, Higinio Angles, whose transcriptions of the same Cantigas melodies were thankfully grounded in reality, and still worthy of close study, nonetheless introduced distortions of his own into the picture of medieval Spain. Away with the Muslims, he wrote -- there are perhaps Celtic influences in the Cantigas, and maybe even Jewish ones, but the Arabs? Never! We hear the voice of the Catholic priest that Angles was, refighting the battle for the Reconquest of Spain, and remolding history to the shape of the Church's desires.

Binkley himself (as I have already mentioned) had speculated on the possible interrelationship between classical Arabic love poetry and the Old Provençal *canço*. Extending that speculation, as Binkley did, to the realm of the musical material was in its time a kind of wakeup call; thirty-some years ago, we all remember, operatic singing was considered the only "real" classic European art. Besides, it made for some riveting performances of important masterpieces. Nobody was ever bored or indifferent at a Studio der Frühen Musik concert.

What worked well then, however, cannot be successfully replicated today. As we now differentiate among various medieval song styles, rather than lumping them all together ("Le moyen-âge, c'est les arabes," one noted French patron of the arts was recently heard to say), it becomes clear that there is not a trace in the historical record of direct musical influence from the Arab world towards the troubadours, the trouvères, the laudiste, and the Minnesänger. The "Arab hypothesis" of the literary historians is not transferable to the musical realm of troubadour and trouvère monody. All our recent orientalisising performances of these repertoires belong to the realm of pure fantasy, attractive and compelling as they may be on shearly musical grounds.

Does this mean that we need to abandon our interest in and fascination with non-Western musical cultures? Not necessarily. First of all, these many musics are wonderful in their own right; and they still have much to teach us. And there are certainly ways to arrive at a truer vision of our own past, and its possible relation to the Orient. Leaving Byzantium aside (for I know not where the landmines are buried in that distant region), I first of all suggest that we confine our quest for the Orient-in-Europe to the Iberian peninsula, where the Arabic presence and influence is well documented in the historical record. Half of the musicians at the court of King Alfonso's son were Muslims! ³We also need to pay more attention to musical sources themselves, and less to recent recordings. Even though the Arab world is itself in flux, a genuine, serious study of Arabic music theory and practice (and, when possible, concrete relationships with practitioners of those cultures) is another important thing to undertake.

We need to study more, and harder, and better. And, yes, let's allow our musical imaginations to flourish as well, as we continue to give shape and substance to the past. Let's return to Tom Binkley and Andrea von Ramm as our role models, but not to imitate their specific solutions, for those belong to a previous generation. Rather let us draw inspiration from their pioneering spirit, and from their marvelous ability to blend learning and creative imagination.

Joel Cohen
Amesbury, Ma.
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3. Some reflections on my own work with the *Cantigas* can be found in the notes to the Camerata Mediterranea concert, elsewhere in this program book