

Muslim Influence and the Global Mediterranean**Jeremy Montagu**

[This is one of three talks given in Barcelona in 2008 at the behest of Prof. Josefina Roma of that city. The other two are *Instrumental Influences in the Mediterranean* and *Muslim Influence in Spain*]

The Muslim influence on the musical instruments of the Mediterranean world began surprisingly early, for Islam surged across the world within little more than a century after the Hegira. As a result the Arab armies of the Prophet controlled the whole of North Africa and almost all of Spain by 711. The expansion of Islam was not only to the west. Armies went east and north also, so that the Muslim world covered all of present-day Iraq and Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Israel as well as North Africa and Arabia itself. This north-eastward expansion is important to us because a surprising number of instruments seem to have had their origin in areas which were then northern Persia, such as southern Kazakhstan, Turkmenia, Uzbekistan. This may be where the gong originated, for example, though this is outside our period, for the gong goes back to ancient times; it was known to the Greeks at the Zeus cult-site at Dodona, and also to St Paul, who refers to it in his *Epistle to the Corinthians*. The earliest evidence we have for the long trumpet is from this area, and this is an instrument that spread eastwards to Tibet, India, and China, as well as to the west, as we shall see later. This may be where the lute came from, too, for it is probable that the origin of the Arabic *'ud* as well as the Chinese *pipa* was in this area. It seems certain that this is where musicians first learned to produce a sustained sound on string instruments, by rubbing the strings instead of plucking them. All these we shall meet again in due course in this session.

Because the Quran was written in Arabic, the spread of Islam meant also the spread of Arabic, and with the religion and the language went much of the culture. Islam, like Judaism but unlike Christianity in its early days, is a literate religion – everyone is expected to be able to read the words of the Prophet. As a result, once those newly converted could read the Quran, they could read anything else that was written in the same language. Thus Arabic brought much in its wake, not only music and instruments but many forms of learning, art, and luxury. Here, too, the spread of Islam eastwards and northwards was important, for it was due in great part to the inclusion of the old Persian Empire, and despite the ascetic ideals of the Prophet himself, that Islam carried the arts and much secular learning into the

Mediterranean area. It brought some new things, and it is also probable that it picked up and carried back into its old heart land many old things that it found as it spread.

An instrument which is commonly used all over North Africa today, all over the Middle East, and with derivatives into Europe both in the Balkans and here in Spain, as well as into India and Indonesia, goes back to the Old Kingdom in Egypt, the *zummāra*, and it is still used in Egypt, Israel, and Arabia, with very little, if any, changes from the pattern of five and more thousand years ago. It is played with added bells of horn in Tunisia, the *zakra*, and with an added horn reed cap as *alboka* among the Basques, as the *reclam de xirimia* in Eivissa. It is normally played with circular breathing, breathing in through the nose while blowing out through the cheeks. Doing this is a knack, which is taught to children with a straw and a glass of water; every time the bubbles stop, the child gets a smack round the ear, and they learn quite quickly! What is much more difficult is keeping the air pressure equalised and avoiding a pressure drop, and thus a pitch drop, when changing from diaphragm pressure to cheek pressure; the muscles across the cheek are much weaker than the diaphragm, so that until one becomes very experienced, as one changes to cheek pressure the pitch goes flat. The easy way to avoid this is by using an external flexible reservoir instead of the cheeks, and this same type of instrument can be seen, again in Tunisia, blown through a bag as a bagpipe. Who invented the bagpipe we do not know, but its use goes back at least to the Roman Emperor Nero, who, Suetonius tells us, played the tibia, the Roman pipes, with his arm. In some areas the bag has vanished again, but there is no doubt that the Dalmatian *diple* was once a bagpipe chanter, and that the groove at the top of the wooden windcap is where the bag was tied in. The spread of this instrument to Dalmatia is likely to have been due to the later Ottoman Empire, from about 1400 onwards, but the use in the south and east could well be as early as the first spread of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries, or it may have been even earlier, in the pre-Islamic periods of ancient Egypt.

One of the instruments of the old Persian Empire that I mentioned earlier was the lute. The instrument that the Arabs call the *'ud* today was certainly known to the Persians before the times of the Prophet. It is found today throughout the Middle East, right across North Africa, in Turkey, in Greece as the *laouta*, in Bulgaria as the *cobza*, and of course it was used throughout mediæval and renaissance Europe, and into the baroque, as the lute, and it is enjoying a considerable revival today. In renaissance Spain it was conflated with an already existing flat-backed instrument, the *guitarra latina*, and its stringing and its tuning were

applied to that instrument to create the *vihuela*. So far as is yet known, an instrument in Paris is the only surviving *vihuela*, which, thinking of its widespread use and considerable repertoire, seems extraordinary – we still hope that further examples may appear.

I mentioned earlier, too, the idea of rubbing a string. Early string instruments had one great limitation – their sound was short. A singer could sustain a note for as long as the breath held out – so could a wind player, and a bagpiper with a bag could sustain a note forever. But a string player, like a drummer, could just go *plck*, and the sound stopped. Somewhere in the area between the Aral and Caspian Seas in what was to become Persia, and then in modern times become southern Russia, somebody thought of rubbing the string with a rough grass stem, and so what the Chinese called the ‘creaking string’ was invented. When this happened we cannot be sure, but it was about 800 AD or so. Before the year 1,000 fiddles with proper bows were known in Byzantium, and not much later in Mozarabic Spain. Because of the prohibition against portraiture in Islam, there is no proof of how the bow travelled from Byzantium to Spain, but we know, because if it had we would find some illustrations and other evidence, that it did not travel through Europe, and thus the only possible route was across Muslim North Africa. Once the bow did reach Europe, perhaps from Byzantium but more probably across the Pyrenees, it travelled fast and it was used mainly on two instruments, one the big northern fiddle, a close relative of the *vihuela*, but the other a smaller instrument which we see first as a plucked instrument in Hellenistic Egypt, but later in a variety of very similar shapes, from the Bulgarian *gadulka*, through the Greek Island *lira*, to the northern European rebec, which still survives in Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe. It was certainly well known here and in southern France before the end of the eleventh century, for it appears in the hand of many of the Elders of the Apocalypse in some of the great church carvings, at Oloron, at Ripoll, at Santiago, and many others.

Important, too, can be the passage of peoples through an area. One migration of peoples that I do not have a date for, though I think it was around the ninth century, is that which came from somewhere in Central Asia, moved across North Africa, leaving some of their people in Morocco, leaving with them *al nafir*, their long trumpet, and moving on down across the Atlas and the western Sahara to become the Fulani people of Nigeria, where the same trumpet is found as the *kakaki* among the Hausa Emirates. It remained a common instrument in Persia and in Turkey, whence, from Constantinople, Crusaders took it home. Thereafter it travelled throughout Europe where it became the general mediæval long trumpet

and the ancestor of the instrument we use in our music today.

Often associated with the long trumpet, because it too was a loud outdoor instrument, was the shawm. We know that with *al nafir*, the Fulani took into Nigeria the shawm *alghaita*, and it remains today, like the *kakaki*, one of the most important instruments of the Hausa Emirates. We know, from much iconographic evidence, that they had brought the long trumpet with them from Central Asia; we do not know whether they had also brought the shawm or whether, as its name *alghaita* suggests, they had picked that instrument up during their stay in Morocco. If I am right in suspecting the latter, that they collected it in Morocco, it would be a good example of how such instruments are spread, how as peoples spread and travel some things they bring with them and leave behind, and others they accumulate and take away. Thus music spreads from one people to another.

The shawm is another instrument that appears on that same Sassanid silver vessel as the lute, though on the other side of it. This is that conical-bore double-reed instrument known as *dulzaina* in Valencia but as *gaita*, the same name as in Nigeria, in Navarre and Morocco and, blown through a bag as *gaita gallega*, in Galicia. This instrument, wherever it exists in the world, and it is found, either bag-blown or mouth-blown, from highland bagpipe in the north of Scotland to the West Coast of Mexico and to the islands of Indonesia, it is evidence of contact at either first- or second-hand with Islam, through trade, conquest or other contact. We cannot ignore the fact, in this paper, that one cannot study the *dulzaina* and *gaita* without considering the Mexican *chirimía*, the Moroccan *ghaita*, the Egyptian *mizmar*, the Turkish *zurna*, the Macedonian *zurla*, the Breton *bombarde*, the Indian *shah'nai*, the Chinese *sona*, the Indonesian *tarompet*, and the Tibetan *rGyar gling* nor the *gaita gallega* without considering the Breton *binou*, the French *cornemuse*, the Scots *piobh mhor*, and, in both cases, many others.

But this wave of conquest from the eighth century onwards was not the only Islamic influence. One of the most pervasive influences on the Mediterranean world in the last five hundred years has been the Ottoman Empire, based on the Sublime Porte, which we saw through Crusader eyes a little while ago under its Byzantine name as Constantinople, but which was now called Istanbul. It should, therefore, be easy to find Turkish influences on musical instruments throughout this area.

But while the whole north eastern Mediterranean became one cultural area so that, for example, the Turkish *saz*, is found in one form or another throughout the Balkans, this

instrument seems to have roused little interest in Egypt, North Africa, and Maghrib. In the north it became well enough known that a version of it was adopted in Italy as the origin of the *colascione*. We do not know whether it was there or in Greece that it later acquired some features from the Italian mandolin, and became the Greek *bouzouki*. The *bouzouki* is a strictly urban instrument, the instrument of the town cafés and nightclubs; in the countryside, something much more like the *saz* remains in use.

A favourite instrument of Turkey and Egypt, on the other hand, is rather less used in the Maghrib and is practically unknown in the Balkans. This is the *qanun*, a trapezoidal board zither which has provision for elaborate tuning changes. A series of small flaps under each course of strings can be flipped up while one is playing to shorten the string-length and thus sharpen the pitch by one or more quarter-tones. This seems to have been a fairly recent development, for some older *qanun* are without these flaps. I was told, too, in Egypt that this was due to Turkish influence; that Egyptian musicians did not use these small intervals until a new style came in from Turkey. I'm not sure that I believe this, because early Persian theoretical treatises describe intervals between the tones and semitones of Western music, steps of three-quarters of a tone, or a tone-and-a-quarter, for which these flaps would have been very useful.

An instrument that is so universal that its origin, at least across North Africa, may be pre-Islamic, is the *nay*. It was certainly known in ancient Egypt but that does not necessarily mean that it was at that period that its use spread throughout the Maghrib. In fact, the absence of this instrument in Spain and its presence in the Balkans and Turkey as the *kaval* might be taken as suggesting that it is more modern than it appears and that it was an Ottoman instrument.

I have been discussing instruments, but I have ignored music. People are, on the whole, much more inclined to adopt instruments from each other than the music that is played on them. Still less are they inclined to adopt the intervals of that music. North of the Mediterranean we have, on the whole, preferred harmony; south and east, people liked the use of heterophony, several versions of the same tune running together more or less in unison. If one is using a single line, variation of pitch and melisma keeps it interesting. If one is in harmony, then ideally each chord, each step of the tune, needs to be in tune vertically, and then pitch variation and melisma become unpopular. Thus instruments change. The Arab *'ud* must originally have had frets on the neck, as both it and a number of bowed instruments

such as the viola da gamba had in Europe, for the early treatises discuss where they should be placed, and the writers would not have wasted time discussing where to put them if they did not have them, and certainly the European lute had frets. Frets make tuning more precise and pitch more definite, although their most important function is to give a rather harder and more precise tone quality, so perhaps this why the *'ud* has lost its frets, precisely so that its tuning and its tone should be more easily varied.

Similarly, every instrument is adapted by every culture to fulfill its musical needs. We have looked at many instruments as they were introduced or carried by Islam – let us look very briefly at what happened to two of them. The rebec eventually was superseded by the violin, starting in Italy around 1500, and the violin can be seen today, fully adapted to Maghribi musical needs, in North Africa, as indeed it can in India and in other places to which once it was strange. The *zummara* became the clarinet in Germany before 1700, and the clarinet, especially in its smaller sizes, was adopted into the Turkish Janissary bands under Italian bandmasters in the 19th century. Nothing is forever, and no influence is always one-sided. No culture is alone, and just as a husband cannot marry a wife unless the wife marries the husband, so all cultures, when they make contact, influence each other.