

Across the divide: A singer's experience of al-Andalus

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The notion that the third century writer Tertullian had heard Roman chant in Carthage led Chris Page to speculate that the “the history of chant (the gradual) opened in Northern Africa”, and that “a case might be made that the cradle of the Western and Latin-Christian space lies not in Rome but in Carthage which is today in Tunisia”. This cultural connection was to have been the foundation for a performance of music for voice, ‘*ud* and lute at the Muwashshah Conference due to be held in Granada in 2020, but which was cancelled due to Covid.

The idea for the performance was inspired by two programmes created by the group *Sirinu-Safar*.¹ This is a multi-instrumental band of musicians from Iran, Africa and Britain, which has built two concerts on the theme of Andalusian music, one called “In the Footsteps of Ziryab”, and the other “The Moors in Spain”. The “In the Footsteps of Ziryab” programme was originally performed at the Beverley Early Music Festival, and was broadcast by BBC Radio 3. The ensemble performed on a mixture of western melody instruments – voice, harp, and lute, and instruments from the Middle East – ‘*ud*, *qanun*, and *tar*, all rhythmically bound together by *def* and *tombak*. The concert charted Ziryab’s journey from Baghdad to Cordoba, and ended with a selection of songs from the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* of Don Alfonso the Wise (1221-84). As we finished playing under the medieval carvings of Beverley Minster, the audience’s applause re-affirmed the contemporary popularity in England of Don Alfonso’s songs, the musical achievements of his reign, and links to his multi-cultural court in a time of conflict. Two members of our ensemble are refugees, and the crossing of musical borders is part of our ethos.

Alfonso’s reign was ended by a coup effected by his son Sancho. The four hundred and twenty devotional songs to the Virgin Mary through which he had planned his own immortality subsequently lay hidden and forgotten. In performance, the naturalness of the cantigas’ narrative is paired with a formal similarity to the music of the Arabic-Andalusian *zajal*. A comparison between audience reaction now and in Don Alfonso’s time cannot be known but the clarity of the musical form, with its returning line and repetitive chorus, is understood by listeners, and while the language barrier meant that the audience in Yorkshire could not have joined in singing the chorus, they reacted positively to the songs’ modality and rhythms.

Speaking for myself, my only previous visit to Al-Andalus had been for a concert of baroque music in Malaga Cathedral twenty years ago. Subsequent to that visit, the significance of Malaga as the place of the final and longest siege in the fall of Islamic Spain brought more vivid significance to another concert of music from al-Andalus and Spain – the programme entitled “The Moors in Spain”. This programme of *villancicos*, *canciones* and *romances* starts in a multi-cultural mode, with Don Alfonso’s rhythmic devotional *cantigas*, and ends with lute and voice and in the manifestly tonal harmonies of a lament – *Paseábase el Rey Moro* by Luis de Narváez (1526-49). Born in Granada, the composer Narváez’s narration on the capture of the Moorish town of Alhama (1482) was written during a time of Christian aggression, conquest and empire-building, but it expresses the emotions of the defeated Moorish king.

The Moorish king was strolling
Through the city of Granada
When letters came for him
Saying that Alhama had been taken
¡Ay de mi Alhama!

Looking side-ways Jonathon Holt Shannon observes that the musical and cultural connections with al-Andalus still have a relevance in contemporary Syria and Morocco. For instance, the slogan for the 1996 Music Festival in Fez's old town (*medina*) was "Saving Fez through its Musical Heritage". The fund called for supporters to help restore the peeling and decaying buildings of Fez by donating through a sense of a common Andalusian musical culture, and in 2004 the Andalusian Music Museum was opened, drawing enthusiasts from far and wide.

The enduring long-term perspective of the cross-cultural musical connection between al-Andalus and Europe is underpinned in *Sirinu-Safar*'s performances by an energy that is transmitted through related instruments, rhythmic percussion and musical gestures, and the thread of related musical forms.

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NOTES

1. The group *Sirinu* got its name from its first tour of music from Spain and the Andes, entitled "The Frozen Jewel of Potosi". In Andean culture the name signifies "the source of music", the place where you go to get your new tunes, which is often a place linked to water. *Safar* is from the Farsi for travel, and relates to Ziryab's journey. Two of the band's members, Sara Stowe and Matthew Spring, made a CD of the 15/16th century voice and vihuela/4-course guitar songs for Chandos: *Senhora del Mundo*, 0546 CHAN, which included three *romances* that are listed in the Appendix below, with translations.

APPENDIX

Mañana de San Juan – Diego Pisador [1509/10? – after 1557], Romance

*La mañana de San Juan
Al tiempo que alboreaba
Gran fiesta hacen los moros
Por la Vega de Granada.
Revolviendo sus caballos
Y jugando de las lanzas,
Ricos pendones en ellas
Broslados por sus amadas,
Ricos marlotas vestidas
Tejidas de oro y grana.*

*El moro que amores tiene
Señales de ello mostraba,
Y el que no tenía amores
Alli no escaramuzaba.
Las damas moras los miran
De las torres del Alhambra,
Tambien se los mira el rey
De dentro de la Alcazaba.
Dando voces vino un moro
Con la cara ensangrentada;*

*Con tu licencia, el rey,
te daré una nueva mala'
el infante Don Fernando
tiene a Antequera ganada;
muchos moros dejás muertos,
yo soy quien mejor librara;
siete lanzadas yo traigo,
el cuerpo todo me pasan;*

*los que conmigo escaparon
en Archidona quedaban.*

*Con la tal nueva el rey
La cara se la demudaba;
manda juntar sus trompetas
que toquen todos el arma,
manda juntar a los suyos,
hacen muy gran cabalgada,
y a las puertas de Alcala,
que la Real se llamaba,
los cristianos y los moros
una escaramuza traban.*

*Los cristianos eran muchos,
Mas llevabn orden mala ;
Los moros, que son de guerra,
Dandoles han mala carga,
De ellos matan, de ellos prenden,
De ellos toman en celada.
Con la victoria, los moros
Van la vuelta de Granada ;
A grandes voces decian :
La victoria ya es cobrada !*

Translation

On the morning of Saint John
When dawn was breaking,
The Moors, celebrate a great feast
On the plains of Granada.
They turn their horses and joust:
Their lances bear rich pennants
Embroidered by their lovers:
They wear rich tunics,
Woven with gold and scarlet.

Every Moor who was in love
Showed signs of it,
And those who were not
Did not skirmish there.
The Moorish ladies look at them
From the towers of the Alhambra,
The king also looks at them
From inside the Alcazaba.
A Moor came shouting,
His face all bloodstained;

“With your permission, my king,
I will tell you bad news;
The infante Don Fernando
Has taken Antequera;
He has left many Moors dead;
I am one who has fared better;

I have seven lance-wounds
Which pierce my body completely;
Those who escaped with me
Stayed at the city of Archidona.”

Hearing the bad news the king,
With an altered countenance,
Orders his trumpeters to assemble
And sound the call to arms;
He orders his men to gather together,
And a great troop of horsemen is
formed.
At the gate of Alcala,
Called the Real,
The Christians and the Moors
Engage in battle.

The Christians were many,
But poorly ordered;
The Moors, warrior people,
Have charged them crushingly,
They kill them, capture them,
Ambush them.
With this victory, the Moors
Return to Granada,
With great shouts they cried;
“Victory is ours!”

Paseábase el Rey Moro – Luis de Narváez (1526-49), Romance

*Paseábase el Rey Moro
Por la ciudad de Granada
Cartas le fueron venidas
Como Alhama era ganada.
Ay de mi Alama!*

*Las cartas echo en el fuego
Y el masajera matas
Echo manos a sus barbas
Y las barbas mensaba
Ay de mi Alama!*

*Alli ablo un alfachi
De barba credicido y cana.
'Buen se te emplea, buen Rey,
Buen Rey buen se te emplea'.
Ay de mi Alama!*

*Matastes los bencerajes
Que'eran la flor de Granada
Cogiste los Tornadizos
De Cordoba la nombrada
Ay de mi Alama!*

Translation

The King of the Moors
was walking in the city of Granada
when news arrived that Alhama
had been taken.
Oh! My Alhama!

He threw the paper into the fire
He killed the messenger and
with his hand
tore at his beard.
Oh! my Alhama!

Up spoke an old man
with a white beard.
'It serves you right oh king,
King, it serves you right!'
Oh! My Alhama!

'You killed the Abencerrajes',
who were the flower of Granada,
who took on the Christian turn-coats
of renowned Cordova'.
Oh! My Alhama!

Sospirastes Baldovinos – Luis Milán (1500-61), Romance

¿Sospirastes Baldovinos
las cosas que yo más quería?
O tenéis miedo a los moros
o en Francia tenéis amiga.»

Si te vas conmigo en Francia
todo nos será alegría,
havra justas y torneos
por servirte cada día,

No tengo miedo a los moros
ni en Francia tengo amiga,
mas tú mora y yo cristiano
hacemos muy mala vida,

y serás la flor del mundo
de mejor caballería;
yo seré tu caballero,
tú serás mi linda amiga.»

Translation

“You sigh, Baldovinos,
I worry that
Either you are afraid of the Moors
Or you have a lover in France.”

“If you come with me to France
All will be well –
There will be jousting and tourneys
To amuse you every day.

“I am not afraid of the Moors,
neither do I have a lover in France.
But you are a Moor and I a Christian –
Together we cannot live happily.

“And you will see the flower of the
world’s greatest knights.
I shall be your knight,
You will be my lovely lady.”



Figure 1: Cover of a book of Spanish *Romances*