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IMS Tokyo 2017

Musical Mutual Intelligibility in the Medieval Mediterranean

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In this presentation I would like to invite us to reexamine the cultural dynamics of the medieval Mediterranean with a particular focus on the movement of musical instruments, music theory, and the musicians themselves. In doing so, I propose both to document that medieval musicians moved with great ease in every direction around the Mediterranean and also explain why they were able to seek and find patronage and receptive audiences in various regions with such success.

In *Muslims in Medieval Latin Christendom*, Brian Catlos offers the term "mutual intelligibility" as a framework for understanding the relationship among various religious and social groups, as well as polities, around the medieval Mediterranean, a term that he has elaborated upon more recently in a series of lectures.[1]

> For all that separated them, Muslims and Christians (and Jews), spoke the same languages, held many of the same social values, ate many of the same foods, and even shared much by the way of folk tradition, religious belief and theological orientation. Their cultures and actions were characterized by a "mutual intelligibility" that emerged from the broad socio-cultural *habitus* – originating with common sources, but refracted distinctly through the specific traditions of each ethno-religious culture – within which Christians, Muslims and Jews all lived their lives and pursued their agendas, whether individual or communal.

[1] Brian Catlos, *Muslims of Medieval Latin Christendom, ca. 1050-1614* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 509, see also pp. 508-35; lectures "The Paradoxes of Plurality and Diversity in the Medieval Mediterranean" (28 July), "Ethno-Religious Relations & Physics of Scale" (20 July), "Conveniencia or "The Convenience Principle": A Model for Ethno-Religious Interaction in the Medieval Mediterranean" (13 July), *NEH Summer Institute* 2015, Barcelona, Spain. I thank Brian for permission to reference some of his as yet unpublished arguments here.

> Even as they worked to maintain their particular religio-cultural identities, they borrowed freely from each other's traditions, did business with each other, and socialized with each other, however askance Christian authorities or those of their own communities might regard this.[2]

The gist of this concept is that although there certainly existed a multitude of cultural, religious, and political differences among the various cultures of the medieval Mediterranean, these distinctions existed to a great extent within a larger frame of shared social structures and cultural repertoires. Nearly all communities in the region, for example, were accustomed to conquest and rule by foreign military elites, whether these were Visigoths, Suevi, Arabs, Berbers, Crusaders, Fatimids, Turkic groups, or others. The idea that a community or state might be ruled by an upper class that originated as a military force from elsewhere, spoke a different language, practiced a different religion or a different form of a given religion (Arianism, Sunni or Shi'ite Islam, Latin or Eastern Christianity, and so forth), and was ethnically distinct from the subject population, was an accepted aspect of political life.

The frequency of such disjunctions in fact gave birth to recurring patterns of relations between ruling elites and subject religio-ethnic groups (the term "religious minorities" is inappropriate here since quite often the subject religious group constituted a demographic majority of the population). Expulsions, exterminations, and forced mass conversions were in fact relatively rare in the medieval Mediterranean.[3] Instead, subject religious groups were frequently viewed as a valuable resource, not least as a source of income since they could be forced to pay special taxes. And smaller religious minorities were often co-opted by rulers to

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[2] Catlos, *Muslims*, p. 509.

[3] Compare, for example, the long list of expulsions of Jewish communities from northern European cities and regions from the 9th to the 14th centuries (insert list?)

serve in sensitive positions within the court or state because they were wholly dependent upon the ruler for protection, hence the frequent use of Jewish physicians and financial officers in many courts around the Mediterranean, Samaritan physicians in the Fatimid court of Cairo, Christian envoys from Umayyad Cordoba, and other examples. When, at various times and places, Muslims suddenly found themselves confronted with the idea of living under Christian rule, there was already a category within their worldview into which they could re-classify themselves – they were now *dhimmi*s under Christian rule as Christians and Jews had been *dhimmi*s under Muslim rule.

Whatever the tensions may at times have been between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, their religions all operated within a shared theological framework based on the worship of an All-Powerful Eternal Creator, a sequence of revelations through prophets, the existence of Holy Scriptures, and so forth. When public debates and disputations were held, they *could* be held precisely because all parties partook of many (perhaps even most) of the same articles of faith about God, His judgment, prophets, scriptures, prayers, and other issues.

In practical daily life, there were many other areas of shared social practices that could be cited. Even coinage was remarkably similar, with new regimes regularly continuing the practices of the state they had just conquered, imitating even the images and symbols of other states, despite differences in religion and/or ethnicity. In addition, no group in the medieval Mediterranean had an overwhelming technical superiority in warfare or in shipbuilding. All of this is not to say that there was not a myriad of cultural differences. Those certainly existed. Yet when travelers went from one region to the next, there was no shock in discovering that there were special rules and taxes levied upon subject religious groups, but rather a recognition that, "Ah, so these are the rules for Jews/Christians/Muslims in this kingdom." It is this type of

recognition that Brian Catlos has termed "mutual intelligibility," a sense that a body of social, religious, and political infrastructures was similar enough to be comprehensible by persons from other regions of the Mediterranean.

This essay addresses the question of whether the same may be said of the musical world of the medieval Mediterranean. Was there a period of "musical mutual intelligibility" in the medieval Mediterranean and might this explain why music and musicians traveled with such ease east and west, north and south, across and around the Mediterranean seeking audiences and patronage? It will be argued here that there was indeed such a period of musical "mutual intelligibility" and that it was in part ushered in by the arrival of new musical instrument types that had not been part of the culture of Late Antiquity. In addition, it is argued that this period was characterized by a shared framework in the realm of music theory inherited from Pythagoras and Ptolemy, as well as by a set of remarkably similar performance practices.[4] This period was finally brought to a close by new developments in Europe on one side and in the Middle East on the other. In the first half of this essay, we shall examine three different aspects of the musical world of the medieval Mediterranean: 1) Instrumentarium; 2) Music theory; and 3) Performance practices. In the second half we shall trace the itineraries of a number of medieval musicians and their various routes across and around the Mediterranean from the 9th to the 14th centuries.

INSTRUMENTARIUM

The entire Mediterranean Basin inherited from the ancient cultures of the Near East, as well as the cultures of classical Greece and Rome, a large number of different instrument types: harps and lyres, horns and trumpets, flute and oboes, bells and cymbals, panpipes, zithers, a variety of

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[4] Please note that throughout this essay I am not engaging religious and liturgical music, but rather the secular 'art music' of the courts, for which we have much more information than folk and rural musical traditions.

percussion instruments, and so forth. Notably absent from this catalogue are two instrument types that came to be almost emblematic of the European Middle Ages and also of the golden ages of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties in Islamic culture: the 'Arab lute' and the entire family of bowed string instruments. It is the arrival and spread of these two instrument types that mark a dramatic change from the musical cultures of Late Antiquity to the shared medieval musical world of the Mediterranean.

The Arab Lute

The Ancient World possessed a number of different forms of lutes, particularly long-necked lutes such as those famously portrayed in images of ancient Egyptian singing-girls, as well as some short-necked lutes. (It is worth noting here that neither Greek nor Roman cultures used lutes extensively and were instead much more interested in various forms of harps and lyres.)

In the pre-Islamic and early Islamic periods a number of different lute-types were known in Arab culture, each with its own name.[5] But eventually one specific type became far more popular than the others, the one that is now commonly referred to as the 'Arab lute.' Though there are some who argue for Persian origins for the instrument, it was spread with the Islamic conquests and is known almost universally by terms that derive from the Arabic name *al-'ūd*.[6] The Arabic term means quite literally "the wood" or "the wooden one," apparently due to its wooden face, which distinguished it from other lutes that had skin faces. Its main characteristics

[5] [Insert full list]

[6] See, for example, Neubauer, "Der Bau"

are that it is short-necked, piriform, with a deep rounded belly and a pegbox that is angled sharply backwards.

Fig. 1: Terms for "lute" derived from the Arabic *al-'ūd*:

Sp	laúd	Czech	loutna	Eng	lute	Turk	ut
Port	alaúde	Hun	lant	Ger	laute	Greek	λαούτο
Cat	llaüt	Serb	лаутa	Pol	lutnia	Fin	luuttu
Fr	luth	Rom	lăută	Rus	лютня	Uzbek	ud

The instrument's widespread popularity was presumably the result of its brighter and louder sound, in contrast with other forms of short-necked lutes. In the Arabo-Islamic regions there was also a long-necked lute known as the *ṭunbūr*, which, interestingly enough, was never widely disseminated in Europe.[7] The lute soon became *the* primary instrument for the performance of art music in the Arabo-Islamic zone and was the most common instrumental accompaniment for solo vocalists—the combination of a singer and a lute, whether played by the singer or by a separate musician, is the most widely documented form of musical performance in the Umayyad and Abbasid courts of Damascus, Cordoba, and Baghdad. Indeed, in the entire *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, the tenth-century magnum opus of Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī which provides an exhaustive account of musical practices in the Umayyad and Abbasid courts (7th-10th centuries), there are only a handful of references to singers singing to the accompaniment of other instruments.[8] In addition, the lute's strings and fingering positions became the primary reference in Arabic

[7] Long-necked lutes such as the theorbo did eventually evolve in Europe, but these developed from the short-necked *'ūd* and not from the *ṭunbūr*.

[8] George Sawa, *Performance Practice*

treatises on music theory, and was used as a form of primitive tablature which may have influenced the emergence of Western staff notation.[9] After the Arab lute's spread to Europe, it became almost symbolic of the music of the Medieval and early Renaissance periods.

The Bowed String Instruments

We are so used to the idea of string instruments played with a bow, that many people assume that this is an ancient instrumental technique. It is not. None of the ancient cultures of the Near East and neither Greece nor Rome knew the technique of sounding an instrument by drawing a bow across its strings. The technique emerged in Central Asia sometime around the 7th or 8th centuries C.E. and spread from that region in many different directions, eastwards as well as westwards. Since these instruments have sound-boxes and necks similar to lutes, scholars of organology (the study of musical instruments) refer to this family of instruments as "bowed lutes."[10]

Some medieval Arabic treatises on music ranked this new instrument type as the most perfect of all instruments because its sound most closely approximates the human voice (which, since God created humans in His image, is by definition the most perfect musical instrument). These new instruments, however, did not immediately gain popularity within the caliphal court and appear not to have been accepted as instruments worthy of being used for courtly art music,

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[9] The strings of the Arab lute were often dyed different colors in accordance with their connections to the four humors, which may explain the colored lines of the earliest western staff notation developed by Guido d'Arezzo (992-after 1033). [Cite Neubauer] Thomas Forrest Kelly, *Capturing Music: The Story of Notation* (New York: Norton, 2015).

[10] This is, however, a bit of a perversion of the term 'ud since an 'ud in Arabic can *only* refer to a short-necked plucked or strummed instrument. The western scholarly adaption of this term to the entire instrument family, bowed and unbowed, is akin to labeling keyboard instruments 'hammer lyres' or guitars 'unbowed fiddles.' In order to make the term fit, one must ignore some of the term's primary characteristics.

which was primarily vocal. We cannot know exactly the timbre and volume produced by these earliest fiddles, but they were apparently not considered good accompaniment for the human voice. The Arabic textual record thus leaves us with a paradox – an instrument capable of imitating the human voice was apparently, at least at first, not considered a pleasing accompaniment for singers in court settings. Perhaps the bowed string instruments were too strongly associated with non-elite contexts. Is any case, this group of instruments spread through the Islamic dominions (westward across North Africa, and then into Sicily and Iberia), they appear to have achieved greater popularity in the far-flung provinces than they possessed in the capital city of Baghdad.

In the 10th century CE, we have iconographic evidence for the spread of the two-string fiddle into Iberia (there are both Islamic carvings and Christian paintings that date to the late 10th century). The Arabic name for this instrument was the *rabāb*, which became the Spanish term *rabel* and later the French and English *rebec.* At very nearly the same time, the new 'bowed lutes' were also entering Byzantium and Eastern Europe, where they were termed *lira* / *lyra* / *lura* (recycling the Greek term 'lyre' and applying it to the new instrument type). These instruments appear to have arrived directly from Central Asia and not via Islamic lands.

The technique of using a bow developed in Central Asia, apparently among the horse nomads of the steppes, where the instruments are still used today. The strings of the instrument and of the bow were commonly made of horsetail hair, and the top of the instrument was often decorated with the carving of a horse's head. This feature is still found on many exemplars from Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Intriguingly, the 12th-century painting of a bowed fiddle on the ceiling of the Capella Palatina in Palermo shows a musician playing an instrument topped by

carving that resembles a horse's head, perhaps indicating that the instrument arrived through the eastern route rather than from North Africa, where the *rabāb* had no such feature.

Fig. 2: Cappella Palatina, c. 1143

Fig. 3 Morin Khuur, Mongolia

It is worth pausing for a moment to think how radically the addition of these two new instrument types transformed the overall sound-world of Late Antiquity. It seems clear from iconographic evidence that the piriform, short-necked Arab lute was more resonant and produced a louder and clearer sound than the other lutes with which it competed, and, as noted above, Greaco-Roman culture had in any case not made extensive use of lutes. For listeners of the 9th-11th centuries, when the bowed string instruments were working their way around the Mediterranean, this new sound must have been quite extraordinary, for this was not a variant of some older instrument (a more resonant lute, a clearer-toned flute, a louder brass instrument), but rather an entirely new sound technology. The effect must have been comparable to hearing a church organ or a keyboard instrument such as a harpsichord or a pianoforte for the first time. As if in recognition that these two instruments had re-shaped the musical world, the two are quite often depicted together in medieval iconographic sources in Europe and the Middle East. Given that these two instruments – the Arab lute and the bowed fiddle -- soon came to play central roles in music throughout the Mediterranean world, their introduction and spread provide a useful benchmark for the transition from the Late Antique to Medieval music. These two periods are distinguished by a completely different mixture of timbres and sounds than earlier ensembles.

Instrumentarium Summary

- In the 9th century, the northern Mediterranean did not possess either the 'Arab lute' or any bowed string instruments.
- By the 11th century, the new instruments were found around the Mediterranean and were important elements of musical performance for several centuries thereafter.
- After that, wherever one traveled in the medieval Mediterranean, the instrumentarium would have been familiar, even if the music was not.

Music Theory

Both Islamic and Western Christian cultures were heir to teachings and writings on music theory from ancient Greek thought, particularly those of Pythagoras and Ptolemy, which held that musical tuning could be expressed in mathematical ratios (the Pythagorean system, for example, advocated a tuning system build on sequences of 'perfect fourths' and 'perfect fifths' generated by 4:3 and 3:2 ratios; Ptolemy later argued for a substantial modification of that system that generated the 'Just' tuning system). This concept, that intervals could and should be expressed or determined by mathematical ratios is found throughout the larger Mediterranean, but not beyond. (I am in the process of trying to work out the precise limits of the region in which Greek ideas about music theory were received and accepted, particularly the concept of determining intervals through mathematically expressed ratios, and would appreciate any suggestions you might have.)

Another shared philosophical concept was that of the 'music of the spheres' (Latin, *musica universalis*), first elaborated by Pythagoras and Aristotle, the idea that the movement of the heavenly bodies either produced actual audible sounds, or a reverberation that had effects upon the Cosmos. The concept was variously understood to be a physical phenomenon, at times a metaphysical one, and at times a purely spiritual idea.[11]

In addition, throughout the Middle Ages, musical systems around the Mediterranean were *modal* (a mode is a specific scale with certain melodic behaviors or characteristics). By the end of the Middle Ages, Western musical theory and practice was moving away from the modal system (see, for example, the eight church modes) towards a system of only two scale types,

[11] Cite Boethius, Brethren of Purity, etc.

major and minor, leaving behind the modal practices which, however, continued and were developed with increasing sophistication in the Islamic World.

All medieval music theorists also shared the belief that music possessed medicinal powers and could be effectively used to treat and heal physical and/or mental ailments. For some thinkers the efficacy of this treatment lay in selecting the correct melodic mode, for others it was rather a question of the correct instruments (i.e. the correct timbre), and for others it had much to do with rhythm and tempo. Regardless of the differences, the idea that music had a salutatory effect on the ill and could be used in their treatment, was nearly universal in the Mediterranean region.

Music theorists such as the Latin Boethius (c. 480–524 AD), the anonymous authors of the Arabic *Epistles of the Brethen of Purity* (8th or 10th century), the 9th-century Arab philosopher al-Kindi (c. 801-873), the Persian philosopher al-Farabi (c. 870-950/51), and Guido d'Arezzo (992-after 1033), may have disagreed on certain matters of detail, but they shared a large number of key concepts. They could easily have sat down at the same dinner table and debated those small differences all night long, but none of the would have brought to the discussion a major concept that was totally foreign and unknown to the others. By the later Middle Ages, however, Europe was moving towards polyphony (starting as early as the 13th century), different tuning systems (such as 'meantone' and 'just' tuning), and eventually, harmony and counterpoint, and the Islamic world was moving towards systems of greatly increased numbers of melodic modes and rhythms.

Performance Practice

Throughout the medieval centuries, vocal music was the central and most important form of music. Instruments were understood primarily as accompaniment to singers. Though there were certainly times when instrumentalists, alone or in small groups, performed without a singer, this was most often as a prelude to a vocalist's performance or in the breaks between songs. In medieval Arabic, in fact, the most common term for 'music' was *ghinā'*, which quite literally means 'singing' (derived from the verb to sing: *ghannā*). The term *mūsīqī* (later *mūsīqā*), derived from the Greek, was used to refer to the science of music theory. In the Arabic tradition we have documentary evidence of thousands of vocal compositions, most often referred to as *ṣawt* (lit. 'voice' or 'sound'), but little to no evidence of *compositions* for instruments that did not have texts. Biographies of a certain number of famous instrumentalists from this period have survived, but these musicians either appear to have improvised much of their material or to have interpreted compositions for vocalists. They owe their fame primarily to their skill at accompanying famous singers, and there is little evidence for set compositions for instrumentalists that were transmitted from one performer to another or from one generation to the next. While there are hundreds, even thousands of reference in the Arabic materials to singers of later generations singing the vocal compositions of earlier composers, to the best of my knowledge there is not a single parallel example of an instrumentalist performing a purely instrumental composition by an earlier composer. (I would be very interested in knowing when the earliest Western reference to a non-liturgical *instrumental composition* transmitted from one generation to another occurs.)[12]

[12] By instrumental composition, I mean attributed to a single composer, as opposed to a folk tune or dance melody.

Throughout much of the Middle Ages, music around the Mediterranean was primarily monophonic (with all voices/instruments performing the same melody) or heterophonic (with all voices/instruments performing the same melody but with a certain amount individual interpretation and/or ornamentation), along with a limited amount of singing in octaves and/or fifths (primitive organum). During the transition from the European Middle Ages into the Renaissance, Western music began increasingly to explore polyphony (multiple voices singing different melodic lines) and eventually harmony and counterpoint, but for centuries, Europe and the Arabo-Islamic world produced similarly monophonic music.

In addition, most musical performances (other than religious music) consisted almost entirely of very small groupings of musicians and singers (often, even, simply one or two singers with one or two instrumentalists). References to larger groupings exist, but these appear to have been staged as unusual, exceptional events [insert reference to orchestra of singing girls performing on lutes together, with Ishaq al-Mawsili detecting the one string on one lute that was out of tune]. The prevalence of small groupings may have been dictated in part by financial conditions, but was almost certainly also tied to contemporary aesthetics and the monophonic nature of the material performed. Coupling a male and a female singer provides a natural means of singing in octaves, but if there are no contrasting notes to be sung, what would be the role of a third singer (other perhaps than to provide increased volume)? Choral singing of refrains (or repeating the line just sung by the vocalist) appears, however, to have been known, even if it was not particularly common technique.

Finally, in what may now seem to us an oddity, it was rather uncommon to group wind instruments and string instruments together. In Spanish this turns up in the division of instruments into 'altos' and 'bajos' and in French as 'hauts' et 'bas.' [Q: Do any images from the *Cantigas* show a wind instrument with a string instrument?] The generally softer sound of string instruments with gut strings, may have made performing with wind instruments impractical, especially if they were meant primarily to accompany a singer. By the later Middle Ages, and definitely by the Renaissance, Western music was exploring larger and larger ensembles consisting of a mixture of musical instruments, a path that eventually led to the modern orchestra, whereas the earlier practice of small groupings continued in the Middle East.

Summary

In the 11th century a musician could travel anywhere in the Mediterranean and almost everything he or she saw and heard in 'art music' or courtly performances would have been recognizable in terms of the instruments, the basic music theory, and performance practices, even if the specific musical traditions performed were regional and distinct. There existed a certain *musical* 'mutual intelligibility.' As a result, musicians, musical instruments, and their music were able to travel across cultural and linguistic boundaries seeking patronage and opportunities to perform through itineraries that now strike as quite remarkable.

But by the 15th century, and certainly later, a traveler from the Middle East in Europe would have encountered unknown instruments (keyboard instruments such as the harpsichord and pianoforte), unknown musical techniques (polyphony and harmony), as well as ensembles of a type he had never seen before in which large numbers of instrumentalists, both wind and string players, performed as a single group, and a musical world where, overall, vocal musical was

playing less and less of a role, while compositions solely for musical instruments were becoming more and more prominent.

In contrast, the medieval Islamic world pursued a path of greater and greater sophistication in modal theory (eventually resulting in nearly 100 recognized individual modes), highly articulated rhythmic theory (with dozens of recognized and carefully defined rhythms), tuning systems that subdivided the whole step into smaller and smaller units (microtones), and placed greater emphasis on artistic improvisation in performance than in the development of wholly pre-composed genres.

These divergences mark the end of a shared medieval Islamo-Mediterranean musical culture.

> [NOTE: The second half of this essay traces the itineraries of a number of medieval musicians back and forth, across and around the Mediterranean. Since it also traces the travels of musicians *from* Christian lands *into* the Arabo-Islamic world, the conclusion of this piece argues against the standard narrative of a unidirectional flow of musical influences from the Ancient World, to the Arabo-Islamic World, and thereafter to Europe, in favor of shared period of musical "mutual intelligibility" in the medieval Mediterranean. Your comments and reactions are very much welcome.]

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