EARLY MUSIC AND THE ORIENT

AN UPDATE AND A MINI-SYMPOSIUM, 2010

EAST MEETS WEST – OR DOES IT?


There’s a lot of this sort of thing in the air just now; more and more concert stages are occupied by ensembles that mix Western-trained musicians with artists from non-European traditions. We are yearning for a jailbreak.

In the classical music field at large, there is an increasing desire to reach out, to escape from the fetters of established categories, to go beyond. Some of these experiments you may find wonderful; others may leave you skeptical, or even set your teeth on edge (Last week, I watched a nationally televised program about a Chinese pipa virtuoso trying to play country and western music. Then there was that clip sent to me only yesterday by a friend on Facebook, of André Rieu leading his ensemble in Hava Nagila. Oy!). But these projects—great, terrible, and everything in between—are out there, and in increasing numbers; there are some pressing societal reasons for these developments...

Well, those recent, get-out-of-jail-free, urges in the arts world at large are not so novel to those of us who, less media-tized, perhaps, than the affable Mr. Rieu, have been involved for a while in the reconstruction of performance practice in the European Middle Ages. While the big world went about its business, we in our small world went about ours. And perhaps because precise information is so scarce regarding the music of those

A winner of EMA’s Howard Mayer Brown Award for lifetime achievement seeks to go beyond the superficial application of Near Eastern musical techniques to find the human commonality at the roots of Western and Eastern musical traditions

Introduced and moderated by Joel Cohen
distant centuries, we Medievalists for some time have been seeking evidence and inspiration about performance techniques from neighboring musical cultures. Speculation and experimentation among contemporary Medieval performers have been going on for decades. Recently, however, our activities seem to be dovetailing with the preoccupations of the society at large. How fascinating!

Which leads me to ask some questions: What’s the current musical state in our corner? How has it been evolving and changing? And how did we get here? Let’s start with the third of those questions.

IN THE BEGINNING
In the beginning was Tom. And Tom created the field.

Or so it still seems to this observer in late 2009, forty years or so after Thomas Binkley and the Studio der Frühen Musik first began performing Carmina Burana and the music of troubadours, trouvères, and minnesingers with ouds, darbouks, Moroccan tambourines, and the other accoutrements of North African Arabic music.

The late Tom Binkley, the son of a renowned historian, was cognizant of the scholarly speculation around Medieval lyric poetry: as he knew, starting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a number of scholars had pointed out the similarities among both the formal structure and the content of Medieval Arabic poetry, and the lyric songs of Provençal, Spanish, and Galician authors in the 12th and 13th centuries.

The shock waves were created when Binkley and his colleagues (singer Andrea von Ramm and instrumentalist Sterling Jones were the most central to this process) began applying some of some of these speculations to the actual performance of Medieval song. The effect was revelatory. Medieval music became exciting, appealing.

A flashback: for the increasingly small number of us who went through music history courses at American universities in the 1950s and ’60s, I now evoke the unpleasant memory of what was out there before the Studio’s experiments: creaky, cobwebby performances from the Anthologie Sonore and other antiquated, required-listening recordings. We prepared for the inevitable test by enduring the most academic and boring imaginable waxworks-in-sound of Gregorian chant, troubadours, and what have you.... Triste plaisir, et douleureuse joie, as they say.

Imagine the shock when Tom, Andrea, Sterling, and fine singers like Nigel Rogers or Richard Levitt or Willard Cobb would let loose with vivid, complex musical events, including vivid, theatrical singing a hundred leagues removed from the world of opera and oratorio, complex instrumental ritornelli, polyrhythms, oriental percussion, and other unanticipated instruments, and a general devil-may-care, in-your-face attitude. It was all unimaginably refreshing, stimulating, challenging, and fun.

And the Studio’s approach triggered an enormous amount of imitation and emulation, even if little of what followed was executed with the same level of flair, musicianship, and scholarship as the Binkley/Studio model. René Clemente was an important popularizer of the Middle Eastern “gospel,” and his Binkley-inspired, but primary-color and larger-than-life recordings of Medieval song were enormously influential among a younger generation, especially in Europe.

There was controversy. One critic observed that the Orientalist “fashion” in Medieval music performance had, too often, given birth to “weird salades

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The world of Arab percussion, I feel, is a strong complement to the performance of early European music.

A native Egyptian, Karim Nagi specializes in traditional Arabic music and dance. He has authored instructional CDs and DVDs, including the first DVD resource on Riqq technique. Karim Nagi is a former faculty member of the New England Conservatory of Music. He leads the Sharq Arabic Music Ensemble, performing classical Arabic instrumental and vocal repertoire, and is currently the director of the Arab Dance Seminar, a travelling weekend of workshops for professional training in pan-Arab dance.
Anne Azéma
The Singer, The Camel, And The Needle’s Eye

The current fascination for East-meets-West musical exchanges is not new: over the span of ages, a mixture of awe and admiration, guilt, and well-intentioned tone-deafness has paved the way for many of these musical experiments in composition and performance practice. Some of these ventures are truly successful artistically, some are fabulously successful commercially; most reflect primarily upon who we are, or who we would like to appear to be, now. Some spring more from a desire for planetary brotherhood than from musical realities. At times, a camel does have trouble going through the eye of the needle!

It seems to me that what makes such experiments worthwhile—beyond the pure energizing aspect of having good musicians of any styles get together—is when we finally touch on plausible and intellectually satisfying “true” connections. I have never understood why it should be interesting to have an oud player in one type of scalemode accompany a singer using a different one, when neither of these musicians understood each other’s grammar or musical language. Some deeper process of assimilation needs to take place.

I will share one anecdote regarding mutual acculturation: four singers, all from different cultures, were thrown together in this activity, all of us with different backgrounds, notions of voice production, and mother tongues. We all had to learn, by ear, a new (actually, old) piece in a foreign language, and each reacted with a somewhat different tactic, according to her upbringing:

1. “I will not learn anything new. I am who I am, and I do only my repertoire.”
2. “Please sing to me this new piece. Sing it to me over and over again, and I will learn it even though I do not speak your language.” And she did.
3. “Please sing it to me, over and over again, but may I write down the words?”
4. “Please sing it to me, over and over again.” (In an annoyed tone of voice: “Hasn’t anybody made a notated edition of this thing?”)

In these reactions were spelled out a part of our respective music histories. They forced me, as a Medievalist, to further reflect upon the many ways that the music that we call “Medieval” came down to us, in various degrees of transmission, (re)composition, interpretation. My work as a singer was then placed within a larger context of receiving music and transmitting it, of becoming only an element in a long chain of exchanges and modifications. I might have understood that

When working on a subject like that of Alexander the Great, we swim in a wide river that has traversed, like Alexander himself, many a far country.

French-born Anne Azéma is the recently named artistic director of the Boston Camerata. She is also a cofounder of Camerata Mediterranea and, in the arena of East-West collaboration, has performed and recorded with Ensemble Constantinople of Montréal. Besides her ensemble work, she has researched, produced and performed a series of five CD programs of Medieval secular monody for the Erato, Warner Classics, and K617 labels. As a teacher, she is a regular invitee of European and America conservatories and universities.

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Mehmet Sanlikol: Performing Turkish Music in the West

Even though my training has been in the fields of Western classical composition and jazz performance and composition (Berklee College of Music, 1997; New England Conservatory, 2000 and 2004), I have been leading various forms of Turkish music ensembles during the past six years. My principal instrument is piano but during the past nine years I have been singing professionally and performing instruments such as the ud (short necked lute), saz (long necked lute), and the ney (end blown flute).

Even though I came to the U.S. 16 years ago in order to study various styles of Western music, about nine years ago I also developed a passion for a number of Ottoman/Turkish music traditions. As a result of my studying and performing Ottoman/Turkish music during this time, about five years ago, along with Robert Labaree, chair of the music history department at New England Conservatory, I established a non-profit organization named Dünya. Based in Boston, Dünya’s goal is to present a contemporary view of a wide range of Turkish traditions, alone and in interaction with other world traditions, through performance, recording, publication, and other educational activities. Dünya seeks to work with a wide range of cultural and religious organizations and musical groups, but we rely on no particular political, governmental, or religious affiliation or support of any kind. When I am putting together Dünya programs, I watch out for two major concepts: Renk ve Sohbet (Color and Conversation).

Renk (color): The many colors of music—popular and classical, secular and sacred, old and new—are displayed in adventurous programs that explore relationships among different styles. In the Turkish spectrum, examples of Arabesk (popular) and ayn (classical sufi music), Ottoman theater (karagöz) and Ottoman chamber music (ince saz), entertainment music (tango, kanto, fasıl), and marching band (mehter) find their way into a season or even into a single concert, often in conversation with other world traditions. Sohbet (conversation). In conversation, culture and individuality are enhanced, not threatened. Programing begins with the Ottoman-Turkish tradition, but Turkish music is just one voice among many. When carefully positioned next to other musics—Western classical music and jazz, religious music of many regions and creeds, popular music in its many forms—the colors of Turkish music become even more vivid than when alone.

This is why so many Dünya programs involve collaborations that cross boundaries of style and tradition: “European Travelers and the Ottomans” (a tribute to Mozart, with Boston Camerata), “The Psalms of Ali Ufki,” “Armenian Composers of the Ottoman Period,” “Let Us Repeat the Names of God” (with The Silver Leaf Gospel Singers), “Greek and Turkish Holy Days,” “The Music of Cyprus,” and “The Language of Birds.” I try to make sure that all repertoires are presented respectfully and explored for what they contribute to the whole. And almost every program includes improvisation and new composition, often in traditional forms.

Mehmet Ali Sanlikol has received a degree in jazz composition and film scoring from the Berklee College of Music, a master’s degree in jazz composition from the New England Conservatory of Music, and a D.M.A. in composition from that same institution. With the Boston Camerata’s Anne Azéma, he is preparing a new program built around the legend of Alexander the Great for performance in Spring 2010.

A New Generation, and a Search for Roots

And yet, to quote a deeply anonymous troubadour, the beat goes on. Forty years later, the early music world, particularly the Medieval segment of it, still is the arena for plenty of East-meets-West performance activity. There is even, perhaps, a sense of increased urgency in these projects and experiments. There is the urging of research, and the call of musical pleasure. But to this mix we add another call, that of the whole human conundrum in the post-2001 world. We have become ever so painfully aware in recent years of the walls and barriers that separate civilizations, and a number of us feel that it is of great importance to rediscover common heritage and common ground, for the sake of music but also for the sake of people in general. Where then are these common roots to be found? Are they, can they, to be discerned in the art of music, and in its richly complex history? Can singers and oudists and darboukists chant and play and drum us out of our contemporary quandary?

Just in the 2009-2010 concert calendar for my home region, Boston, I notice a discernable uptick in these kinds of crosscultural projects. A few weeks ago, I heard Mehmet Sanlikol give a lecture-recital, for a large synagogue audience, about Turkish-Jewish musical exchanges in the Ottoman Empire. As I write this report, mid-November, the Boston Camerata prepares its Mediterranean Christmas program for a national U.S. tour, assisted by the Sharq Arabic music ensemble. Then, in March, the
same two ensembles travel together from Boston to France for a reprise of The Sacred Bridge. MENA Music brought the Orchestra of Tetouan (Morocco) on tour last year and introduces the Orchestra of Aleppo (Syria) in Washington, D.C., New York, and Boston. In the spring, the Boston Early Music Festival has invited Jordi Savall to present his Jerusalem program. And late in the season the Boston Camerata under Anne Azéma and Sanlikol's DÜNYA ensemble collaborate on a storytelling program around Alexander the Great, drawing on both European and Oriental sources.

I am convinced that there is something important going on here, reaching if you will beyond the immediate issues of music history and musical performance. We want these musical and personal stories about sharing and exchange and wider community. In a world full of rejection and animosity, we need such narratives to keep our sanity and our spiritual equilibrium.

The current wave of activity owes much to the pioneers of the 1960s, but much has changed in the performance world since then. On the scholarly/earlymusic/“Western” side, we know something more about the evidences of musical notation and musical iconography than we did in the intervening years.

Most significant still, and here we approach the central point of this presentation, there is now a young generation of “Oriental” musicians who, like us in the Euramerican mold, have caught the “historically informed” virus. That’s a very important development for non-Western musics, where historical perspective has been noticeably lacking until quite recently. These young musicians—scholars from the “other” side, have eschewed the rampant Westernization so prevalent around the globe and are searching, as we do in the Western tradition, for the sound and substance of early roots. The arrival of such talented artists on the scene makes possible a kind of substantive East-West dialogue, both musical and interpersonal, that would have been unthinkable just a few years ago. Our Mediterranean corner of the early music scene is currently abuzz and aglow with all kinds of fascinating interactions. It’s a great place in which to hang out and to be active.

My current project and passion, Camerata Mediterranea (http://medmusique.org), has to do with bringing the current crop of cross-cultural performers and scholars together to learn from each other and to benefit from each others’ unique gifts and insights. During Cam Med’s first international colloquium, held at Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, France in June 2009, participants arrived from Spain, France, Morocco, Germany, Israel, and the United States to make their scholarly contributions and to make music together. Check out the web site! We plan more such events in 2010 and 2011, both in Europe and here in the U.S., and are looking for American partners and co-presenters (how about you?).

What I wish to focus on just now, however, is the current state-of-the-intercultural-art close to home. I want to get a reading of how people active in this arena view their mission and their activities. To this end I have asked four distinguished friends and colleagues, from the Arabic, Turkish, and early music worlds, to create with me a mini-symposium on these pages. Beyond a general charge/query – Where are you going? – I have left each individual free to respond in his or her voice, with his or her priorities. My choice of co-participants is, this time, unabashedly local, and personal. Each one is a gifted artist, living and working in or around Boston, and each has contributed essential elements to recent productions of The Boston Camerata and/or Camerata Mediterranea. I find it incredibly encouraging and exciting to see so much activity, reflection, and dialogue going on in this small geographical perimeter, from people of diverse backgrounds and training. We’re listening to each other, learning from and enjoying each others’
Joel Cohen, artistic director of Camerata Mediterranea, led the Boston Camerata from 1969 to 2008. In recent seasons his energies with both companies have been centered on southern European and Mediterranean basin repertoires. Many of these projects have involved collaboration with Middle Eastern musicians. Cohen’s recent productions have included a revised and expanded version of The Sacred Bridge: Jews, Christians and Muslims in the European Middle Ages; Cantigas of Alfonso el Sabio (Erato/Warner Classics, Edison Prize, 2000); A Mediterranean Christmas (Warner Classics); and Alla Turca: A Mediterranean Dialogue. He is currently planning the next international colloquium of Camerata Mediterranea, to take place in the Medieval abbey of Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, France.

FURTHER READING AND LISTENING

• On one hotly-debated topic, namely the use/appropriateness of musical instruments in Medieval monody, see an earlier contribution from Joel Cohen, Peirol’s Vielle: Instrumental Participation in the Troubadour Repertory, in Historical Performance, Vol. 3 No. 2, Fall 1990, pages 73-77. [supply link to PDF online].

• An extended interview with Joel Cohen on his Cantigas project, involving musicians from Europe, America, and Morocco appeared in the Winter 2006 EMAg. [supply link to PDF online]

• Joel Cohen’s article on Orientalism in early music performance practice, including his views on the appropriateness/historical relevance of employing Middle Eastern musicians in early music projects, appeared in the program book of the Utrecht Early Music Festival, August 2000 (English and Dutch versions). An electronic version is available at the EMA website [supply link].

• Sound file: A miracle narration from Medieval Spain, “Como somos per consello do demo,” is here performed by The Boston Camerata, assisted by the Sharq Arabic Music ensemble. Excerpted from the Warner Classics CD, A Mediterranean Christmas. [supply link] You may download the text and translation here: [supply link].

• Sound file: A recent work by composer Kareem Roustom, integrating early Arabic modes and meters into a contemporary chamber music context can be downloaded here [supply link]. The composer’s own description is as follows: “From Buhur: clarinet & string trio. 2nd Movement, ‘Al-Kamel’ (The Complete), based on the poetic meter of the same name. Uses motifs from a Ud Taksim by Riyad Al-Sunbati and exhibits the use of complex counterpoint using a quarter scale (G, A ½, B, C, D, E, E ½, F, G, and other modulations). The melodic scheme and modulations are very traditional and old as the hills, but everything else is new, I suppose. Performed by the Damascus Festival Chamber Ensemble 2008.”

• Sound file: A traditional riqq (Arabic tambourine) solo by Karim Nagi can be heard at http://www.turbotabla.com/ cds/riqqsaba_karinnagi.mp3.

• Sound file: “Veysel’insonsiiri,” performed by the DUÑYA ensemble. Mehmet Sanlikol’s note: “It’s from a recent concert. It’s both getting back to roots (the track is directly inspired by the Turkish Asik-troubadour music/ poetry) and being modern (by featuring a double vocal improvisation accompanied by other instruments).” [supply link].