

Abstract

In this journey we are going to discover the role of music in the cultural exchange in one interesting part of the world that was the cultural capital of the Islamic world and a very important religious center of Western Christianity.

The lands that are now Spain and Portugal were always a crossroads of different ethnic and linguistic groups. The Romans pacified the Peninsula during the third to second centuries BCE, giving it the name Hispania and its Romance languages, several of which are still spoken today. From 711 to 1492 CE there would be Muslim kings ruling the Peninsula. In these times at the court of Abd Ar-Rahman II of the Umayyad dynasty, comes Ziryab.

Abu I-Hasan 'Ali Ibn Nafi' or Ziryab (789–857) was a polymath with knowledge in astronomy, geografy, meteorolgy, botanics, cosmetics, culinary art and fashion. He was a singer, oud player, composer, poet and teacher who lived and worked in Iraq, Northern Africa and Al-Andalus. He was the first to introduce the lute (oud) to Spain and Europe in general. He is credited with the addition of the fifth string to it and substituted the wooden pick with the eagle's quill.

His origins are subject to controversy but many researchers agree that he must have been of Iranian origin (Titus Burkhart, Julien Ribera, Henri Pèrès, Dozy, Henry Levy to name a few). He brings to Europe the musical form of sawt – the precursor of muwashshah and nawba and later the suite – from the Abbasid court (Baghdad, Iraq) and sets up the first music conservatory at Córdoba. From the muwashshahat and zajal the Spanish cantigas developed. The songs and music of the muwashshahat and zajal also gave rise to the famous troubadours.

Besides music Ziryab was deeply involved in all aspects of life. Soon Córdoba became the intellectual center of Europe. Students from the rest of the continent flocked to Córdoba to study science, medicine and philosophy and to take advantage of the great municipal library with its 600,000 volumes. They returned to their home countries not only with knowledge, but also bringing art, music, cuisine, fashion and manners, many of these being channeled by Zyriab.