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Traditio vel Aemulatio?
The Singing Contest of Sāmarrāʾ, Expression
of a Medieval Culture of Competition

Abstract: There is hardly any evidence suggesting that the singing contest of Sāmarrāʾ deals with *traditio*. Music is mainly performance, and the significance of improvisation allows the singer, male or female, to assume a key position. Regardless of the school, Arab Music of the 9th century is characterized by the aemulative event, especially in the form of competition and contest.

Keywords: singing contest, singing slaves, Sāmarrāʾ, court culture.

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The rivalry between two famous female singers was the topic of the day in al-Mutawakkil's (r. 847–61) Sāmarrāʾ, according to the *Kitāb al-aghānī*. We are told that[1] "the refined and well-bred people at this time were divided into two communities, one of them supporting ʿArīb (*ʿArībiyya*), the other one backing Shāriya (*Shārawiyya*) ..." Further, in the same context:[2] "(...) The supporters of one party did not use to visit those of the other one, nor were they friends with each other."

The texts are concerned with the most famous female singers of their time. Their rivalry was interpreted by J.E. BENCHEIKH[3] as a mere continuation of a *querelle des anciens et des modernes* between two musical "schools," whose actual exponents had been the singers Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī (d. ca. 850) and Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī (d. 839). In fact, Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī is usually regarded as an exponent of the classical Arabic musical tradition from the Ḥijāz, to which ʿArīb may have also been inclined. As opposed to this, Shāriya's teacher, the ʿAbbāsid prince Ibrāhīm

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1 13, p. 29. Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, Dār al-Fikr, 21 parts and Index in 9 vols. equivalent to the edition Kairo 1322/1905–5. Quoted below "*Agh*" the first number referring to the respective part.

2 14, 109.

3 *Les musiciens et la poésie. Les écoles d' Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī (m. 225 H) et d'Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī (m. 224 H)*, in: *Arabica* 22 (1979), fasc. 2, 114–152, especially 146f.

ibn al-Mahdī, preferred the modernist Persian style, which was characterized *inter alia* by redundant improvisation.[4] Consequently, *traditio* in our context refers to these musical traditions, and in a broader sense, to a concept close to Latin *imitatio* or Greek μίμησις – consulting an (elder) paragon with the aim of converging[5] or transmitting it.

Aemulatio, on the other hand, is defined as "competing with a stylistic or poetical paragon, in order to outreach and even surpass it."[6] Originally a rhetorical concept, the notion of *aemulatio* has been adopted by other disciplines, such as literary criticism and art history. *Aemulatio* requires knowledge of the paragon, i.e., of the (musical) tradition.

We will discuss the question of whether or not the rivalry of the female singers is to be regarded as a *querelle*, a quarrel, between two *traditiones*. Are they mere representatives and thus imitating elder paragons, with the rivalry between them being, in fact, one between two schools? Or is their contest a personal one as would be suggested by interpreting it as *aemulatio* – and thus indicating individualization?[7]

The sources and the singers

Several works from the elder scientific literature have adopted the polemics of Islamic theologians almost uncritically: singing-girls as a phenomenon of deca-

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4 As I will discuss below these terms, these, especially "romanticism" for the Persian style, are problematic. In the absence of a better alternative, I will thence refer to them as classical Arabic and modernist Persian style. However, we still lack a comprehensive analysis of both musical traditions. For a general survey, see Amnon SHILOAH, *Music in the World of Islam. A Socio-Cultural Study*, Aldershot 1995 and IDEM: *The Theory of Music in Arabic Writings (c. 900–1900)*, 2 vols., Henle: München 1979, 2003. Still useful is the work of Hans HICKMANN and Wilhelm STANDER, *Orientalische Musik*, in: B. SPULER (ed.) *Handbuch der Orientalistik* 1. Abteilung, Ergänzungsband 4, Leiden, Köln 1970, 1–134.
5 Like Byzantine monks, who were expected to imitate angels through their lifestyle. For a nuanced discussion of the notion, see Andreas RHOBY and Elisabeth SCHIFFER, eds., *Imitatio – Aemulatio – Variatio. Akten des internationalen wissenschaftlichen Symposions zur byzantinischen Sprache und Literatur (Wien 22.–25. Oktober 2008)*, Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: Wien 2010, 17–21, and F. NEUMANN, *Tradition*, in: Gert UEDING (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, vol. 9, Tübingen 2009, 732–41.
6 Barbara BAUER, "*Aemulatio*", in: Gert UEDING, *Wörterbuch,* vol. 1 (1992), 141–188.
7 Joel KRAEMER, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*, Leiden 1992, XXVI, 1ff, 11ff (on the 10th century) mentions individualism as a feature of a "Renaissance."

dence.[8] Later publications, such as those by Michael Stigelbauer (1975)[9], Hans Engel (1987)[10], George Sawa (1989/2004)[11] or Abdul-Kareem al-Heitty (2005)[12] provide us with a large amount of material, and yet, understandably, could not analyze the singing-girls' position exhaustively. Certainly, the most important biographical source for the life of the singing-girls is the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*.[13] From numerous other sources, I will concentrate on the *Risālat al-qiyān* by al-Jāḥiẓ.[14]

ʿArīb was probably born about 797 C.E., an alleged daughter of the Barmakid vizier Jaʿfar. She is said to be sold by her Christian nanny after the fall of the Barmakids in 803. This was how she came to ʿAbdallāh Ismāʿīl al-Marākibī, probably the caliph's equerry. Caliph al-Amīn cheated al-Marākibī out of his beautiful slave-girl: he invited the equerry to bring ʿArīb into the palace, so that authorities could examine her talent – and then kept her with him, making her his concubine.[15] After 813, the new caliph al-Maʾmūn forced al-Marākibī to sell the singer to him. Al-Maʾmūn was so devoted to ʿArīb that she was called al-Maʾmūniyya. Still, she obviously did not return his affection – ʿArīb ran away from his palace to stay with her lover, got pregnant, and succeeded in being married to him.[16]

During the reign of al-Muʿtaṣim ʿArīb was manumitted – and took part in a hazardous political intrigue. When ʿAbbās, al-Maʾmūn's son, planned a coup against his uncle al-Muʿtaṣim and his heir apparent, al-Wāthiq, she offered to kill

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8 Like Alfred v. Kremer, *Kulturgeschichte des Orients unter den Chalifen*, Wien 1877, 111. More objective works from prior secondary literature are Charles Pellat, *Ḳayna*, in: *EI²* vol. 4, 1978, 820–824, Henry G. Farmer, *A History of Arabian Music to the XIII. Century*, London 1929. Idem, *The Minstrels of the Golden Age of Islam*, in: *Islamic Culture* XVII (1943), 273–281 and XVIII (1944), 53–61.
9 Michael Stigelbauer, *Die Sängerinnen am Abbasidenhof um die Zeit des Kalifen al-Mutawakkil. Nach dem Kitāb al-Aġānī des Abu l-Faraǧ al-Iṣbahānī (sic) und anderen Quellen dargestellt*, Wien 1975.
10 Hans Engel, *Die Stellung des Musikers im arabisch-islamischen Raum*, Bonn 1987.
11 George Sawa, *Music Performance Practice in the Early Abbasid Era*, Ottawa 2004 (¹Toronto, Ontario 1989). Sawa points out similar competitions among singers (178ff), he also briefly quotes our singing contest (without referring to Bencheikh).
12 Abdul-Kareem al-Heitty, *The Role of the Poetess at the Abbasid Court (132–247 / 750–861). A Critical Study of the Contribution to Literature of Free Women and Slave-Girls under the Early Abbāsid (sic) Caliphate, their Biographies and Surviving Works*, Beirut 2005.
13 For extensive biographies that are contradictory in details, see Stigelbauer, *Sängerinnen* 18ff, and Al-Heitty, *Poetess* (only ʿArīb, 73ff). Especially Stigelbauer, *Sängerinnen,* 7ff and al-Heitty, *Poetess*, 350ff, give also bibliographies. Al-Heitty lists lost sources as well.
14 A.F.L. Beeston, *The Epistle on Singing-girls of Jāḥiẓ. Edited with Translation and Commentary by A.F.L. Beeston*, Guildford 1980. Quotations refer to this edition.
15 See Stigelbauer, *Sängerinnen,* 24.
16 See Stigelbauer, *Sängerinnen,* 152ff.

the latter personally.[17] The conspiracy was detected, the conspirators were killed – except for ʿArīb, who returned to court shortly afterwards. Whether or not the anecdote is reliable, ʿArīb seems to have enjoyed less popularity during the reign of al-Muʿtaṣim and al-Wāthiq.[18] However, when she died in about 890, she was highly respected and vastly wealthy. Her songs were collected and her biography was recorded.[19] Unfortunately, those works have not survived and are only known by their titles.

During the time when ʿArīb enjoyed less popularity, she was outstripped by a rival who was about 20 years her junior. Shāriya was born in about 815 in al-Baṣra, the illegitimate daughter of a Qurashī – as asserted by the woman who sold her and claimed to be her mother. The ʿAbbāsid prince Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī purchased the girl; he was one of the most famous *bonvivants* of his time and even counter-caliph for a short time (during an ill-defined period between 817 and 819). Years later, when Shāriya's alleged mother saw a prospect of coming into huge wealth, she wanted her back; she suddenly recalled the genealogy of the now famous girl, and claimed that Shāriya was freeborn. However, Ibrāhīm, a cunning jurist, managed to outwit her and keep Shāriya with him. Subsequently, Shāriya was manumitted during the reign of al-Muʿtaṣim or al-Wāthiq and had her glory days during the al-Wāthiq's caliphate between 842 and 847. These however, ended when ʿArīb's popularity increased again during the time of al-Mutawakkil. Shāriya died in about 870 C.E.[20]

The singing contest of Sāmarrāʾ:

It was probably during the reign of al-Mutawakkil, between 847 and 861, that Sāmarrāʾ witnessed a noteworthy event:[21]

"One day we sat together at Abū ʿIsā ibn al-Mutawakkil's, who had invited us for a morning drink (ṣabūḥ). With me were also Jaʿfar ibn al-Maʾmūn, Sulaymān

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17 *Agh* 18, 187. AL-HEITTY, *Poetess*, 82, reads this as a manifestation of her pro-Barmakid attitude. However, I cannot see the coherence; it seems to me rather an attitude towards the family of al-Maʾmūn.
18 STIGELBAUER, *Sängerinnen* 28 and 45, follows *Agh* 18, 187 saying that this aversion was based on the aforementioned conspiracy and her quarrels with al-Wāthiq (*Agh* 18, 186). Anyway, the caliph could also have simply preferred modernist singers, since he favored this style (FARMER, *History*, 148).
19 *Agh* 18, 176.
20 STIGELBAUER, *Sängerinnen* 39ff, Eckhard NEUBAUER, *Shāriya*, in: *EI²*, vol. 9 (1995), 350f.
21 *Agh* 13, 29.

ibn Wahb and Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mudabbir, furthermore ʿArīb and Shāriya and their singing-girls. We were all filled with joy, when Bidʿa, ʿArīb's slave-girl, sang:

> *O criticizing woman, you increase your stupid blame,*
> blaming me not for real fault or shame.

This song was by ʿArīb. Then ʿIrfān sang:

> *And if my heart wants my beloved to separate, there are two advocates*
> pleading her cause deep in my heart: her braids.

This song was by Shāriya."

At that time, the refined and well-bred people (*ahl al-ẓarf wal-mutaʿānūn*) were divided into two communities (*ḍaffayn*) – one supported ʿArīb (*ʿArībiyya*) and the other backed Shāriya (*Shārawiyya*). Each party (*ḥizb*) favored the singer whom they admired (*taʿaṣṣaba,* today also: to be a fan, devotee) in terms of applause (*istiḥsān*), *ṭarab* (see below), and improvisation (*iqtirāḥ*). ʿArīb and Shāriya did not perform themselves: each singing-girl sang her mistresses' songs, none of them outperforming the other. Finally, Shāriya's girl ʿIrfān sang:

> *Who, by my father, visited me in my dream[22] at night,*
> came close to me, averting yet his eyes at the sight?

She did well and received the desired applause.[23]

We continued to drink all together, when ʿArīb suddenly put down the cup and asked Shāriya: Tell me, my sister, who composed that melody? She answered: I did. I composed the song when my master, Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī, was still alive. At that time I performed it in his presence. It won his acclaim, and he presented it to Isḥāq and others, and they applauded as well.

Arīb did not reply, then she asked Abū ʿIsā: By my father, Mylord, I would like you to send for ʿAthʿath and ask him to come here to me.[24] Abū ʿIsā did as she had asked. ʿAthʿath came and sat down. When he had made himself comfortable, drank and sang, ʿArīb adressed him: Abū Dalīja, do you remember the song by Zu-

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22 *Manām* obviously alludes to the motif of the beloved's dream figure. Of course one could also translate „bedroom". The verse is quoted out of context.

23 *Fa-aḥsanat mā shāʾat*. I want to express the double meaning of *aḥsana*.

24 *Agh* 13, 28 tells us that he was a black catamite who was later trained as a singer and poet. He had the *kunya* Abū Dalīja. Bencheikh, *Musiciens*, 130 mentions him as a disciple of Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī.

bayr ibn Daḥmān[25], which he performed in my house when you were there, and which he taught you at my request? So he recited (the verse she was talking about):

> *A virgin, can she ever forget the man who took her innocence?*[26] *Nay!*
> By God! I swear, I still remember it as if we'd parted only yesterday!

And ʿArīb asked him: Sing it! So he started and sang exactly the melody which Shāriya('s girl) had performed before, until he had echoed it completely. ʿArīb burst into laughter and told her girls: Rehearse that in the right way, and then let's abolish the lie (*daʿūnā min al-bāṭil*)! They started singing the old song, Bidʿa and some of ʿArīb's girls, and Shāriya was abashed and bowed her head in shame, since her defeat was obvious. So she had not gained anything on this day, neither she herself, nor her singing-girls, nor any of her fans (*min mutaʿaṣṣibīhā*)."

Sāmarrāʾ's upper class was split into two communities of devotees. This is illustrated in the frame of a matinée hosted by the high nobility (ʿAbbāsid princes, but also ʿArīb's friend – and maybe lover – Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mudabbir, an *homme de lettres* from Khurāsān's aristocracy). The terminology is striking: *ʿArībiyya* resp. *Shārawiyya*. This grammatical pattern refers to the adherents of a master or a (theological) concept, usually within a religious context.[27] (The Latin *fanaticus*, later "Fan" derives from religious vocabulary as well). The notions *ḥizb* and *taʿaṣṣaba* resp. *mutaʿaṣṣib* also show a strong emotional moment. Etymologically, *taʿaṣṣaba* is related to *ʿaṣabiyya*, which means "clannishness" or "tribal cohesiveness".

ʿArīb was able to convict her rival of plagiarism and, as such, managed to win the competition. The text does not talk about musical schools. Anyway, we learn that "… People were divided into two parties: some preferred Shāriya, others ʿArīb. The adherents of one party did not use to visit those of the other one, nor were they friends with each other."[28]

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25 Bencheikh, *Musiciens,* 130 assigns him to the school of Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī.
26 According to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Freytag, *Lexicon Arabico-Latinum ex opere suo maiore in usum tironum excerptum*, 1837, vol. 3, 125, *Abū ʿudhrihā* means the man who deflowered a woman.
27 Ashʿariyya, "Dahrīya": Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, 6 vols, vol. 4, de Gruyter: Berlin and New York 1997, 451–455 provided a brief discussion of the latter notion claiming it was an umbrella concept rather than a clearly defined school.
28 *Agh* 14, 109.

That the devotees of the ʿ*Arībiyya* and the *Shārawiyya* did not visit each other is much more than one could say about the adherents of theological or even religious parties. Further:[29]

"Abū l-Ṣaqr Ismaʿīl was an ʿArībist (*kāna … ʿArībiyyan*). One Friday ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn invited him, when ʿArīb with her slave-girls was his guest. Shāriya gained knowledge of this. One or two days later, she sent her own singing-girls to ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn and ordered one of them – I don't remember if it was Mihrajān or Muṭrib or Qamriyya – to sing:

> *Don't you return (to her), after she's gone!*
> But look, how I compose a song!"

Stigelbauer, who usually translates reliably, reads only the first hemistich. This has led him to the wrong conclusion, namely, that Shāriya would forbid her disloyal fan to visit her again, because he dared to listen to ʿArīb.[30] This interpretation fails to capture the competitive character of the anecdote: In fact, Shāriya intends to convince ʿAlī (by showing her own talent as a songwriter) that she can do better than ʿArīb. As in the anecdote of the singing contest, there is no evidence that Shāriya would justify her supremacy by *traditio*. The rivalry seems to have persisted longer: "Shāriya started to play the lute only during the reign of al-Mutawakkil, in the context of the controversy between her and ʿArīb. ʿArīb wanted her to stop it, but Shāriya, nonetheless, continued."[31]

The *Kitāb al-Aghānī* tells us of manifold discussions on the question of who the best singer of a given period was. Sometimes, a compromise was found – that ʿArīb was the best and most creative composer – she wrote between 1,000 and 1,125 songs[32] – while Shāriya and Farīda had the most beautiful voices, and Mutayyam was brilliant in her technique.[33] ʿArīb excelled in many ways, but there were also critics. Specifically, she was accused of having plagiarized herself (by using the same melody for different songs) and of having composed many rather worthless pieces: "Abū l-ʿAbbās ibn Ḥamdūn said to me, during a discussion about ʿArīb's songs, that many of them were not perfect, since she had produced lots of inferior songs, and that some of them were of modest quality. I replied: Who knows among the singers of the ʿAbbāsid (caliphs and princes) one whose entire oeuvre would be perfect? Then I attempted to list all her good songs and reached a total of about 100." [some examples followed, A.I.]

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29 *Ibid.*
30 Stigelbauer, *Sängerinnen*, 72.
31 *Agh* 14, 107. The narrator is Ibn al-Muʿtazz.
32 *Agh* 18, 176.
33 *Agh* 3, 177.

"Herein we agreed, and finally he said: There was no woman after ʿArīb (*mā khalafat* [...] *mraʾa mithluhā*), who would have been able to hold a candle to her in the field of singing (*ghināʾ*), recital (*riwāya*) or composing (*ṣanʿa*). And I answered: And not a large number of men either!"[34]

ʿArīb's biography specifically emphasized that she was unequalled since the time of the great Umayyad singing-girls.[35] Here she is explicitly regarded as equal to her male colleagues. Nevertheless, there was pigeonholing as well. Some held the opinion that a good teacher necessarily made the better singer:

"Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī bought Shāriya and she learned from him everything he knew about singing and even more. Some, herefore, prefer her to ʿArīb. They advance the argument that Ibrāhīm taught and trained her to perform with perfection and taught her his knowlegde (*maʿrifa*). The situation is different with ʿArīb, because al-Murādī[36] could not compete with Ibrāhīm regarding matters of knowlegde ..."[37]

The relation between teacher and disciple seems to be interpreted as a kind of genealogical one. Does this text provide the missing reference to *traditio*? Indeed we can assume that Shāriya was shaped musically by Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī. Although she had been introduced to music by her alleged mother – who therefore seems to have been a singer as well – Ibrāhīm soon took over her training. He was famous for his beautiful voice and had a preference for the Persian style of music. Although improvisation was a feature of both the classical Arabic and modernist Persian style, the latter tended to adorn songs excessively. The classicists disapproved of this self-display of the singer, which in their eyes distorted the songs (hence, the singers ʿAllūya and Mukhāriq were told that their music needed "bleeding").[38] Consequently, the point of difference is not so much composition, but performance. Specifically, although the passage between both was fluid: one should keep in mind, that musical notation at this time was usually just an *aide-mémoire*.[39] In my opinion, it is not correct to call the modernists "romantics."[40]

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34 *Agh* 18, 190, the narrator is Ğaḥẓa.

35 See *Agh* 18, 175 as well.

36 Stigelbauer, *Sängerinnen*, 21, suggests that this could be an error for al-Marākibī (ʿArīb's first master).

37 *Agh* 14, 105.

38 *Sic* Farmer, *History*, 148 in a metaphorical sense referring to phlebotomy.

39 See Eckard Neubauer, *Musiker am Hof der frühen ʿAbbasiden* (sic), Frankfurt am Main 1965, 34f.

40 Frequently used by those following Farmer, *History*, 148. Improvisation, defined by the simultaneity of musical creation and performance (H. Lindlar, *Improvisation*, in: Marc Honegger and Günther Massenkeil, *Das grosse Lexikon der Musik in acht Bänden*, Herder: Freiburg, Basel, Wien 1987, vol. 4, 159–161) is a common feature of Arab, Turkish, and Persian music

ʿArīb's case is not comparably obvious, although she is usually associated with the classical Arabic school.[41] However, we find her in contact with most of the famous singers of her time, and indeed, showing a slight preference for those of the classical Arabic school, such as Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī (d. ca. 850), one of the most important singers of his time and an exponent of the classical tradition. However, there is no evidence that ʿArīb used to sing only in the classical Arabic style. A singing-girl, according to *Risālat al-qiyān*, had a repertoire of about 4,000 songs.[42] We should assume that the girls mastered both styles well, even though they personally might have preferred one of them. Thus, Shāriya said that "her" song won the acclaim of Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī,[43] an exponent of the opposing school, and similarly, ʿArīb's talent was examined and approved by Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī.[44] The song plagiarized by Shāriya was originally composed by an exponent of the classical style, Zubayr, who had taught it to ʿAthʿath, a disciple of the opposing modernist Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī.[45] Finally, not even the text on Shāriya's training provided evidence that she was taught only the modernist Persian style.

Neither Isḥāq nor Ibrāhīm was mentioned as a reference model in the singing contest of Sāmarrāʾ, nor did the musical *traditio* play a decisive role.[46] Quite the contrary, Shāriya asserted that her song had delighted both of them, no matter which school they adhered to. When ʿArīb unveiled the deceit, there were no differences in the melody, although the real composer Zubayr belonged to the opposing *traditio*. This is remarkable since the modernists were blamed for corrupting the songs, so that one never heard them the same way they were

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until now. However, it is not a characteristic of European romantic music. On the contrary, early and baroque music, like Arab music in our context, was not fully notated and left much space for improvisation. Famous *virtuosi* were nearly on equal terms with the composer, since the work was not complete unless performed. Romantic music, by contrast, tends to abolish improvisation by stressing the importance of notation ("Werkfixierung". See S. Kunze, *Romantik*, *ibid.*, vol. 7, 114–119). Romantic music is further characterized by an increasing distinction between performer and composer, including the superiority of the latter. However, Ibrāhīm believed the opposite: When blamed that his redundant improvisations corrupted the songs, he answered, that he was a king and son of kings, and thus, he sang as he liked (Farmer, *History*, 148).

41 As does Stigelbauer (*Sängerinnen*, 46) following Farmer, *History*, 148. Likewise Bencheikh, *Musiciens*, 146 f.

42 §53 according to the edition by Beeston (*Epistle*, 21 of the Arabic text, 35 of the English translation).

43 *Agh* 13, 29.

44 *Agh* 18, 181.

45 Bencheikh, *Musiciens*, 130.

46 Ibrāhīm died probably about ten years before (d. 839), Isḥāq (d. ca. 850).

composed.[47] Even the fan communities (ʿarībī and shārawī) obviously referred to the person of the singer herself (while there were no comparable references of ibrāhīmī or isḥāqī). Both women had achieved iconic status. They were idols of their time.[48]

In this sense, female singers do not just continue a competition between two elder (male) stars nor does the narrator himself interpret the situation in this way. The singing contest of Sāmarrāʾ is not about two musical traditions, but about the rivalry between ʿArīb and Shāriya. The singers are the protagonists – not traditio. However, if it is not about tradition, what is the story talking about?

Cultures of competition

Singing, says al-Jāḥiẓ,[49] is nothing but poetry with melody. Indeed poetry and music are closely connected. Most singers wrote at least some of their texts themselves, so it could be useful to regard music and poetry as parts of the same intellectual milieu rather than as separate components. Ibn al-Muʿtazz, author of the Kitāb al-Badīʿ, wrote down the biographies of the great singing-girls as well. Literary badīʿ, as well as the Persian musical school, claim to be "modern" (badīʿ/innovation) and to surpass tradition.[50] However, this idea (of surpassing especially prior models) is not a characteristic of the modernist school. It refers less to a competition between schools, but is a phenomenon that can be found throughout the culture of the 9th century. It is found within the so-called schools as well as between them.

Poetry and singing contests were extremely popular in 9th century courtly life. Even among theologians we can find famous permanent rivalries, such as that of Ibn ar-Rēwandī[51] and al-Khayyāṭ. Educated slave-girls, who took part in contests even found their way into the Arabian Nights like Tawaddud, who com-

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47 Farmer, History, 148.

48 One should keep in mind the original meaning of "icon" and "idol" in the religious sense. Our modern concept of the "star" as a secular cult figure is derived from religious sphere. Star cult – even if it is one avant la lettre – phenomenologically resembles religious cults in many respects, especially regarding the strong emotionality.

49 § 31 according to Beeston, Epistle, 11 (23f in the English translation).

50 See the comprehensive analysis by Stefan Sperl, Mannerism in Arabic Poetry. A Structural Analysis of Selected Texts, Cambridge 1989.

51 I follow the transcription of van Ess, op. cit., especially 295–349 (chapter on Ibn ar-Rēwandī).

peted among others with the famous theologian al-Naẓẓām.[52] Generally, from the beginning of the 9th century, we note a great interest in disputes, contests, and verbal controversies. During the first decades of the century, the *naqā'iḍ* between Jarīr and Farazdaq resp. al-Akhṭal (dating to the 7th and early 8th century) were collected. This type of satirical feud was in fashion, and not only among male poets: The poetess Faḍl (d. ca. 870), for instance, was the heroine of several "poetry slams." Al-Heitty[53] quoted different verses that she composed extemporaneously, competing with other poets during a *majlis*. She also had an invective competition with another slave poetess:[54] Both accompanied by male supporters, the two poetesses were anything but squeamish in attacking each other in the way of Jarīr and Farazdaq.[55]

Regarding the context of music, the quarrel between Isḥāq al-Mawṣilī and Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī is by no means the only one. So Isḥāq's father, Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī, competed with a colleague in the presence of Hārūn ar-Rashīd, who knew more songs than the other. Isḥāq himself outstripped Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī in his ability to charm sounds out of a completely off-tuned lute. He also competed against the singer Mukhāriq, both of them singing the same song, trying to outperform each other.[56] Moreover, the singing-girls were by no means only objects of dispute, but also active competitors; in fact, a similar contest was related about Maḥbūba.[57]

Thus, Shāriya was not ʿArīb's only opponent. The *enfant terrible* of the ʿAbbāsid court challenged an even more prominent rival: Caliph al-Wāthiq. We learn about the music enthusiast al-Wāthiq:[58] "Whenever al-Wāthiq had written a

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52 The interpretation of this (vastly discussed) and similar stories that slave-girls in the context of intellectual contests were a parody or expression of disdain towards the other participant, is of course inadequate. It was falsified as early as in 1973 by Claudine Gerresch, *Un récit des Mille et Une nuits: Tawaddud, petite encyclopédie de l'Islam médiéval*, in: *Bulletin de l'Institut Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire*, Serie B 35, 1 (1973), 57–175, p. 114. Gerresch points out, that Tawaddud incorporates in an ideal way the extensive education of slave-girls (*ibid.*, 115. The article provides also bibliografy including manuscripts). Further recent studies by Claude Bremond and Bernard Darbord, *Tawaddud et Teodor: les enjeux ludiques du savoir*, in: Michelangelo Picone (ed.), *L' enciclopedismo medievale*, Longo: Ravenna 1994, 253–273. M.R. Parker, *The Story of a Story across the Cultures. The Case of the Doncella Teodor*, London 1996.
53 *Role of the Poetess*, 235 ff.
54 *Agh* 21, 118 a certain al-Khansāʾ, slave-girl of Hishām ibn Makfūf.
55 Translation by Stigelbauer, *op. cit.*, 141f, for further "poetry slams" in general *ibid.* 33 and 70.
56 Sawa, *Performance*, 178ff for these and similar competitions.
57 Translated by Stigelbauer, *Sängerinnen*, 59 (from al-Masʿūdī's *Kitāb murūj al-dhahab*).
58 *Agh* 18, 186.

melody (on a poem), ʿArīb would compose another melody on the same text, which surpassed his." This seems to be one of the reasons, why she was in his bad books – not to mention that she may have tried to kill him personally.[59] His uninspired music, however, does not seem to have been the reason for the latter attempt. The competition between ʿArīb and Shāriya was not an isolated incident, to be understood in the context of another quarrel. Instead, poetical and musical contests were common courtesy. This takes us to the notion of *aemulatio*.

Over the past few years, the notion of *aemulatio* has been investigated by several scholars and is considered from different angles, usually in terms of art history and literary criticism regarding the European Renaissance or Byzantium.[60] Although it is difficult to transfer European concepts to the Arab world, it makes sense in this case. Byzantium and classical antiquity were important reference models for the Arab world of the 9th century. Arab scholars regarded themselves as heirs of the ancient Greeks as did their Byzantine colleagues. Music was regarded as a part of the Greek heritage, and indeed, Arab music theory shares similar concepts with the latter (for instance regarding the *maqāmāt*).[61] Al-Jāḥiẓ stresses the close relation between music and poetry (and therefore, *sensu lato*, also with rhetoric), but also between music and psychology (see below). This refers to Graeco-Byzantine patterns as well, and indeed, al-Jāḥiẓ points out two non-Arabic and pre-Islamic types of influences on music:[62] "The Persians regarded singing as *adab*, the *Rūm* (Byzantines: as distinguished from *Yūnān:* ancient Greeks) as (a branch of) philosophy."

Reference points like these justify the act of seeking examples of *aemulatio* in Sāmarrāʾ as well. We do find them in official court poetry such as the Qaṣīdas by al-Buḥturī (820/1–897). As early as in 1989, Stefan Sperl dealt extensively with the panegyric on the basin of al-Mutawakkil, which surpassed all wonders of architecture, both of the ancient world and of nature.[63] We should add that if the basin surpasses nature, this is to say that the creation of the caliph surpasses even that of God! In this case, we note primarily the concept of *aemulatio veterum*, which is to surpass prior models.

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59 *Agh* 18, 187. But as said above, this caliph preferred the modernist style anyway.
60 Jan-Dirk Müller et. al., eds., *Aemulatio. Kulturen des Wettstreits in Text und Bild (1450–1620)*, De Gruyter: Berlin 2011, and Rhoby / Schiffer, *Imitatio*.
61 Especially music theory, unlike singing as such, compare the frequent distinction between singing (*ʿilm al-ghināʾ*) and music theory (*ʿilm al-mūsīqā*), the latter being ascribed to the "Greek sciences."
62 § 28 according to the edition by Beeston (*Epistle*, 10 of the Arabic text, 22f of the translation).
63 Sperl, *Mannerism*, 38 ff, dealing with Poem Nr. 915, to which Ibn al-Muʿtazz refers as a perfect example of *badīʿ*.

ʿArīb and Shāriya, however, were not official court poetesses. Yet, it is worth taking a look at their biographies as related by the *Kitāb al-Aghānī:* ʿArīb was compared repeatedly with the great singers of the past: 18, 175 notes, that from the time of the great Umayyad singing-girls there was no one like her; 18, 190 claims that no other singing-girl equalled her either: She survived comparisons with the singers of the past, and became a model herself. Likewise, we learn of how Shāriya (14, 105) had been taught by Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī all he knew, and even more. Remarkably, Shāriya exceeded even her master – a noteworthy case of a woman who outshone a man.

A recent publication of a conference on *aemulatio*[64] emphasized that the key elements in the aesthetics of early modern times (as the example of the rivalry between Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci shows) include outstripping models from the past and exceeding coeval rivals (*aemulatio modernorum*). In this light, we find several *aemulative* motifs in the text on the rivalry of Sāmarrāʾ: Shāriya tried to win back her renegade admirer, ʿAlī, and to convince him that she was the better musician.[65] She staged her protest by sending her singing-girls to him and by delivering the message (i.e., "I'm the better one!") in the form of a song on the situation. In this way, she simultaneously proved the superiority she claimed, and the way in which ʿArīb made her rival look like a fool in the singing contest was remarkable as well. She did not simply say: "This is a plagiarism," instead, she turned her triumph into good publicity and showed remarkable stagecraft.

Then, what is the difference among plagiarism, *imitatio*, and *aemulatio?* Shāriya was deemed a plagiarizer not because she allowed her singing-girl to perform a melody created by another composer, but because she claimed that it was her own creation.[66] Even in order to imitate a paragon, one has to name it or to make sure that the audience knows the work one refers to; the more so if one wants to surpass it (as *aemulatio* is defined).[67] Thus, naming the paragon as well as surpassing it are the features of *aemulatio*.

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64 MÜLLER et. al., *Aemulatio*.

65 *Agh* 14, 109.

66 It was not unusual for different melodies to be composed on the same text, as ʿArīb does in her competition with al-Wāthiq. Iṣfahānī interprets this as *aemulatio*. Shāriya's case is different: She uses the melody of another singer, pretends that it was hers and that she had just changed the words. Even today we distinguish a new, maybe better musical version of a text from musical plagiarism (copy of a melody). SAWA already noted that plagiarism could lead to a defeat, *Performance*, 179.

67 See above.

This distinction can be illustrated by another anecdote from ʿArīb's biography, which is constructed in a similar way.[68] In that anecdote, ʿAlī ibn Yaḥyā al-Munajjim related how ʿArīb once asked him about a meeting (*majlis*) in the caliph's palace. She wanted to know, who had been the singers and which song had been the best-liked (*istaḥsana*). He replied that it was a song by Bunān.[69] ʿArīb wanted to hear the verses, and he recited them for her. Then she sent for Bunān, dined and had wine with him, and finally asked him to perform his song. As soon as he had finished his performance, ʿArīb composed another four-lined stanza in the same metre (more or less) spontaneously. According to other sources, she also changed the *maqām* (Tropos, mode) of the melody. Bunān was so impressed that he decided to adopt her new version.[70]

The story is constructed conspicuously similarly to that of the singing contest of Sāmarrāʾ – ʿArīb learns about a song, sends for the singer, and so on. However, there are differences that are detected. In this anecdote, the song is attributed to its real composer. ʿArīb by no means tried to make anybody believe that she composed the melody. She staged her version as a reply to – even as an improvement – of that song. Based on the most successful song of yesterday's *majlis*, she subsequently provoked a competition, which she could not hold in the presence of the ruler himself. She made sure that there was a witness to tell the caliph about her triumph. By first making Bunān sing his own version and then improvising a better one, she turned the encounter into a staged contest. Bunān finally admitted that her version surpassed his own (the most-liked song of yesterday's meeting). That fact that ʿArīb did it better symbolized real *aemulatio*.

That the singing contest of Sāmarrāʾ was interpreted as a continuation of another quarrel may be due to the fact that the protagonists were female. Anecdotes about slave-girls were often dominated by sexual aspects; thus, it was difficult to imagine that the singing contest was a competition between two (female) artists.[71] Further, it seemed inconceivable that women could achieve such huge popularity – even less so because the 9th century is usually regarded as a period of increasing segregation of women from public space.[72] The disappearance of noble

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68 Arabic text quoted in AL-HEITTY, *Poetess,* 215f.

69 Famous singer, coeval.

70 AL-HEITTY, *Poetess,* ibid.

71 Regarding the singing contest, however, this aspect is not relevant. Especially, ʿArīb was already beyond the age when a singing-girl would have passed as an object of erotic dreams.

72 This is briefly discussed in Susanne ENDERWITZ, *Liebe als Beruf. Al-ʿAbbās ibn al-Aḥnaf und das Ġazal*, Franz Steiner Verlag: Stuttgart and Beirut 1995, 93. Al-Washshāʾ, Abū l-Ṭayyib Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq ibn Yaḥyā, *Kitāb al-muwashshā*, ed. Rudolph E. BRÜNNOW, Leiden 1886, 93, refers still to the conflict that a *ẓarīf* preferred women of his own (noble) range, but this had become difficult, since these women were jealously guarded. Similarily *ibid.*, 100.

women from public life, however, created a void. Singing-girls benefited from this. Noble women continued to sing, but they could no longer perform in front of a male audience; sometimes, they were even forced to conceal their talent from their families.[73] Since comparable moral demands were not expected of singing-girls, they temporarily occupied this void.

Hence, one should consider parallels between male and female singers, which are indeed striking. As has been noted by several studies, the ideal of an educated (male) singer is connected with the urban life-style of *ẓarf* (refined elegance) and also with the idea of the educated *Kātib*.[74] Thus, many male singers claimed prestigious genealogies. No less a figure than Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī, father of Isḥāq, maintained a noble descent: It was only due to adverse circumstances that he had become a vagabond, the fault of a despotic Umayyad governor (i.e., an enemy of the now ruling dynasty). These types of legendary genealogies were also spread by female musicians: ʿArīb, Shāriya and Faḍl all claimed to be free born, even noble women, who had been sold into slavery unjustifiably.[75] Especially in the context of the court, famous female singers behaved like the male *ẓarīf*. They cooked and jested, met friends and patrons, performed music, and then competed with each other in their own houses, at a friend's or at court. Music was closely connected with urban life and its ideals. It seemed that male and female singers adapted their biographies to this ideal, as soon as they had attained a certain position. This included claiming noble descent and also an aemulative form of behavior.

In the singing contest ʿArīb and Shāriya *de facto* appear to be equal to their male companions (ʿArīb also appeared as such in the anecdote with Bunān). They were invited into a patron's house, where they did not expose themselves, but celebrated with their friends leaving it to their slave-girls to entertain the circle. It seems that the most famous female singers of the 9th century succeeded in transgressing gender role-models and in participating in the cultural discourses of their time. One should, therefore, regard the two singers not so much as music-playing-women, but rather as musicians, who happen to be women. At that time, musicians were – in a certain frame – public figures. Their contests were held in public in the same way as the singing competition of Sāmarrāʾ: as staged rivalries.

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73 *Agh* 14, 110.
74 This is a concept that has been exhaustively dealt with by ENDERWITZ, *Liebe*, 47–67, in the context with musicians and singing-girls: Eckhard NEUBAUER, *Musiker*, 46, STIGELBAUER, *Sängerinnen*, 73 ff, BENCHEIKH, *Musiciens*, 130ff, ENGEL, *Stellung*, 276.
75 ʿArīb was an alleged daughter of the Barmakid vizier Jaʿfar (*Agh* 18, 177ff). Shāriya claimed that she was from Quraysh (different versions, see for instance *Agh* 14, 105). Faḍl, too, claimed to be the legitimate daughter of a free man (*Agh* 21, 114).

Touchstones of *aemulatio*

The criteria by which the success of *aemulatio* was determined in the courtly setting are named explicitly:[76] applause (approval of the audience), *ṭarab* (the performance itself, including its impact on the audience), and improvisation (including technique).

Istiḥsān – Approval
The aspect of public approval is quite obvious in the narration about the singing contest of Sāmarrāʾ. The slave-girls took turns at singing their respective mistresses' songs, and none surpassed the other. Finally, ʿIrfān performed the controversial song, and "she did well and attained the desired applause".[77] At this point, Shāriya seemed to be the front-runner. When narrating the tall tale about the composition of the song, she claimed to have performed it in front of the most famous authorities of her youthful days and maintained that the song had met with their approval.[78] In addition to claiming the applause of the present audience, she strengthened her position by invoking the approval of famous men of the past. When ʿArīb exposed the fraud, ʿArīb regained the approval of the audience.

Ṭarab
We cannot provide a detailed explanation of the complex concept of *ṭarab* here.[79] On the one hand, it means simply performing music; but this is not what our singing contest is about, since ʿArīb and Shāriya do not themselves perform. However, as we learn from another anecdote quoted above, Shāriya's luteplaying had displeased ʿArīb – because it enabled the rival to surpass her own performance. On the other hand, *ṭarab* means the impact of music performance on the audience or the evoking of emotions through music. It is for this reason that al-Jāḥiẓ connected music with psychology[80] (Others attribute it to medicine or even magic). This is based on the idea – probably deriving from Greek models – that music has

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76 In the story quoted above *Agh* 13, 29.
77 *Aḥsanat*, for details see above.
78 *Istaḥsana*.
79 This will be done on another occasion. For a short discussion of the notion see ENGEL, *Stellung*, 133f.
80 § 31 according to BEESTON, *Epistle*, 12: "*Wa kitāb al-ʿarūḍ min kitāb al-mūsīqā, wa-huwa min kitāb ḥadd an-nufūs ...*" He seems to refer to Greek concepts of "psychology", maybe Aristotle's "περὶ ψυχῆς" (sensual perception as an ability of the soul). For an overview see R. WALZER, *Arisṭūṭālīs*, in: EI², vol. 1 (1960), p. 630–33. For music as a therapeutic see ENGEL, *Stellung*, 36–38.

an influence on body and soul, which can be used therapeutically. Al-Jāḥiẓ related about Yazīd ibn ʿAbd al-Malik:

"Yazīd used to listen (to his singing-girls Sallāma and Ḥabbāba, my addition), and when specially moved (ṭaraba) he would rend his garment and cry: I am transported! And Ḥabbāba would reply: Please don't be transported!; we need you!"[81]

It is a topos of ṭarab that the audience is so transported by emotion that they-would rend their garments in response to one's performance. In our singing contest, this is alluded to only marginally in talking about the "fans" of the two singers (taʿaṣṣaba). Their strong emotional commitment refers to the notion of ṭarab.

Iqtirāḥ – Improvisation

Vocal improvisation is still an important feature of Arabic music today. The singer can display his or her technique, creativity, and beauty of voice. During the 9th century, improvisation carried a great weight, especially in the modernist Persian style. In the classical Arabic tradition, music theory defines which notes to stress by improvisation, too.[82] Further, improvisation includes even *impromptu* composition of songs, as we have demonstrated in our discussion about the competition between ʿArīb and al-Wāthiq or Bunān[83] – it is a key element of the great singing competitions. Thus it was by no means just a feature of Persian style, even if the latter gave the singer more space for it.

As demonstrated in discussing the notion of "romanticism" above, improvisation gave the singer a position comparably important to that of the composer. Since the work was not fully notated, it was not complete unless performed. Thus, the singing-girl was not "*l'umile ancella del genio creator,*"[84] but in special cases, was considered at least equal to the composer, and rather comparable to the great *castrati* (Senesino, Farinelli) and divas of the baroque era. The passage betweeen improvisation and composition was fluent anyway, and indeed many singing-girls were also composers. Therefore, we have to relativize STIGELBAUER's argument that the singing-girls did not contribute much to musical developments, rather, they were reproducing artists who were interested primarily in hard

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81 § 29 according to BEESTON, *Epistle*, 10 f. Translation ibid., 23, my additions.

82 SAWA, *Performance* deals extensively with melodic ornaments, 91–105.

83 Precomposed songs and improvisation discussed by SAWA, *Performance,* 138–144.

84 F. CILEA's *Adriana Lecouvreur* (1902, act one, sc. three): The aria "*Io* (i.e. the singer/actress) *son l'umile ancella del genio creator*" is the *credo* of a singer of the late romantic era.

cash.[85] Without knowledge of music theory, it was simply impossible to perform. In our singing contest, Shāriya seems to have adhered closely to the original melody ("So he started and sang exactly the melody, which Shāriya's girl had performed before"). This is the more remarkable since it means that the song had been performed by the girl in the classicist way (The modernists were accused of changing the songs out of recognition). Had Shāriya performed it personally, she probably would have at least improvised in a witty way and thus have contributed to the song. However, since she did not reveal the name of the real composer, nor improved on the song, she was just a cunning plagiarizer and, in the end, failed to present the key element of *aemulatio*: Doing it better.

Traditio vel aemulatio?

There is no evidence to suggest that the singing contest of Sāmarrāʾ deals with *traditio*. On the contrary, it is obvious that female singers are perceived as autonomous idols themselves. Music is mainly performance, and the significance of improvisation allows the singer, male or female, to assume a key position. Thus, ʿArīb and Shāriya stage their rivalry and even their biographies according to current patterns of *ẓarf*. But the singing contest is not only about stereotypes. Arab Music of the 9th century, regardless of the school, is further characterized by the aemulative event, especially in the form of competition and contest. The aemulative character and the great weight of improvisation (and *impromptu* composition) also refer to an increasing relevance of the individual: It is the individual person who challenges the famous masters of the past as well as his or her contemporaries.

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85 *Op. cit.*, 119. Similar misinterpretations were frequent in the cases of Clara Schumann or Fanny Mendelssohn.

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