CHAPTER 11

Song and Punishment

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Life close to the center of power in the early Islamic centuries was often precarious, particularly when that power was embodied in the person of a caliph, governor, or other figure whose all-too-human whims and moods could determine the fate of those around him.* This was certainly true for political figures who served capricious superiors, and even for those who made only occasional appearances at court, such as scholars and poets. Singers and musicians, however, constituted a social group that was repeatedly subjected to both collective persecution and individual punishments. As practitioners of an art form that was disapproved of by many religious figures, and which was often associated with social behaviors condemned by conservative groups, singers and musicians were periodically subjected to various forms of disciplinary action. In addition to this general disapprobation, their every performance involved a potentially dangerous choice of material, for each song was in effect an attempt to respond to the current emotional needs and expectations of their patron. Any shortfall in this regard could lead to the patron's displeasure, verbal reprimands, expulsion from a gathering or court, and even, on some occasions, imprisonment and harsh corporal punishment.

Beyond the risky business of the performance also lay the patron's potential anger at personal (mis-)behaviors on the part of his singers and musicians that displeased him. And all of this took place, I will argue here, within a social space that was charged with eroticism and sexual tension. Not only did many female slave singers (qiyān or jawārī) also serve as sexual partners for their owners, but male singers, whether freedmen or slaves, were to some degree "eroticized" because of their intimate access to a patron's female slave singers in the roles of teachers, mentors, and co-performers, exposing them to accusations of flirtation and dalliance that not infrequently aroused the jealousy and anger of the women's owners. The intimate social gathering of a patron, his

* It is an honor to dedicate this essay to Everett Rowson as partial thanks for all of the guidance and assistance he has offered over the years to myself and to so many other scholars. I would also like to thank George Sawa for drawing my attention to a number of the examples cited in this essay—his expertise and help are very much appreciated.
male guests, and female performer(s) was not only a venue for shared pleasure, but also an arena where males vied with each other for recognition of their own quick-wittedness, poetic skills, and physical attractiveness to members of the opposite (or same) sex through social interaction with female slaves or professional entertainers. In addition, closely implicated in the maintenance or transgression of the social boundaries between males and females during certain historical periods were the ‘effeminates,’ or mukhanathūn, whose gender ambiguity added a further level of eroticization, and whose social role as matchmakers or go-betweens provoked a variety of responses, sometimes quite extreme.1

This essay examines a number of cases in which singers were punished for practicing their métier, as a result of a maladroit performance, or for personal behaviors that angered their patrons. The analysis of these anecdotes, culled from the Kitāb al-Ağhānī of Abū l-Faraj al-İṣfahānī (hereafter KA) and other works, attempts to untangle the complex interplay of performance, power, patronage, sexuality, jealousy, and licentiousness revealed in these narratives of these events.

Collective Punishment

Given the conflicting religious and moral views about musical performance in general, but especially what might be termed ‘art music’ or ‘entertainment music’ (ghināʾ), it is not surprising that singers and musicians were at times punished en masse simply for being musical performers.2 Such was the case, for example, when one new governor of Medina ordered the imprisonment of all musicians (KA iii, 307):

[Khâlid ibn Kulthûm reported]: I was with Zabrâʾ in Medina when he was the governor there—he was from the Bani Hâshim [tribe], one of the Bani Rabī’a ibn al-Ḥarîth ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib—and he summoned the aṣḥāb al-malâhî (singers and musicians) and they were imprisoned. ‘Atarrad

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1 On the ‘effeminates,’ see Rowson, Effeminates 671–93; Rowson, Gender irregularity 45–72; and, Roswon, Categorization 50–79.
2 For discussions of the permissibility of music, see Cook, Commanding Right; Al Faruqi, Music 3–36; and Robson, Tracts. Ghināʾ is often contrasted with the ancient Bedouin style of singing, hidâʾ, which attracted less opprobrium from conservative religious figures because of its close association with ancient Arabian culture and the fact that it normally did not involve the use of musical instruments.