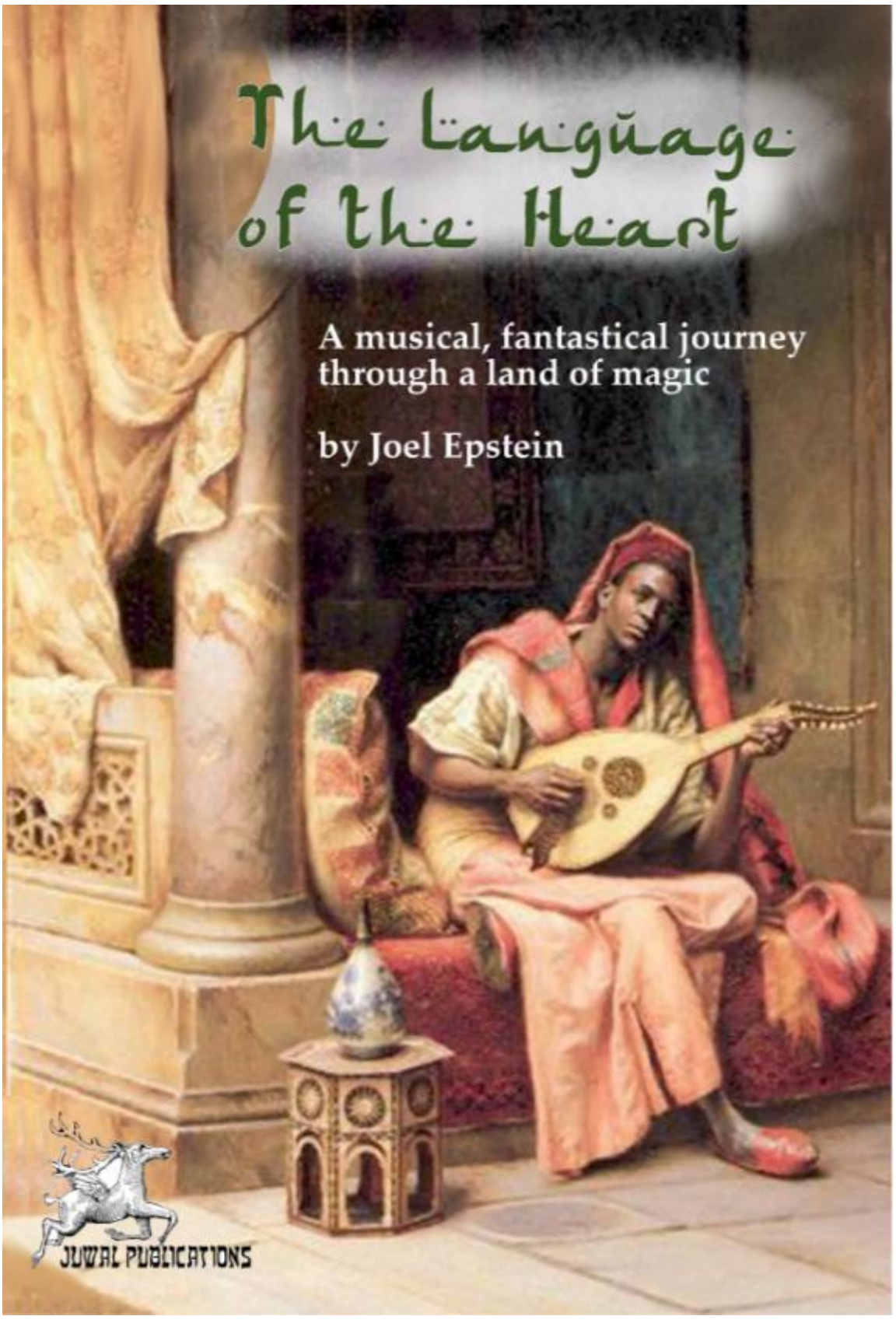


The Language of the Heart

A musical, fantastical journey
through a land of magic

by Joel Epstein





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The story of Ziryab,
the Blackbird of Baghdad

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On the cover: a 19th century portrait of Ziryab by Ludwig Deutch.



JUWVAL PUBLICATIONS was the original publishing house of the St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music, a seminal group of Russian Jewish composers at the beginning of the last century, who created a new form of Jewish art music, combining tradition klezmer music with the rich harmonies of late Russian romanticism. We continue the Juwval tradition by publishing works of importance related to music, including books on pedagogy, sheet music of original works and arrangements, and fiction.

To my Grandchildren (so far):
Guy, Noya, Dany and Emma



Ziryab the Blackbird of Baghdad

They say that when Ali ibn Nafi emerged from his mother's womb, instead of crying, he sang. Whether you believe that or not, what is certainly true is that he could sing before he could talk, and he could beat a steady rhythm before he could walk. Perhaps this is not surprising, for he had musical genes. His mother Fana was a singer in the royal court of Baghdad at the time of the reign of the great Caliph Haroun Al Rashid, about 1,200 years ago. This was the Baghdad of magic and romance: the land of Aladdin and Sheherezade and djinni and sorcerers. And it was the Baghdad that saw a flowering of music, culture, and science that would change the world.

Fana and Ali's father Havtamo were 11 years old and betrothed to each other, when Arab slave traders abducted them in their native Ethiopia, and sold them into the Caliph's service. Fana, whose toast-colored brown skin glistened like gold and whose features were like a finely chiseled statue, was trained as a singer and courtesan, while Havtamo was trained to be a soldier in the Caliph's army. In fact, Havtamo was a terrible soldier – he was clumsy with the scimitar, slow with the pike, and too kindly to his horse ever to drive her into battle. But as luck would have it, Havtamo became a hero. He was standing in ceremonial guard when the Caliph's Vizier walked by, and an assassin rushed forward to kill him. Without thinking – and certainly not out of bravery – Havtamo leapt forward and slashed

with his scimitar with all his might, almost severing the assailant's body in two and killing him on the spot. But not before the assassin's blade sliced down, splitting open Havtamo's head, gouging his left eye and severing the nerves in his shoulder. Indeed, no one expected Havtamo to survive, but life is stranger than our expectations, and Havtamo recovered. With only one eye and an ugly scar ripping across his face, and with his left arm dangling useless at his side, Havtamo was granted a handsome lump sum and a meager monthly pension, as well as his freedom. With the lump sum he promptly purchased the freedom of his childhood bride-to-be. She left the palace, and they set up house in the Ethiopian quarter of Baghdad. They were both 19 years old at the time.

Fana bore Havtamo a daughter, Abeba, and two years later, a son Ali. A week after his birth, Fana took the shriveled remains of Ali's umbilical cord to the Ethiopian fortune teller. The fortune teller was a woman of indeterminate age – her face was crinkled and her hands gnarled like an aged biblical sage, but her step was spry as a 15-year-old and her eyes twinkled with a youthful glow. The fortune teller held court in a low camel-hair tent behind her home. The flaps of the tent blocked out almost all light from outside. Straw mats covered the earthen floor. In the fire pit in the center of the tent a small pile of embers burned, bathing the space with an eerie glow. Fantastic shadows danced on the walls. Fana sat cross-legged across from the fortune teller, and handed her the brown lump of flesh. The psychic woman sniffed it, held it up to the light of the embers, and took a bite of the end to taste it.

*"As this cord bound together mother and son,
"So are they in music bound as one."*

She waved the cord over the fire. Blue and green and orange sparks flew up from the embers.

*"Your son is born with the greatest art,
"to speak the language of the heart."*

Another wave over the fire. Red and yellow spits of flame flashed in the air in every direction. The psychic's eyes glassed over in a trance.

*"But, alas, great hardships shall him befall,
"Before he answers fate's great call.*

*"A moment, clear and sharp as glass,
"From boy to manhood he shall pass.*

*"And at that moment, filled with wonder,
"From family, home be torn asunder.*

*"Wander long from place to place,
"and fearful dangers shall he face.*

*"A powerful enemy shall seek to kill
"the vital essence of his will."*

The fortune teller tossed the umbilical cord into the embers. A fearsome glow like a pillar, flashing the colors of the rainbow, stood straight up above the fire and passed right through the top of the tent into the sky like a beacon.

*"With art your son shall smite the foe,
"To timeless stature shall he grow.*

*"To meet your son again – not ever,
"But bonds of love and art – no force shall sever."*

The pillar of light faded away. The fortune teller awoke from her trance, and smiled gently at Fana. But Fana was in tears. "Why do you tell me these things? I do not want to lose him ever!"

"You should not weep, but rejoice," replied the soothsayer. "Your son has a powerful destiny.

"And I have this advice for you: be strong, be firm, and give your son freely of your own gifts. And when that moment comes when he shall set out to seek his destiny, give him the push that will strengthen him on his way."

And with those words, the fortune teller rose, as did Fana, who headed home, her heart filled with dread and wonder and hope.



Young Ali, for his part, did all to fulfill his destiny. Before he was four, he sang all the songs of his Ethiopian community, in a voice as clear and beguiling as only a child's voice can be. He accompanied himself on the *krar*, the traditional six-stringed harp of Ethiopia. And when his mother joined in, their voices mingled with the gentle strum of the *krar* in a harmony that was truly heavenly.

When Ali was four years old, his mother started to teach him the courtly music of the classical Arabic world. Within a few months, he had mastered the complex melodies, with their difficult intonation and rhythms. Fana decided to take him to the fountain of the large square before the palace, where freelance musicians often gathered to play and earn a few coins from passersby. But Havtamo was opposed.

"Gawr, yer son' a young'un fer showin' off," he said in the coarse barracks dialect he learned as a soldier. "Ain't proper have a tyke his age out aworkin' the streets." The family was seated on the packed dirt floor, eating the midday meal – a vegetable stew, redolent with fenugreek and cumin that Fana had gathered from the fields, and mopped up with pieces of *ingere*, green, pancake-like bread made from fermented batter.

"Tell me," replied Fana, "How much pension did you get this month?"

"Well, er, the paymaster done took a bit fer hisself."

"How much?" insisted Fana.

"Well, er, nigh three dinars."

"And I worked only one day this month," said Fana. She was called to the palace occasionally to sing and play her *oud*, the soft-voiced lute of classical Arabic music. "How do you think we will make ends meet?"

"Well, t'ain't right."

"Let me tell you something," said Fana, fire in her eyes. "This boy is going to be something. Something great. Do you not recall what the fortune teller told us? And I will do all I can to see him fulfill his destiny."

"What Goddam destiny, wife? Yer adreamin'. Yer facts is – we poor, we black, and yer not even become a Muslim. We worse than *dhimmis*." Havtamo used the term for Jews and Christians, who were second-class citizens in Baghdad. People of other religions were third-class.

"I will not accept the religion of the people who made us slaves," snapped Fana. And she broke into an angry tirade in her native Amharic, the language they spoke when they didn't want the children to understand.

As you can imagine, Fana won this argument, and that Friday she set out for the fountain, *oud* in hand, with her son and her daughter, who at age 7 was a passable player of the *daf*, the large round Arabic drum. They were an instant success. The Friday concerts of the ibn Nafi family quickly became a major event in Baghdad. Listeners came from across the city to hear the boy wonder and his mother and sister perform a gamut of songs, from popular and bouncy ballads to the most heartfelt and moving songs of the classical repertoire.

"He trills like a *Ziryab*, a blackbird," said one listener. The name stuck, and from that day forth, Ali Ibn Nafi was known as Ziryab, the graceful black bird with the orange and white flames of color under its wings, and a beautiful song.

Ziryab's fame spread throughout the city, and into the palace, where it reached the ears of Ishaq Al-Mawsili, the chief musician of the royal court. Al-Mawsili, short, dour and curt, was the unquestioned master of music of his day. He had composed hundreds of songs, and written dozens of treatises on the art and science of music. No one knew as much about music as Al-Mawsili, and no composer or performer was as prolific and as popular. And with that renown came power: Al-Mawsili, with his deep eyes, his beaklike nose, his neatly groomed beard tied in an elegant braid, his fine fingers exquisitely manicured, was the undisputed autocrat of cultural life of the palace.

Al-Mawsili heard of Ziryab, and went on Friday to hear for himself. He stood in the back of the crowd, careful not to be spotted. For he knew Fana – he was one of the teachers of the strong-willed woman when she was trained in music, and he didn't want her to know of his interest in her son. So he listened intently from the back, and was profoundly impressed by what he heard. This boy has talent, he thought, great talent. This boy must be my protégé.

So on Saturday morning, Al-Mawsili appeared at the door of the Ibn Nafi hovel in the Ethiopian quarter of Baghdad. "Praise be to Allah, The Merciful and Compassionate," he said in greeting.

Havtamo, astonished that such a personage should be at his doorway, fell immediately to his knees and kissed the ground. "May peace be upon ye, in de name of Allah," he mumbled. Fana, too, as custom demanded, went down on her knees and bowed. "Welcome to our home, Master Al-Mawsili. May it please thee to come in and sit with us." The family had no chairs, but she quickly rose and arranged pillows on the low table in the middle of the room. When the music master sat, Havtamo and Fana rose, and took seats on pillows along the wall. In the other room, Ziryab and Abeba hid behind the wall and listened to every word.

"I shall be direct," said Al-Mawsili. "I have heard thy son sing. I wish to take him to the palace to study under my tutelage."

Havtamo sputtered, "Dis be a great honor, sire. We tank ye much, much."

Fana gave Havtamo a quick kick. "A very great honor, indeed, your Excellency. Alas, we cannot agree."

Havtamo looked at her in astonishment. Not agree? Hadn't she been carrying on about his destiny? Wasn't this the realization of her dream?

"We live, your Excellency, on my husband's pension, which is scant. Without the extra money that my son's singing brings, we shall lack for bread on our table. Surely, in thy bounty, thou canst understand this."

Ziryab, behind the wall, listened in amazement. He had never heard his mother talk like this. She always spoke the dialect of the Baghdad street, never this flowery language of the court.

"How much is his pension?"

"Five Dinars a month," said Fana.

"I shall provide thee with a sum of 20 Dinars a month."

"We are most indebted by thy generosity," replied Fana. "Yet we still must demur. For our son doth care dearly for his father, who, you know, was crippled defending our great Caliph, and without our son's devoted dotage, my dear husband shall truly suffer." Havtamo looked in amazement at his wife, but said nothing.

"What is it you want?" asked Al-Mawsili testily.

"With the greatest respect, I must insist that our son return home two days a week to care for his father."

"One day a week."

"One day a week, plus all holidays."

"Done," said Al-Mawsili, and prepared to rise from his place. But Fana was not done yet, and made clear with a gesture. Al-Mawsili sat again with a sigh.

"What now?"

"Your Excellency, my son has a sister. She, too, is a talent not to be eclipsed by my son. But she hath no chance for betterment, for, being a maid, she cannot attend the *madrasa* to receive a proper school education."

"What can I do about this?" responded Al-Mawsili angrily. "I cannot turn thy daughter into a man. This is ridiculous. If thou insisteth on such matters, we shall forget the whole matter." He rose from his seat.

"Ali, come and sing *Al Yashkuri* for our guest," called Fana. Ziryab emerged from the other room, and sang the heartfelt song of a poet wrongfully executed by a jealous Sheikh, that Al-Mawsili had himself composed. Ali sang with a beauty and love such as Al-Mawsili had never heard.

Al-Mawsili sat again. "I shall send a tutor once a week to teach thy daughter."

"Three times a week."

Al-Mawsili stood again in frustration. "Twice a week. And no more demands. Have the boy ready to leave on the morrow."

Havtamo and Fana again dropped to their knees and bowed to the ground. "May Allah grant thee the glories of heaven," said Fana. Al-Mawsili muttered his farewell, and swept out of the hovel. Havtamo looked on his wife with wonder and admiration.

Ali Ibn Nafi – Ziryab – was five years old.



The Caliph's Palace

Ziryab was completely awe-struck by everything he saw. Within the palace compound the streets were paved with granite flagstones smooth as glass. At every turn there were inscriptions in ornate Arabic script, or blue-tiled walls painted with complex and elegant arabesques; carved lintels of marble that looked like delicate lace; squares with fountains that water ran through endlessly, without having to be refilled.

An attendant led the boy to the home of Al Mawsili. The heavy, ironclad door was built of juniper wood, carved with a trellis of vine leaves, each leaf highlighted with gold, and studded with jade and quartz. The door swung open, and Ziryab saw a large hall, tiled with shiny marble, and covered with deep, plush wine-colored carpets. More carpets, with green and blue and mustard-colored designs, hung on the wall. In the center of the room was a long table, with chairs all around. Ziryab had never seen a chair, and was unsure what they were for. But their beauty was enrapturing, for they were inlaid with a maze of tiny shapes – diamonds and triangles and stars – made of pearwood and orange and ivory and mother-of-pearl.

Al Mawsili swept into the room. He wore an elegantly embroidered robe of pure black linen, the dress of a high court official, and on his head a white turban – the sign of someone who has made the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, the home of the prophet Mohammed. As tutored by his mother, Ziryab knelt, pressed his hands and face to the floor, and said,

"Your Excellency, I am honored to be your student."

"Thy student," Al Mawsili corrected him. "Thou shalt forget the barbarous street Arabic of thy home, and learn the true tongue of our holy Kor'an."

"Yes, your Excellency. Thy student."

"Now rise, and follow the attendant to thy room. There thou shalt bathe and dress in proper garb. Then we shall begin thy lessons."

His own room! With a real floor, and carpets, and a bed and pillows stuffed with goose down instead of straw! A bright room, with light streaming in through a large window, shaded with a lattice of strips of willow.

It was a brand new life for a five-year old boy: a new way of speaking, a new way of dressing; bathing in a tub, with aromatic soaps, instead of with a bucket by the river; food fragrant with cinnamon and clove, with spices brought by caravan from China and Arabia instead of the pungent fenugreek and cumin gathered by his mother from the fields; bread of the whitest flour, rather than the dark green *ingere* bread made from fermented sourdough; clothes of linen and finely combed cotton, rather than the course woolen hand-me-downs from his sister. It was a new life, mystifying, enchanting, and frightening for a five-year-old boy. It was so intense that, for the first few days at least, Ziryab hadn't a moment to feel homesick. For, immediately after he had bathed and dressed, the lessons began.

"My son, thou art learning a new art. Thou must straight forth forget the barbarous melodies of thy home. For thou art entering the holy sanctuary of the true music, the music of Allah, and all other music is but dross at thy feet.

"And know ye, that, more than music, thou shalt learn all the arts of courtly life. Thou shalt learn to be a gentleman, to know the ways of honor and culture, thou shalt learn the arts and sciences and shall master the manly arts of love and war. And the ways of the streets of Baghdad, where thou findest thy roots, thou shalt erase as though they never were."

Ziryab listened attentively, and, as his mother had instructed, asked no questions nor made any comments. But, even at his young age, the lad knew that he would never forget his roots, and would never forget the beautiful music of his family and his heritage.

"We shall begin with the theory of music," continued al Mawsili. "Know that all music consists of melody and rhythm. There are eight modes, or *'asabi*, of melody. Each mode hath its own character – hot or cold, dry or humid. For example, know thee that the *Saba 'asab* is hot and humid, so melodies in this *'asab* are melancholy and full of tears." Al Mawsili took up his lute and played and sang a melody of such haunting sadness that it brought tears to Ziryab's eyes.

And so Ziryab was plunged into a whirlwind of learning. Within the first week, he had learned the names of the eight melodic modes and the six rhythmic modes. He learned which modes were joyous, which romantic, which expressed yearning, fear, reverence to God. He had his first lessons on the *oud*, and was introduced to the other instruments of the orchestra: the *rebab*, the two-stringed violin played with a bow, the *daf* drum, the *miz'afa*, a 12-string harp similar to the harp played by King David, devilishly tricky to play. By the end of the week, when he was to make his visit home, Ziryab's head was spinning.

During that week, Ziryab hadn't a moment to be sad or homesick. But the moment he saw his mother at the gate of the palace complex, he burst into a flood of tears. Fana pressed him to her bosom, and comforted the confused child.

"He wants me to forget everything," wailed Ziryab. "My home, my food, the way I talk. My music of Ethiopia that you taught me. I will never go back there, never!"

"Calm yourself, child! Come home, I have made you a wonderful plate of *Wat* vegetable stew, and *ingere* bread. When you have eaten and rested we will talk."

The spicy meal, flavored with hot peppers and turmeric, the hug, and the scents and feel of home, calmed Ziryab. But he was still angry and adamant that he would never return to the palace.

"The master said I must never listen to Ethiopian music again. He called it barbarous. He is the one that is barbarous!"

"Listen to me," said his mother. "You are a child of five. But I know you. Even at your young age, you know who you are, and you know who you want to be. Learning to be a great master of Classical Arabic music will not change that.

"And, as for never listening to Ethiopian music again, I will make you a deal. When you come home, we will make our own music together. Just don't tell al Mawsili. It will be just between us."

Indeed, Fana was too wise and too worldly to leave her son's musical education to the great master. Over the next months and years, during Ziryab's weekly visits home, his mother taught him not only the music of Ethiopia, but of the many communities of Baghdad. She took him to hear the chants of the Jews, who still sang the traditional melodies that they had sung in their holy Temple of Jerusalem, before it was destroyed 700 years before. He learned to speak a bit of their Aramaic language, and learned to blast on the *shofar*, the hollowed ram's horn used in the Jewish festivals. Fana took Ziryab to hear the music of the Persian Mamlukes, the slave-servants who ornamented their melodies with wondrous trills and melismas; and to the Sufis, the followers of the mystical teachings of Islam, whose chants and wildly spinning dances induced deep trances and lifted their spirits to heaven.

"The world is full of music," Fana taught her son. "Al Mawsili is a great master, that I cannot deny. But he is wrong to think that his is the only right music. There is no right music, and everyman's music has beauty and grace, and plucks at the strings of the heart. For music is the language of the spirit."

For two years, Ziryab learned music, and, under the strict tutelage of Al Mawsili, learned to act like a gentleman. At the age of seven, his fingers ran up and down the neck of the *oud* with the speed of a hummingbird, and he could make a decent melody on the *rebab*, the *miz'afa*, and on the *nai*, the noseflute with its seductively soft sound. In the autumn of his seventh year, he started attending the palace school, the *madrassa*. There he sat with the other boys of the palace, and learned, in addition to his daily music lesson, arithmetic and geometry, poetry, Kor'an, *Hadith* (Islamic law), and Greek and Latin. It was a massive load of study, that kept the boy busy from dawn to dusk.

Fridays and holidays he spent at home with his family. Some of the time, he went around with his mother to hear the Sufis sing their enchanting music, and watch them whirl themselves into a trance. He would take his *oud* along and join in the music-making, and would himself feel transfigured by the song. And sometimes he sat with his sister Abeba, studying or playing chess or *mankala*. Abeba had a two-year head start on Ziryab, and helped him struggle with Greek and geometry. Ziryab taught her chess (in the palace, girls never played chess), and within a couple of games, she mastered the strategy and beat him every time.

"How did you do that?" marveled Ziryab after a particularly clever checkmate.

"You see, your knight is pinned – you cannot move it or you will endanger your king. You thought that the knight was protecting your pawn, but you see? If you can't move it, I can attack the pawn and you lose. Simple!"

One Friday, he and Abeba wandered down to the square at the palace gate, where the old men gathered to play chess. Abeba peered over the players' shoulders in silence, soaking it all in, checking out possible moves and traps. At one point, she couldn't resist, and blurted out, "Trap the queen with your pawn!"

The players, sprawled on a stone bench, looked up in astonishment and affront. "Look at this, a ten-year-old girl telling us how to play chess! Run along, little girl, and don't be insulting."

Ziryab bristled. "Don't talk like that to my sister! Anyway, she can beat you with her eyes shut!"

The players looked at Ziryab with wonder. "I tell you what," said one. "I will play her. If she loses, I will give you the good beating that you deserve."

"And if she wins?" asked Ziryab.

"Don't worry, she won't win."

A crowd gathered around to watch the strange match. Abeba sat confidently on the stone bench and arranged her pieces. From the opening moves, the older player found his bishops blocked in, and his pawns blocked from advance. Abeba moved her pieces deftly into the attack, threatening to strike at the weak king's bishop's pawn, but the player castled out of danger at the last minute. Abeba paused to ponder for a moment.

"Come on, sister, move it. We don't have all day," jeered the player. Abeba looked him straight in the eye. She moved her knight forward.

"Wrong move!" chortled the player, and pounced on the unprotected knight with his queen.

Abeba said nothing, but immediately moved her bishop, capturing the pawn protecting the king. "Check," she said. "And, as you can see, checkmate on the next move." She stood. "Thank you for a very enjoyable game. You play much better than my brother."

The elder player looked at the chess board, crestfallen and said nothing. But the crowd around was full of adulation. "Where did you learn to play like that? What is your name? Come play over here! It is Ziryab the singing boy. His sister!" Everyone was talking at once.

Abeba played three more games that day, winning two. Ziryab and his sister returned every Friday afternoon, and, within two months, Abeba was the undisputed chess champion of the palace square.

*On this, the 14th day of Rabi Al-Thani, in the 184th year of the Hejira of our prophet Mohammed**

In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful and Compassionate

*To my beloved father and mother, and my dearest sister,
Greetings!*

Praised be to Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate.

May Allah rain a thousand blessings upon you!

I am writing to tell you that, for the first time, I will not be coming home this Friday. The Maestro has asked that I remain to perform in the orchestra for the Persian ambassador, who is visiting Baghdad. However, he has promised me a three-day vacation next week, for my 11th birthday. What a treat!

Actually, though, I have another reason for writing: to show off my mastery of Rihani script. Our teacher says I have the best penmanship in the school! I can also write in Naskh and Tumar scripts. They are all so beautiful!

But don't think I am best in everything. In the martial arts, I am no good at all. The best in our class is Nazeer, the son of Ali, who leads the Sufis that we sing with. Nazeer is amazing with the scimitar and the javelin. He whirls his sword around so fast it looks like a streak! And with his crossbow he can hit a target while going full gallop with his horse. Funny, Nazeer is a pacifist and a vegetarian, like his father! He says he would never harm another human or animal. Well he could certainly beat me if he wanted to!

In Kor'an, too, I am far behind. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, the son of the Captain of the Palace Guard, has memorized 90 of the 114 Surahs of the holy book, and I only about 20. Well,

* May 12, 800 AD

actually, he has memorized much more of the Kor'an, but I am much better at chanting – as long as I have the book in front of me. Our teacher is the famous Al-Kisa'i. Al Kisa'i developed a system for adding little markings to the text of the Kor'an, to help remember the melody, and his system is famous throughout the world. He is so respected for his learning that he teaches the Caliph's son Al-Amin. The class is Al-Amin, Ahmad, Nazeer, and me. Al-Amin is pretty much of a goof-off, and rarely learns his lessons. Nazeer and Ahmad are very serious, and both are far ahead of me in memorizing the text. But when it comes to chanting, I beat them all hands down. Ahmad has no memory at all for melody and sings terribly off-pitch. He has had a good many raps on the knuckles, but to no avail!

Ahmad is very religious, and I don't doubt will become a great Imam one day. Meanwhile, he is a bit of a pain. He is always telling me how evil my music is. The Prophet opposed music, he says – it leads to sin, to drinking and to venery. Nazeer and I have endless arguments with him. He says one day Allah will come and destroy our evil instruments.

Actually, sometimes I think he is right. Here in the palace there is an awful lot of sin going on. Everyone drinks wine and beer – even the Maestro, who has been on the Hadjj pilgrimage to Mecca. Certainly it is forbidden to him, no? There is a new drink now, called Araq, that is much stronger than nabidh, the usual wine made of raisins and dates. So I see a lot of drunken people wandering around, especially at night, when the parties and dancing happen. So maybe the music does do bad things to people?

The truth is that Ahmad's threats are really kind of scary. Because there are people here in the palace who agree with him, and they are real thugs. Sometimes they grab women who they think are not dressing modestly enough, and more than once they have yelled at me as I went with my oud to my lesson. So far no one has tried to hurt me – maybe because I am the student of Al Mawsili – everyone fears Al Mawsili, who is one of the Caliph's best friends. But these fanatics fear nothing.

Maestro Al Mawsili is a very thorough teacher and very strict. I must play everything exactly as he says, and not a single note escapes his attention. Sometimes I want to play for

him some of my other music – the Sufi music, or the music of the Jews, or of the Persians – but I dare not. For the Maestro, there is only one music, nothing else will do! He especially hates the Persian musicians, who dress up their playing with all kinds of trills and musical ornaments. I think it's kind of nice, but I would never say that to him! Well, it is very good discipline, and is making me a true master musician like him. And we have our Fridays and holidays, when I can be really creative and let myself go!

And now, three days! I can't wait!

Your loving son,

Ali

"I am afraid, Maestro, that there is nothing to be done."

On the table in Khalid's workshop were the shattered pieces of Ziryab's oud. The solid walnut neck of the instrument had been wrenched from the body, splintering the thin cedar ribs and cracking the elegantly inlaid top into three twisted pieces. Looking on were Al Mawsili and a distraught Ziryab, holding back his tears with difficulty, as well as the master craftsman Khalid and his son Walid.

"I understand that the instrument cannot be repaired," said Al Mawsili. "There is naught to be done but to construct a new instrument for my pupil.

"Ali," he said, turning to Ziryab, "thou shalt attend the construction of thy new oud. In my youth, it was customary for every musician to construct his own instrument. Alas, those days are gone, and now our musicians purchase their ouds like fish at the market. With thee, that shall not be! Thou shalt learn the art of oud making, and though thou shalt not be a master, thou shalt indeed learn to appreciate the care and delicacy that is invested in building this king of instruments."

"Yes, Maestro," replied Ziryab. He was still deeply shaken by the events of the last day. On his way to his lesson, just as he had feared, a band of older boys, sporting beards and white turbans, and carrying clubs, grabbed him in the middle of the street. "Degenerate! Sinner!" they shouted at him. "Has not Allah forbidden your disgusting music? Has not the Prophet said, 'Fornicators, drunkards, wearers of silk, musicians – The mountain shall fall upon them!' The thugs grabbed his instrument out of his hands.

"Don't touch that. It isn't mine!" shouted Ziryab, struggling to free himself from their grip. "It belongs to the Maestro Al Mawsili!"

The mention of the chief musician's name took them aback for a moment. Al Mawsili was a powerful force in the court, and to pick a fight with him was a risky and desperate act. But one of the thugs, who seemed to be the ringleader, stepped forward and snatched the oud from his fellow. "You speak of Al Mawsili? Give this to Al Mawsili!" And he swung the oud in its cloth case hard against the flagstones. There was a sickening *crunch!* as the delicate oud smashed into pieces like the shell of an egg. They left Ziryab kneeling and weeping over his beloved instrument.

Al Mawsili himself was much more sanguine about the incident. He was not a bit angry with Ziryab, and, for the first time, gave him a hug to calm him. But his wrath toward the religious fanatics who destroyed the oud was implacable. "These are not Muslims," he muttered. "They are nothing but hoodlums, who should be under lock and key! I shall speak with the Caliph about this, thou mayst be sure!"

"And, as for thee, I understand thy feelings. For one's instrument is akin to one's lover – a musician builds a love for it, fondles it, it becomes an extension of his own body. For this reason, we shall visit the master luthier, and see what can be done to restore thy oud."

And so it came to pass that Ziryab spent two afternoons a week in the shop of Khalid and his son Walid, attending the construction of his new oud. For Ziryab, the shop was magical. The smells of freshly hewn wood, hide glue, pungent resins and beeswax, permeated the air. On the wall behind the workbench was an array of oddly shaped knives, chisels, gouges, scrapers, awls, and other specialized tools. A rack held a collection of special molds for shaping wood, and another rack for saws and bending irons. By the

entrance to the shop hung nine ouds, some of them finished and some still in progress.

The shop, outside the palace compound by the river, was brightly lit by large windows and was spotlessly clean. Whenever Khalid worked, scattering wood chips and sawdust, he stopped often to sweep up any mess. At the end of the day, he wiped his workbench clean with an oiled cloth, and dusted off all his tools and shelves. Tall and lanky, with deep-set eyes and sharply angular nose and cheeks and chin, Khalid wore a leather apron as he bent over his bench, shaping every piece of wood to perfection. His concentration was intense. When he worked, the room seemed transformed, the silence total, the air frozen. But the moment he rose from his work, his eyes twinkled and he bubbled with friendship and charm.

"The first thing you must do, my friend," he told Ziriyab on his first visit, "is to pick the wood for your instrument. The oud must be beautiful to look at, but must also be beautiful to the ear. Every wood, and every piece of wood, has its own character, and its own special sound."

Khalid took a piece of wood from a rack. "This piece of walnut has been aging for seven years. Listen to it carefully." He dangled the block between two fingers and tapped it with a small hammer. The wood rang with a low, dull *ping*.

"Now listen to this piece." He took a piece of reddish wood, with a waving grain that looked like a flame. He tapped it with the hammer. "What do you think?" he asked Ziriyab.

"The first has a lower pitch. The second is higher, and it resonates longer."

"Very good. You have a good ear. An oud made from the walnut will have a deeper sound, with beautiful bass notes. One built from the second wood will have a richer more resonant sound. It is bubinga wood, which I import special from Africa. No one else uses

this wood. Now listen to this." Khalid took down one of the ouds from the wall and strummed it. Then he took a second, and played the same tune on it.

"The first must be from walnut, the second from bubinga," guessed Ziryab.

"Excellent. Now you can tell the difference, tell me which you prefer."

"Why can't I have both?" asked Ziryab. "One rib from walnut, one from bubinga."

"You can, you certainly can! You will have the best of all worlds!" Khalid beamed, pleased as a child with Ziryab's innovation. "We shall build the oud of walnut and bubinga, with alternating ribs! It will be as beautiful to look upon as it will be to listen to!"

Khalid sawed the blocks of walnut and bubinga into wafer-thin slices, and showed Ziryab how to shape them into ribs using chisels and scrapers. It took Ziryab six attempts before he came close enough that Khalid, with his practiced eye and hand, finished it into a hair's breadth of the exact size and shape. Meanwhile, Khalid carved the end and neck blocks of the oud's body. When they finished cutting a rib, they heated up the bending iron in the fire, soaked the rib in water for an hour, then bent it over the hot iron to the right curve; let it cool and dry until the shape was set; sanded it smooth with a rag impregnated with crushed seashells; and then glued it in place, to end and neck blocks, tightly squeezed against its neighbor rib. It was a slow and meticulous process: shape, soak, bend, dry, glue, over and over for each of the 17 ribs. In the waiting time between steps, Khalid was busy making or repairing other instruments, while Ziryab and Walid chatted and played.

"I saw your father put a special notch in the middle of the first rib. What was that for?" asked Ziryab.

"It is a house for the music djinn," said Walid.

"You mean there is a djinn in every oud?"

"Oh no, there are only eight music djinni in the world," said Walid. "They were born from the strings of King David's lyre. When King David sang the psalms, those Djinni sang out of his lyre with the most heavenly music. But when his lyre was destroyed, the Djinni went out into the world. The greatest thing that can happen to you is that one of them decides to move into your oud. Then your music becomes as heavenly as King David's."

"Well, I hope one of them decides to live in my oud," said Ziryab. "Then, maybe even Ahmad Ibn Hanbal might like my music."

"Ahmad Ibn Hanbal will never like music," said Walid. Though he lived outside the palace, Walid knew all the palace gossip, since his father repaired instruments and built furniture for all the courtiers.

"It is because of his father. When his family moved to Baghdad from Persia, his mother took sick and died. His father became a religious fanatic. He hates music, and he hates all the partying and drinking that goes on in the palace. He is the one that encourages the thugs that smashed your oud."

"I simply can't understand it. How can someone hate music?" wondered Ziryab. "It is like hating the sound of your own voice. I don't believe that anyone, deep down, really hates music."

Sometimes, during the breaks, Ziryab and Walid wandered down to the river, stripped off their clothes, and dived into the cool water. Walid taught Ziryab how to swim, and how to spear fish with a sharpened stick. Sometimes they walked over to the Sufis, to listen to Nazeer's father Ali lead the mystics in song and dance. It was a pleasure for Ziryab to spend time outside the palace. Here he didn't have to speak his formal Arabic or to worry about his delicate

manners or about dirtying his robe. And Walid was the perfect companion – not educated, but world-wise, master of dozens of life hacks picked up from the streets of Baghdad.

Meanwhile, work on the oud progressed. When they had finished the body, Khalid showed Ziryab how to cut and shape the belly and support bars, how to fit the neck and build the pegbox, and how to inlay the colorful beaded purfling around the edges and the delicately filigreed rose that covered the soundhole. Khalid did almost all the work, while Ziryab watched and tried to imitate as best he could. But he was nowhere near the mastery of the great luthier.

"My time with you is coming to an end," said Ziryab regretfully as they applied the first of seven coats of shellac on the finished oud. "I hate to leave."

"You don't have to," said Khalid. "We can always build another oud together."

"What would I do with another oud?"

"You could make one different. You could, for example, build an oud with five strings instead of four."

Ziryab paused to consider. He, too, had thought about adding a string to the oud. As it was, the four-string oud had a limited range. Ziryab often dreamed of reaching down to the deep bass notes, below the range of the human voice, but the bass notes were not there.

"But Maestro Al Mawsili would never agree," he thought out loud. "The Maestro believes the oud was given to us by Lamak, the sixth generation grandson of Adam and Eve, and that the four strings of the oud correspond to the four seasons, or to the four basic elements of the world. He would never agree to change that."

"He wouldn't have to know, would he?" said Khalid with a wink. "I have always wanted to build a five-stringed oud, and you

are just the person to try it out. And I will speak to Al Mawsili that you are continuing your apprenticeship with me for another few months, without mentioning the new project."

So Ziryab returned to the palace that evening with a song in his heart – his time with Khalid and Walid was extended for another few months. But when he reached the Maestro's house, it was a dour Al Mawsili that greeted him.

"I am displeased that thou hath tarried," said the Maestro. "Thy presence is requested. Ahmad ibn Hanbal's father has taken gravely ill, and he requests that thou and thy friend Nazeer shall visit him."

"Thy wish is my command, Maestro," replied Ziryab. But in his heart, he wondered – what could Ahmad's father want with him? The man, like his son, was a religious fanatic who despised the music of Ziryab and Nazeer's father Ali. It could only be bad.

Ziryab and Nazeer set off in silence to Ahmad's house. There, a pallid Ahmad sat by his father's bed, helping him to sip a cup of water. The man, the potent and powerful general of the palace guard, was so weakened by fever that he could not hold a glass.

The general beckoned the boys over to his bed. "Praise be to Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate," Ziryab greeted him.

"And praise to Mohammed his messenger on earth," replied the general. "My boys, I fear I am dying. I have one last request. Go to Nazeer's father Ali, and ask him to come to me.

"And ask him to bring his oud."

Ziryab and Nazeer looked at each other in wonderment. "As you wish, My Lord," replied Ziryab. They bowed and backed out of the room. Then off they flew to Nazeer's home, and fetched Ali.

"Praise be to Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate," said Ali when he entered the darkened chamber of the sick man. The general motioned for his son Ahmad and the two boys to leave the room and shut the door. As they sat silently outside the room, they heard the

strains of Ali's oud. Ali played and sang for an hour, two hours, three hours. At the end of the fourth hour, the music died, and Ali stepped from the room.

"Praise be to Allah. Your father's spirit has been gathered to heaven."

Ahmad's face was streaming with tears, and his mouth was twisted into an expression of grief and rage. "Why did he call you? Why did he wish to hear your evil music on his deathbed? It is evil, evil."

"My son, I cannot tell you the secrets of your father's heart. I know how he, like you, disdained music. But, in the end, perhaps he understood its power."

"It is nothing but subversion, nothing but vile entertainment," cried Ahmad.

"Music is much more than entertainment, my son. Music is the language of the heart.

"Let me tell you a story. There once was a Sultan who married a beautiful bride. On his wedding day, an evil Djinn coveted his new wife, and tried to force her to leave the sultan so he could enjoy her. But she was virtuous, and refused. So the Djinn cursed her and turned her into a pig.

"The Sultan was distraught, and called his Vizier. 'I know a sorceress who can, perhaps, dispel the curse and turn your bride back into a woman.'

"'Bring her to me at once,' said the Sultan.

"The Vizier brought the sorceress to him, an elderly lady with white hair, a robe of pure white linen, and a staff as long as she was tall. 'I know this Djinn well, I have battled him before. To dispel the curse, I must kill him.' She rapped her staff on the ground three times, and the Djinn appeared before her. He was a terrible Djinn,

twice as tall as she, with muscles bulging in his arms and his eyes flashing fire.

"You dare do battle with me, you hussy? Good, let us begin.' And the Djinn turned himself into a cobra, hissing and weaving. The sorceress in turn, changed into a weasel. For every turn and strike of the cobra, she dodged and turned, escaping his venomous jaws and looking for the moment to snatch the cobra's head in her sharp teeth. Faster than lightning they moved, until the weasel ducked and struck out.

"But with her jaws only inches from the cobra's neck, the Djinn transformed himself into a lion. With a mighty roar, he moved to leap on the weasel. But the sorceress turned herself into a jackal, and with a quickness and cunning, moved away from the lion's leap. So the battle continued, the lion leaping with all its might, and the jackal cunningly dodging until the lion's strength was spent. And when the lion was weakened, the jackal leapt up to seize its throat in his jaws, when the Djinn transformed himself into a crocodile.

"The crocodile moved to snap up the jackal with a single bite. But the sorceress transformed herself into a hawk and flew up out of reach of the crocodile's grasping jaws. The hawk hovered just out of reach of the enraged crocodile, diving down again and again to make a vicious peck at his sensitive nostrils and eyes. Gradually the crocodile, blinded by the bird and suffocating, began to weaken. But just before the hawk could descend for a final blow on the crocodile, the Djinn transformed himself into a raging elephant.

"The elephant reared up on his hind legs, and lashed out with his trunk at the hawk. But at that moment, the sorceress transformed herself back into herself, and her staff into a lyre. She sat under the elephant's feet and began to play. The elephant heard the music, and froze in midair. He moved back, and flapped his huge ears, listening to the music. She played, and the elephant gradually began to sway, laid down, and went into a trance. And the moment the trance was

upon him, he turned back into the Djinn, the towering mountain of a spirit, with his eyes shut in a daze.

"The sorceress turned her staff from a lyre into a sword, and with one mighty blow, struck off the Djinn's head. Then she turned to the throne, where the Sultan's wife, the pig, was seated, and transformed her back into the beautiful bride.

"So you see, Ahmad, music is not entertainment. Music is more powerful than speed, or cunning, or agility, or brute force. You may believe that music is sinful, but never doubt its power. For music is the language of the heart."

Ahmad was overcome by his strange mixture of feelings: grief and anger and doubt and confusion. As Ali turned to leave with Ziryab and Nazeer, Ahmad muttered, "Sin, sin. It is sin." But then his words and his thoughts were drowned in a flood of tears.



Playing with Magic

What an amazing place to grow up in was Baghdad in that Golden Age! It was a huge playground of miracles and magic.

The heart of the city was surrounded by a massive stone wall, perfectly round. The entire walled city was so large, that, were you to set out to walk all the way around, you would begin in mid-morning and finish with the setting sun. Within this round enclave were two more round walls. The innermost circle was the Caliph's palace, a magnificent jade and marble building that housed him and his harem, and his closest guards and advisors. The middle circle was for the senior officials, the military commanders, and the palace guard. In the third circle lived the aristocracy, the craftsmen and artisans, and the markets, rich with wares – spices and carpets and fine beaten copper and silverware, everything known anywhere in the world. Every item of value found its way to the markets of Baghdad.

Outside the third wall were the ethnic quarters – the Ethiopians, the Jews, the Manicheans, the Christians. The magnet of Baghdad drew people from every corner of the earth, from China to the Celtic islands to deepest Africa. These quarters, narrow streets crowded with mud brick homes, squeezed between the city and the river, that flowed like a huge, lazy snake through the land. It was in this section of the city where Ziryab was born; when Al Mawsili took him on as protégé, he moved to the second circle.

There was a zoo, the world's first. Wild animals from Africa to the Far East were brought to the Caliph as tribute or gifts by his subjects. The Caliph had their cages arranged in a beautiful park on the palace grounds, a park so large you could walk for an hour from one side to the other. Ziryab and his friends spent hours wandering

about and marveling at these creatures. They watched as the huge Bengal tiger paced back and forth in his enclosure, eyeing them with a dark menace – what a delicious meal they would be if he could just get past these bars! They marveled at the African ant eater, with his strange snout long and tapered like a dagger to ferret out the tiny insects crawling in the dust. There was an elephant, whose turbaned Indian trainer, called a *mahout*, taught to rear up on its hind legs and bellow with a sound that shook the ground; a strange Mongolian camel with two humps instead of one; a family of African baboons, with bright orange bottoms, who swung from the bars of their cage and threw banana skins at the passersby.

Near the main gate of the inner circle was a marvelous room, an engineering miracle ordered by the Caliph. A large pool filled the vast marble hall, and in the center of the pool an island, with a tree of gold and silver. Perched in the tree were hundreds of mechanical birds, that chirped and flapped their wings. And around the edge of the pool was a regiment of cavalry, their wooden bodies meticulously painted to look real, their powerful steeds dressed out in the finest leather saddles and traps.

Only honored guests were allowed in this hall, to see the mechanical marvel in operation. But Walid, the street-wise mastermind of the gang, knew all the secrets of the room. "My father helped build this room," he said. "I used to come here and watch as they assembled the whole contraption." On a day that the Caliph was entertaining the ambassador from Tunis, he led Ziryab and Nazeer to a secret opening in the street. The three boys – now 14 years old, and inseparable companions – slipped through a dark, narrow corridor that wound under the palace, until they reached a huge basement room underneath the hall. There, protruding through the floor, was a complex mass of levers and wires and cogwheels, which drove the horses and the birds above. A group of slaves manned the turntable that made the whole thing work. "Follow me," whispered Walid. The three boys followed through

another corridor, up a winding flight of stairs, and into a small chamber near the base of the dome, there they could peer down and watch the horses march around the pool, to the amazement of the guests. It was the grandest sight Ziryab had ever seen! The birds made a tremendous racket, while the soldiers and horses glided around the pool, the wooden steeds sometimes rearing up on their hind legs.

When the hall was not in use, the boys would sneak in and wander about the machinery, trying to figure out how it all worked. Walid led them upstairs into the main hall, and proudly pointed out the painted horses that his father had carved. "Look here, here is my signature," he cried, pointing to the bottom of a hoof. "I made this horse's leg."

In all matters requiring street smarts, Walid was the ringleader. But when it came to strength and agility, Nazeer was far in the front. The boys would spend hours climbing over the gardens, over artificial mountains elegantly planted with exotic flowers and fruit trees growing around strategically placed boulders and flowing waterfalls. Nazeer leapt over the rocks like a gazelle, with Walid and Ziryab panting behind. "C'mon, lazybones!" he shouted from the top of a hill.

"With your strength, you could be a captain of the guard," said Ziryab as they rested on the summit. Below them spread the palace complex, with marble facades and granite paved streets and elegant blue domes and spires. "You could rise to be commander of the Caliph's guard."

"Ugh! And hang out with all those Persian Mamluke slaves? They never wash, they smell like a stable!"

"But that's not the real reason, is it?" said Walid. "It's because of your father. Isn't it?"

Nazeer peered over the city, deep in thought. He took a long time before he answered. "I guess you are partly right. My father is

a pacifist, and he wants me to be a pacifist, too. I love learning the martial arts, it's really fun clobbering our teacher with the mace.

"But I think it's me, too. Not just my Dad. I mean, I sit on top of this hill and look over at the city and the palace and the river, and all this beauty, and Ziryab's beautiful music, and your beautiful instruments, and I think – well, I don't know exactly what I think, but..." His voice trailed off and he was lost in thought. Then he suddenly leapt up.

"Last one down the hill's a smelly Mamluke!" he cried and dashed down the rocky path, Ziryab and Walid trailing behind.

A magical place it was, Baghdad, and not only because of the marvels that the Caliph had built. It was magical mostly because of the people. For Baghdad, the capital of the entire empire, drew to it people from across the globe: nearly naked African tribesmen with their noses and ears pierced; tall Amazigh from north Africa with their faces and hands tattooed in fantastic blue mazes; Chinese traders in gold and red embroidered vests and conical hats, who spoke in a bizarre singsong.

There was every stripe of religious fanatic in Baghdad. Indian fakirs, wearing only a loincloth, their knobby bones protruding under their emaciated bodies, sat on beds of nails, for hours, the nails miraculously never piercing the skin. Moslem teachers sat on street corners, surrounded by disciples, each teaching his own brand of Islam. Of course, there were the "Modesty Police", the thugs who smashed Ziryab's oud. Despite Al Mawsili's intervention with the Caliph, these fanatics were too powerful to squelch, and they continued to maraud the streets. Shouting matches, and even fist fights between the different sects, were not uncommon. Ziryab and the gang steered clear as much as they could.

Then there were the magicians, the jugglers, and the street performers. Many of these gathered in the large plaza before the palace gate. A shirtless man in baggy pantaloons and long, straggly

hair, juggled nine balls with his hands and feet, while his wife accompanied him on the *daff*. He would catch a ball under his chin, and it would then miraculously drop between his legs. He lay on his back, his arms and legs raised, bouncing the balls between them.

There was a snake charmer, who sat cross-legged amid a half a dozen wicker baskets. He pulled out a wooden flute, and his turbaned head nodded as he played. It was the strangest tune that Ziryab had ever heard. Slowly, from each basket rose the head of a black cobra – the deadliest of snakes. The snakes weaved and bobbed, their dark menacing eyes following the swaying of the flute, their broad hooded heads flaring as though in a deep trance. It was a terrifying dance of death. Ziryab was fascinated by the sight, but mostly by the mystical power of the charmer's melody. I must learn to play that, he thought.

Fortune tellers, medical quacks, conjurers who made doves appear from under napkins and mixed brightly colored juices that burst into smoke and flame: They all gathered in the square, showing their tricks and selling their wares. Ziryab and his friends wandered through the square marveling at the magic. They bought magic potions that promised to make them wiser and stronger and quicker. They bought charms that warded off djinni and evil spirits. Some of these worked and some of them didn't. The charms against evil spirits seemed pretty good, since evil spirits did not attack any of the three of them.

But evil there was, and in those days you had to be careful. One of the most evil of these wizards showed up in Al Mawsili's studio. Ziryab was waiting for his daily lesson when this wizard showed up. He was tall and lanky, with gangly arms and long, thin fingers. He wore a purple robe embroidered with stars and moons. His face was as pallid as the white of an egg, and over his conical cap a small black whirlwind kept spinning.

"I have cuum to study music," said the wizard in a strange accent.

Al Mawsili looked at him disdainfully. "I take not students from the street," he hissed. "Get thee hence!"

The stranger pulled out a purse filled with gold coin. "I weel pay you handsome!"

"I needeth not thy money. Begone!" cried Al Mawsili.

"I shall not be put off so easily," said the wizard. He pulled out a wooden wand, and waved it over the Maestro. Al Mawsili looked down, and, to his horror, saw his two hands shrivel in his sleeves into tiny, useless claws.

"I weesh to learn music, and I weesh for you to teach me," said the wizard. "I theenk it wise you do not cross me."

"Give me back my hands!" shouted Al Mawsili. "You blackguard! Guards! Guards!"

"Hoosh, sir. No guards shall coom – I have poot them all to sleep. Here, I shall geev you back yor hands." He made another pass with the wand over the musician, and Al Mawsili's hands were miraculously restored.

"I see you have a pupil now," said the wizard, waving in Ziryab's direction. Ziryab stood, frozen, horrified and speechless as he watched. "I weel go now, perhaps I coom back at noon for me lesson?" And he turned and disappeared through the door.

Al Mawsili collapsed to the floor, shaking his whole body. He grabbed his head in his hands. "What am I to do, what to do?" he muttered over and over. Ziryab didn't know what to do. He, too, was terrified by this display of malice and magic. The sight of his teacher in such abject terror riveted him to the spot. At last, he roused himself and went to the master musician. He put his arm on Al Mawsili's shoulder. "Maestro, do not fear. Somehow we shall defeat this evil man."

The Maestro regained his self-control. "My son, there shall be no lesson today. We must think, we must find a way to destroy this monster. Now go."

Ziryab hurried off to consult with his two friends. They met at the top of the artificial hill. Nazeer and Walid shuddered as Ziryab recounted what had happened.

"I don't understand how he managed to work his magic inside Al Mawsili's home," wondered Walid. "Surely he has talismans against evil spirits."

"He has the court wizards sweep the house twice a year to keep out Djinni and prevent spells," replied Ziryab. "It doesn't make sense."

"You said he sounded like a foreigner," said Nazeer. "Our charms and talismans work against local spirits. Foreign magic – we might not have any protection against that."

"And that black whirlwind over his head," said Walid. "That is no local spirit."

"But why does he want to learn music?" asked Ziryab.

"I can tell you that," said Nazeer. "Magic. He wants to learn the magic of our music. We know the power of music – we saw that when Ahmad's father died. Your wizard wants that power."

"Then we must stop him from getting it," said Ziryab.

"But how?" asked Walid.

The three fell silent. No one had an idea.

Walid peered out over the blue domes. "I don't even know who we can ask."

"Maybe the snake charmer," suggested Ziryab. "I have talked to him a few times. Maybe he can help."

"It's worth a try," said Nazeer. "And I will ask my father. Maybe he has an idea."

So the next day, Ziryab went to the plaza and sat down with the snake charmer. He was a wizened old man, with a spikey white beard and a dirty yellow turban. He had sparkling eyes and a modest smile that showed a deep, inner contentment. Ziryab explained the problem.

"I can help you," said the snake charmer. "I can teach you what I know. But I cannot solve your problem. Only you can do that. You must take my knowledge, and your own initiative, and find a solution."

"Teach me what you can, and I hope I can do the rest," said Ziryab.

"What I can teach you," said the charmer, "is the magical melody that hypnotizes these snakes. It is a strange melody, as you know – not a melody created by a human, but by a spirit.

"A music Djinn?" asked Ziryab.

"The same," replied the man. "It was Al Zir, the Djinn of the first string. The first string of King David's lyre. He came to live in my flute for a time, and taught me some melodies of the different animals."

"Is he still there? In your flute?"

"No, he wanders about now, has no permanent home. But he visits occasionally. He is a wonderful Djinn."

"Teach me the melody."

So the charmer took up his flute, and started to play. At first it made no sense to Ziryab, a series of unconnected sounds with no method and no rhythm. But, as he listened to it again and again, it gradually began to fit into a pattern, to weave a musical fabric that

was at once strange and wonderful. The charmer offered Ziriyab his flute. "Here, you try it."

Ziriyab took the instrument, and haltingly tried to reproduce the odd melody. The charmer urged him along. "A little higher there, and then a long note. That's it." Gradually, Ziriyab mastered the tune. And then, as he played, the snakes rose out of their wicker baskets and began their dance. Startled, Ziriyab handed the flute back to the charmer, who continued the haunting melody.

"That was a good start," said the charmer. "But you must not stop in the middle. It is very dangerous. For the moment you stop or make a mistake, the snakes come out of their trance, and there is a danger that they will strike!"

"God willing, I shall not stop," said Ziriyab. "Now we must see how I can use this new knowledge to rid us of the evil wizard."

For the next few days, Ziriyab sat with the charmer and practiced the snake dance, until, he thought, he had it perfect. He could now sit and watch the snakes bob and weave to his playing. He learned the different nuances of the tune – how to make the snakes rise up and flick their tongues, how to make them writhe and wrap themselves around their baskets, how to make them return to their shadowy homes. He invited Walid to look at the flute. Walid measured it carefully, and the next week brought Ziriyab a close replica, that could play all the strange notes of the charmer's melody.

Meanwhile, Al Mawsili was giving the wizard daily music lessons. Actually, during the lessons, this wizard was quite charming. His name was Maccus, and he came from the north. He enjoyed a brief chat before the lesson. But underneath the façade, Maccus was pure evil. The threat of the shriveled hands was always in the background. Al Mawsili hated every moment of the lesson, and he hated Maccus. It ruined Al Mawsili's entire day – he could not teach, he could not compose, he could not perform for the Caliph and his court. He let out word that he was ill, and confined to his

bed. Ziryab's lessons, needless to say, came to a halt. Nonetheless, Ziryab dutifully sat with the Maestro every day, and played for him soothing music to calm his soul. He played through the morning, until the wizard showed up for his forced session.

"The worst thing," Al Mawsili said, "is that he has no talent. No talent whatsoever. It is like teaching a board. He cannot sing a tune on pitch, he cannot hear the difference between the strings of the oud. He is completely tone-deaf."

"Then, at least, we know that he will never learn the magic of music," said Ziryab. "He will never have that power."

"Yes, but meanwhile, he has power over me. What am I to do?"

"Master, I am working on a solution. I hope we will be rid of this monster soon."

Al Mawsili smiled weakly at his pupil. So young, so naïve. It was with a bitter and exhausted heart that he looked at Ziryab, and had no strength to reply.

But Ziryab did indeed have a plan. Perhaps not a whole plan, but the germ of an idea. He met with his friends on the hilltop.

"What I have to do is show this wizard the magic I can perform with this tune, and lure him to the snakes. Then I will charm the snakes to wrap themselves about the man, and terrify him until he agrees to leave.

"I need for you to be nearby, and when he sits to listen to the tune, to move the baskets so he is surrounded by the snakes and has no way of escape."

"It's worth a try," said Nazeer, "though I don't like the idea of getting too close to those vipers. But how are you going to convince him to come to listen?"

"I don't know yet," said Ziryab.

Days went by. Days of terrifying, exhausting routine. Ziryab came in the morning, played and comforted his teacher, until the wizard showed up. Ziryab left, and the miserable Al Mawsili tried to teach this evil man the elements of music. The lesson lasted for two hours or more, the wizard never tiring of his miserable attempts to make a tune on the oud or to strike a constant rhythm on the drum. At the end of the lesson, the wizard left and disappeared in to the city.

Ziryab always left after his session with Al Mawsili. He had no desire to encounter the wizard. But, eventually, he realized that he must if he was to get rid of the menace. So one day, he stayed in the vestibule, listening to the wizard's painful attempts to play a simple tune. As the lesson drew to a close, Ziryab pulled out his flute, and began to play the snake dance.

Maccus strode out of the studio, and paused a moment to listen. The whirlwind above his head, too, seemed to be listening. Then the whirlwind spread down the wizard's head and covered his ear, as though whispering something. The wizard looked sharply at Ziryab.

"What be that tune, booy?"

"It is a magic tune. It is a snake dance."

"What does it do?"

"It charms the snakes and makes them my servants."

"You will teach it me," said the wizard. There was a threat in his voice, and he started to draw out his wand. Ziryab waved him aside.

"I will gladly teach it to you," Ziryab said. "You must come with me."

Ziryab rose and strode toward the plaza. As he walked past Nazeer's house, he gave a sharp whistle. Nazeer rushed out, called Walid, and the two of them followed Ziryab and the wizard at a fair distance, so as not to be noticed.

Ziryab reached the plaza. The snake charmer looked up at him, and immediately understood. He rose from his place, and stepped aside so Ziryab could sit behind the row of baskets. Ziryab sat down, took out his flute. The wizard sat before him, the row of baskets between them. Nazeer and Walid sat behind.

Ziryab began to play. Slowly, the cobras lifted their heads and turned to the music. They began their weaving dance. Maccus watched intently, enchanted, like the snakes by the music. Walid and Nazeer silently moved up, and slowly and gently dragged the baskets from their row, to form a circle around the wizard. The wizard was so intent on the music that he hardly noticed.

Ziryab changed the tune. The snakes slithered out of their baskets and moved to the wizard. Suddenly, the wizard saw he was surrounded. The snakes, responding to the new melody, started to hiss and flash their tongues. The wizard was frozen with fear. The snakes glided to the wizard, wrapped themselves around his arms and legs. One viper slid under the wizard's robe, slithered up his belly and poked his head out of the collar. All color drained out of the wizard's face, and his eyes grew huge as apples. "Bricriu, protect me!" he cried.

Bricriu – that must be the name of the whirlwind spirit – slid down from the top of his head and wrapped itself around the wizard's entire body, forming a protective seal between the snakes and his master. But, though the snakes could no longer strike at the wizard, the terror in the wizard's eyes did not fade. "Boy, make them stop! Make them stop!"

And then – Ziryab forgot. His mind went blank, and he could not remember the tune. He tried, for the life of him. Nothing came. He lowered the flute from his lips.

The moment the music stopped, the snakes paused in their deadly dance. They looked about, and their entranced eyes took a new, menacing sheen. Slowly, they turned their malignant eyes

toward Ziryab. They slid off the wizard's shuddering body, and started to weave their ways toward him. Ziryab stood up and started to move back. The snakes moved forward. Ziryab turned to run, the snakes sidling quickly after them. They were gaining, gaining.

And then, Ziryab heard a voice. It was like a voice in his head, but he knew it was not. Instinctively, he knew it was Al Zir, the music Djinn. Al Zir was singing the melody, the magic snake dance. His memory returned, Ziryab turned back to the snakes, and continued the tune. Moments before the cobras raised their heads to strike, they heard the tune, and they fell again into their trance.

The wizard had, meanwhile, arisen and was beating a path through the plaza to escape the snakes. Ziryab, flute bleating the snake dance, pursued, and the snakes with him. They gained rapidly and wrapped themselves again around the wizard's limbs. He was riveted to the spot.

While Ziryab continued the snake dance, Nazeer approached the wizard. "My friend," said Nazeer in his quiet, peace loving voice. "I think it is time for you to leave Baghdad. I think you have learned enough music for now."

The wizard was shaking with fear, unable to move because of the snakes wrapped around his arms and legs. "So be it! I shall leave! Just call off the snakes."

"I need some assurance that you will leave, and not return," said Nazeer. "Perhaps if you give me your wand."

"Take my wand, and let me goo!" And the wand miraculously popped out of his robe and clattered to the pavement. Nazeer picked it up and stepped back.

Ziryab changed the tune, and the snakes dropped off of the wizard's body and returned to their baskets. The wizard turned to Ziryab, menace in his eyes.

"I shall indeed leave Baghdad. But I have not seen the last of ye!
We shall meet again, booy! We shall meet again!"

He turned, and made his way out of the plaza.