

>> Welcome to another session of our podcast on Music and Brain. I'm Steve Mencher [phonetic] for the Library of Congress and today I'm joined by Taoufiq ben Amor who is about to give a lecture entitled States of Mind, Music in Islamic Sufi Ritual. Dr. ben Amor is Gordon Grey Junior, Senior lecturer in Arabic studies at Columbia University and I'd like to start by not talking about the subject of what you do but I'd like to hear a little bit about you, where were you born?

>> I was born in Tunis, Tunisia in North Africa.

>> All right and what was your family situation there?

>> My father is a musician, he played a two sided drum that you kind of hang on your neck and beat on with two sticks, one on each side. He used to sing as well. He kind of floated sort of in and out of profane and sacred music and he sort of did both and a bunch of other jobs. So when he would come back home he would just eat quickly and pick up his drums and go somewhere. The music was part of the setting, you didn't have to try hard to go to a concert to hear it, it was still within that era where actually music is sort of very functional and played within cultural settings and in many spontaneous ways. So the idea of actual performances, etcetera you know would become the phenomenon in later years.

>> How did you end up in the United States?

>> Oh, a lot of...a lot of reasons, my first reason is when I was in Tunisia I was working with the Peace Corp I taught Arabic to for a number of years.

>> You taught Arabic to folks who were going into Africa, North Africa...

>> Into North Africa and into Tunisia as Peace Corp volunteers and you know that had stays of two years, they were doing all sorts of different things and that's how my questions about America started in my mind and after a while I felt I needed to see it for myself you know as opposed to hearing about it from all of these really dear friends of mine. I got a Fulbright to come and actually work on my dissertation and that was in 1958 so that's when I came to the U.S. first.

>> Are you yourself then a Sufi and is that something that's inherited or is that something that you choose to be?

>> Actually you can do both and it's part of the debates, the many debates that are in the Sufi tradition you know, people are born into a family but does that mean that you actually practice on being a Sufi and who's a Sufi and who decides actually who is a Sufi it is a very personal thing. I think that's one of the aspects about [inaudible] I really like. I grew in the context I have done a few of the practices and all sorts of things, am I still one or not, I mean it never goes away so...

>> Maybe I'd better ask what is a Sufi?

>> A Sufi is a Muslim who adheres to the mystical branch of the religion, it doesn't mean that you don't actually practice all the tenants of Islam, you do, you fast, you pray, don't drink you do all the things that the regular Muslims do. But then on top of that you hold these beliefs that you can experience God and truth directly and holy. So in order for you to do that you have to actually train yourself to be able to do that through rituals, through practice, through many years of some ego smashing. You know at a certain point we do believe that when the ego is totally done with then you can actually be in unity with the universe, with the greater being, with truth and that's when you lose yourself completely into the totality of being of the universe itself.

>> That sounded to me a little bit like Zen Buddhism as [inaudible].

>> It is, it's like you know its mysticism is so similar in so many ways, I mean what the Sufi calls fana which is to lose oneself in truth or in God is nirvana for somebody, you know, kabbala the whole Jewish tradition is very close to this. So I think the mystics are the same but where they start from is a different place and how they get where they get is different, it's not the same path.

>> Okay we'll talk more about that in a minute but I saw that you had participated in a seminar in music in the brain last spring with my friend Jim Anderson who I used to work with many years ago. What's the most surprising thing you learned taking part in that discussion?

>> I think one of the most surprising things to me you know other than the amazing people who are there, actually Jim was telling me details that I've wanted to know for many, many years you know and I was kind of [inaudible] and why is it such a great recording, it's an amazing recording.

>> What recording was that?

>> The Time of Bloom.

>> Ah.

>> And then he started talking about the session and then I asked him other questions later because it doesn't happen that often that you actually have that perfect thing happening and by perfect that it's clean, I mean it's real music you know with all of it. What I learned that day was how to reconcile the many different ways actually looking at the role of music within culture with a human history; I felt that the gap was really huge between us as participants. I really felt that the question came up over and over what is the role of music really in our evolution of survival and to me it was always an obvious thing, you know what do you mean does music do in our lives, it does everything. It makes us happy, it makes us sad, it paralyzes our enemies you know when we go to fight, we communicate with music, we court with music, we do lots of things with music so why isn't music as important as drinking water or eating bread. I think I realized it [inaudible] and I think since then I've been thinking a little bit about what it is that happened that created this kind of [inaudible] a little bit. People up to 150 years ago

were talking about you know music and therapy, how to use music to cure all sort of ailments, you know psychological diseases, all sorts of things and then all of a sudden we're back to zero and we're saying you know we want to actually study the effects of music on the neurons, on the brain and that how many chemicals are you know secreted at a...listening to a certain type of music etcetera and it feels to me that it's sort of backward way of going about it. It's something you can't reproduce, it's very hard to reproduce. Somebody who gets into the sense of bliss or enchantment or trance or whatever you want to call it today and we'll be talking about that in more detail but it's not something that you could put in a lab and have all the conditions that are favorable to induce this person to live the experience, it's very different than that it's so embedded in so many other things and sometimes it doesn't happen. Most importantly it has a condition, the first condition is you have to believe in order for it to happen so you know with all of that cut out I felt that I was there in that conversation you know almost awed you know by the gap and questioning myself what had happened in these 150 years to humanity to a point where music is so estranged from us now that we have to actually ask those questions. Nobody asked them 150 years ago, I was taken so back all the way to Greek philosophers everybody is talking about the effects of music, no one doubted the effects, they want to understand how it had that effect.

>> Let's dive into that a little bit, I know when we first started when you look back and you started to say what were the kinds of things we would talk about you said well you wanted to think a little bit about a critique of looking at music and critique of Darwinian utilitarian and empirical approaches and it made me think of some of the things we've talked about already in this podcast, let's start with Darwin. Not long ago we had a guest on the podcast who took probably what you might call a Darwinian approach, so the way he described it he said well genes for music and dancing might have helped some tribes to dance better and sing better and maybe they would be more coordinated when it came time to go hunting or when it came time to go fighting. So he said those genes were then favored and the next generation had better music genes and that I guess would be a Darwinian approach, now is that ridiculous or is that something...

>> It's not, it really isn't, no I mean it's really looking at one aspect of music and dance and that's the point that I'm trying to make, look I'm not against comparisons or about [inaudible] or a way of looking at music you know in even a utilitarian way of looking at it. I think that it doesn't provide us with answers as to how does music exactly induce altered states of mind and you know we could get into the genetics, we could get into the lab, dismiss music altogether because the utilitarian approach would tell you what's the use of music. I mean at least a person you talk to was saying that music was important in human survival, I've heard other people who would say it wasn't even, it's a luxury, it's part of culture, it's one of the things that we didn't develop until we had enough food and figured out how not to be eaten by some carnivore on the Serengeti Plains. I don't know what constitutes music and I don't know how we should define it and see it because I see it as a much wider thing than that. It's a collection of sounds, it's somebody who is actually

chipping at a stone to make the little arrow with which they're going to go and hunt you know in a way is actually creating sound. How do people relate to that, I don't know how but I would hate to think that music is not crucial, that esthetics in general are not really crucial to human beings and to culture.

>> In terms of the utilitarian, you know I have my own pet peeves in a sense that we think well music is instead of listening to music, instead of listening to the feeling of music, sometimes we talk about music because it's good for us. You know music is good because it brings people together in religion or it serves a particular role in films to make our emotions come to the surface or might sooth a child; we talked about inciting an army. Sometimes I want to stop people with those arguments and say well let's listen, let's feel, let's do all of those things then we can talk about roles that music might play and things it might do but that's not the first thing we should talk about.

>> Right I agree with you, I agree that the social role is obviously very important, there's no doubt about it, I mean most of music is very communal, I mean the only time that it is not communal is when you're singing by yourself in the shower or practicing the piano somewhere and even when you're singing in the shower or practicing the piano at least practicing the piano we know you practice it in order to use it to have people listen to it, be it your teacher, an audience or somebody, it's actually one of the things that is so communal and yet so individual and I think that's such a wonderful thing about music in a sense. We could go you and I, to a concert and sit there together and experience it together because it's meant to be the musician and us listening to the musician and interacting with him. But we could have so many different feelings and so many different emotions each one of us when we leave the concert with different feelings or different ideas about what it was. So I think we've been a bit divorced from that emotional link that we do have with music even though we say it, we say it makes us sad or it makes us happy, why is this is such sad music it has real properties, it really has this incredible effective array of properties that can actually lift us up, that can actually heal us you know psychologically and even physically, I mean that's known, it's the link that's the problem. I think they used to be much more of a link in the past of what music did, I mean whole theories talked about music not just a sound or scores or tempos, they related modes to temperaments, to the elements, to the zodiac signs to...and so actually when you go learn the music you learn these properties with it. You have to actually learn them, this mode does this, you know Aristotle was basically saying oh the [inaudible] mode is actually a very good mode for happiness, and he was not inventing anything where these theories that were transmitted as part of learning music. I don't think the folks at Juilliard are doing that right now, nobody is talking about temperaments, nobody is talking about how this music is really related to moods and to the body and to the zodiac signs and what its effects are in healing, etcetera.

>> Now you have done a lot of scholarly work I understand you know kind of saying not only Aristotle said these things but a lot of Arab scholars and philosophers were there at the same time or earlier saying similar things.

>> Absolutely the Indian tradition has the same thing, the present tradition when you [inaudible] Gods saying exactly and the Indian tradition actually I know more about the north than the south unfortunately, the south has a very rich [inaudible] tradition in music that I wish I knew more about...I hope I would. But for the north part the Hindustani system still has kept the properties of [inaudible] in terms of playing in the morning or playing them at night and playing them...you know and performing them in a certain way. Some of them are good for singing, some of them are not good for singing, some of them are appropriate for certain instruments like the [inaudible] and some aren't. Arabs used to play the hot modes in the evening and the cold modes in the day, you know cold modes cool you down and hot modes warm you up so you have to actually think about the temperature etcetera. But if you went to the conservators today where Arab music is being taught and you tell people what's a cold mode and what's a hot mode they wouldn't know because of the [inaudible].

>> Wow, now I have been looking into Youtube and seeing some of the rituals that you've been talking about, the zecor [phonetic] how do you say it?

>> Yeah, [inaudible] some people say or [inaudible] they say [inaudible] as well which is another...there's so many names for the same thing.

>> And hundreds of thousands of people have viewed some of these videos and to me I'm seeing people sort of dancing around in a circle and jumping and singing, help me see some more things, what's going on in some of these things.

>> The vicker [phonetic] basically is not all about music it's actually a very well planned series of activities, you know practices that you do. It varies a little bit according to the Sufi order, according to the country, etcetera. It contains prayers, it contains other forms of chanting, reciting the Quran and readings, etcetera and music and then some movement and it depends you know sometimes you see frame drums being played, sometimes no drums at all, sometimes other instruments are played and all of this is because of the different schools and different ways of thinking about this. Some schools allow for certain instruments and not for others, some schools don't allow for instruments what so ever. Some schools actually rely on clapping and breathing to create the rhythmic pattern. Generally these gatherings are very long, when I was young and I used to go to the...in my particular order they used to happen on a Thursday night. So they would start actually after the sundown and they go on until the next day at dawn, you know with breaks and they bring the food and people eat so there's a lot that goes on into this but basically the idea is if you go through this very long cycle of practices that include music in order for you to reach the heightened point where Sufi's talk about shedding the cloak or they talk about lifting the curtain on the senses and then all of a sudden you are one with truth. The problem is there's amnesia after that, after you come back and so you see these people, when you see them you see them in trance and it's amazing what they can do. I mean some of the stuff is completely graphic like what they do to their bodies and stuff that's hard to believe but when they

come back from the trance you know they cannot remember what they went through, it's as if they lived the experience on another side.

>> You mean is this the kind of thing where they would injure themselves.

>> They would cut themselves, they would injure themselves, they would stick daggers in their hands, I mean they would do things that I have some videos of mine that I want to show today, that's for sure. You know I've talked about some of these practices.

>> This would be where, mostly the injury, the self-adulation...

>> It's not self-adulation there's a lot that gets done and it depends on which order is the unit and in which country and even the Sufis sometimes look down upon these things, they think these guys are charlatans, you know this is not...Sufi spirituality but you know for years lying down on glass or walk on fire, we know about this. The problem is we can't explain it and the other complication is a lot of these people who go through these trances cannot remember what they went through and therefore it is a communal experience in which playing the music together and chanting together gets you as an individual to that stage where you lift the veil of the senses and experience the unity of the universe as a whole and a unity with God but then it's so individual because not everybody goes into that trance. Certain people do at different points within the evening and trances last for different times, you know sometimes it's really short, sometimes it's really long and you really have to take care of the person who gets into a trance because they can hurt themselves, the music has to go on because if you interrupt the music from heat they get really cold and then what might be a shock in coming back to this world. So it's a very individual experience, it's like death you know with except that there is a resurrection after that. We all know about it, we all are going to experience it and that we experience it so individually.

>> So let me interrupt you though to ask then as a scholar, as a Sufi, as a person what is most interesting to you about this, I'm fascinated but it's a very diffuse fascination but here's someone who knows about this, what's the most interesting thing about this to you.

>> The most interesting thing to me about mysticism is that it offers other ways of seeing, other ways of perceiving our life in the world. I'm not saying that it's the way or it's a better way but it is another way and there are lots of Sufis who live in so many different ways. I don't think I want to create a bit of a conflict in between scientists and [inaudible] the Sufi because I don't want to create that. The truth is a lot of the Sufis were mathematicians and doctors and all these things but they were Sufis too. I don't see the contradiction between the two.

>> So it's music and dancing, that's part of what brings them through into the spiritual realm, the mystical realm.

>> Right the music is only a means to all of this, which actually raises other questions, you know I'll probably talk about [inaudible].

>> Before I let you go I want to ask a little bit about the whirling dervishes who I saw in Cairo in a city there, is this another kind of Sufi ritual or are these folks...

>> It is the same [inaudible] it depends on which setting you've seen them, a lot of it is like [inaudible] and I think we have to distinguish between performance and ritual. I'm not saying there's no place for performance I think there is as long as performance doesn't pretend that it's ritual because it's not. Did you see where the guy is actually in colored robes?

>> Yes.

>> And when they whirled did they lift they're robes?

>> They went almost up to the top of their heads.

>> It's a folkloric [inaudible].

>> Tourists, well now I'm really disappointed.

>> I actually don't like the word whirling [inaudible] I generally go for turning or something like that.

>> Well, tell me what the real thing is.

>> It's so hard to come by now but it's actually part of the Mevlevi Sufi order, it's one of the main Sufi orders of [inaudible] and everybody knows [inaudible] and I'm so glad he's such a popular poet I think his books were like beating all other masterpieces of literature whatever recently. He's the founder of this order and this order actually is found in many other countries including...Turkey's is the main place for it even though [inaudible] is Persian and his poetry isn't Persian and he spent a lot of time in Konya in Turkey. The Mevlevi's have this dance that we know is the [inaudible]. It's really full of symbolism in so many different ways, it's one of the things I wouldn't be talking about today but the turning, the movements, the color of the robes you know the way they progress and all of that actually has...is very symbolic. Just to give you an example, not to go through all of this, it's a long ceremony but as they come in on top of the white that they wear, they wear a darker cloak, black or gray and one of the first things they do when they stand and sheikh is there is they shed it, it's the act of shedding your other life and entering another. They symbolism continues [inaudible].

>> Well, I look forward to seeing more of that and I look forward to hearing more about you and your fascinating work. This has been one of our podcasts on music and the brain from the Library of Congress, I've been talking to Taoufiq ben Amor, I'm Steve Mencher and thanks for joining us.

>> Thank you.