



# EBRĀHĪM MAWṢELĪ, ABŪ EṢĤĀQ

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**EBRĀHĪM MAWṢELĪ, ABŪ EṢĤĀQ**, the most celebrated musician at the court of Hārūn al-Rašīd and a central figure in the development of the Iraqī school of music under the early 'Abbasids. He was born in Kūfa in 125/742-43 to Persian parents who had recently moved there from Arrajān in Fārs, reportedly to escape the exactions of a tyrannical Omayyad governor (*Aḡānī* V, p. 2). His full name was Abū Eṣḥāq Ebrāhīm b. Māhān b. Bahman b. Nosk, but he later referred to himself as Ebrāhīm b. Maymūn, thus disguising his non-Muslim origins. His father died when he was an infant, and he was brought up by his maternal relatives, who had established a relationship of clientage with the Ḥanzāla tribe of Tamīm in Kūfa. Neglecting his studies, he took to carousing with the local youth, and at one point fled to Mosul to escape his relatives' disapproval of his conduct; on his return to Kūfa a few months later his companions dubbed him "al-Mawṣelī," and the name stuck. According to most sources (e.g., *Aḡānī* v, p. 3), it was in Mosul that he discovered his talent for music, which he subsequently cultivated first in Ray, where he studied both Arab and Persian song, then in Obolla, near Baṣra, where he apprenticed with a Magian named Jovānūyah. After attracting the attention of a first cousin of the caliph al-Manṣūr resident in Obolla, the budding musician was summoned to the court in Baghdad, where he soon became an established figure.

Ebrāhīm served as court musician to three caliphs, al-Mahdī (158-69/775-85),



al-Hādī (169-70/785-86), and al-Rašīd (170-93/786-809), accumulating vast wealth and great prestige, but also suffering the ups and downs of court life. An inveterate drinker, he incurred the wrath of the teetotaling al-Mahdī, who imprisoned him more than once, and had him flogged for contravening his order to stay away from his sons Mūsā (al-Hādī) and Hārūn (al-Rašīd). When Mūsā succeeded his father as caliph, he brought Ebrāhīm back to court and showered him with largesse, and when Hārūn came to the throne he continued to favor him, although he again fell from grace at least once, languishing in prison for a time in Raqqā. Like other court musicians, he was on call at all times, and many anecdotes describe his performances, alone, with slave girls, or with colleagues and rivals, at Hārūn's parties; at some point he did, however, win the caliph's permission to have Saturdays off. He was also patronized by Hārūn's viziers, especially the [Barmakids](#), and his large number of close friendships among the nobility generally is remarked upon in our sources.

Musically, despite the Persian elements in his training, Ebrāhīm was considered a conservative, upholding the Arabic tradition which had heretofore flourished in the Ḥejāz. Under al-Mahdī and his successors, most of the major musicians in Baghdad were in fact émigrés from Mecca and Medina, Ebrāhīm being the first musician born in Iraq to achieve real prominence; yet it was the Ḥejāzīs themselves, and in particular Ebn Jomay' (d. before 188/804), a member of the Prophet's tribe of Qorayš and one of Ebrāhīm's chief rivals, who were more open to innovation in musical style. This innovating trend was subsequently carried much further by Ebn Jomay's pupil, the caliph al-Mahdī's own son Ebrāhīm (d. 224/839), and an intense rivalry developed between Ebrāhīm b. al-Mahdī and his modernizing "party," on the one hand, and Ebrāhīm Mawṣelī and his equally celebrated (and equally conservative) son [Eşhāq](#) (d. 235/850), on the other.

Ebrāhīm Mawṣelī was an exceptionally prolific composer; one account credits him with nine hundred songs, of which his son Eşhāq considered three hundred superior to anything produced by his contemporaries (*Aḡānī* V, p. 16). He was also noted for his versatility, being able to compose songs in every rhythm; although he developed a particular skill in the rapid *mākūrī* rhythm. Besides accompanying himself on the *'ūd*, as was standard, he often sang accompanied by two famous instrumentalist colleagues, Barṣawmā (d. after 188/804) on the *nāy* and Zalzal (d. after 227/842) on the *'ūd*; he was particularly close to the latter, whom he had managed to persuade Hārūn to release from



prison after a ten-year confinement, and whose sister he married. The sources mention two other wives of Ebrāhīm, Dōšār and Šāhak, both of whom he had married during his stay in Ray, the latter being the mother of Eshāq and most of his other children. He also had a brief affair with the slave-girl Kōnt, known as Dāt-al-Kāl, who was later bought by Hārūn (*Aḡānī* XV, p. 76).

Of contemporary poets, Ebrāhīm was particularly close to Abū Eshāq Esmā'īl b. Qāsem b. Sowayd, better known as Abu'l-'Atāhīa (d. 211/826), with whom he shared the misfortune of imprisonment by Hārūn (we have verses by each commiserating with the other), and the romantic 'Abbās b. Aḥnaf (d. 188/804), many of whose verses he set to music. Having learned that the late Du'l-Romma Ġaylān b. 'Oqba (d. 117/735) was Hārūn's favorite "bedouin" poet, he not only made something of a specialty of singing his poetry, but even got Hārūn to forbid other musicians to do so.

Of Ebrāhīm's many students, besides his son Eshāq, whose fame at least equalled his own, the most important was the slave Moḳāreq, celebrated for the beauty of his voice, who later, however, went over to the innovating camp of Ebrāhīm b. al-Mahdī. Ebrāhīm Mawṣelī was also important in establishing in Baghdad the practice of training slave girls in music; besides those he owned himself, he at times had as many as eighty other girls in training in his school.

In his later years, Ebrāhīm suffered from a digestive ailment (*qūlanj*); when his ailment grew more severe he retired from caliphal service, and died shortly thereafter, in 188/803-04.

Unlike his son Eshāq, Ebrāhīm is not known to have written about his art. He did, however, at the behest of Hārūn al-Rashīd, collaborate with his colleagues Ebn Jomay' and Fodayḥ b. 'Awra' in compiling a collection of the one hundred "greatest songs," which, after substantial later revision by Eshāq, was to serve as the kernel for the *Aḡānī* of Abu'l-Faraj Eṣfahānī, our richest source on the history of classical Arabic music.



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