

# Chronicles of the Andalusian Blackbird

There are very few periods in medieval history where people of different faiths rubbed shoulders with one another, exchanged their writings, debated the burning issues of the day and in the end were able to peacefully create a synthesis of diverse cultures. One such epoch was in Moorish Spain, under a slew of tolerant and prosperous Muslim rulers, also known as the period of "La Convivencia" (The Coexistence).

Then, under the Moors, a symbiosis of diverse cultures and peoples gave birth to some of history's greatest personalities and their amazing creations. Muslim Spain was far from perfect but ensured a degree of coexistence and harmony never witnessed in the Iberian Peninsula before.

From this fertile period of learning in the Iberian Peninsula emerged the charismatic polymath Ziryab, trying his hand in subjects as varied as fashion design, music, poetry, gastronomy, astronomy, and branches of science. The legacy of this great polymath is rarely heard of and talked about, which is particularly surprisingly as his legacy imbues almost every aspect of our modern times.

Ziryab's fairytale like life started in the sandy dunes of the Arabian Peninsula, where he was born into slavery, in Mosul, in modern-day Iraq, in 789 AD. Mosul was a part of an expanding Abbasid empire, which itself was ushering an age of learning and enlightened scholarship.

Called Abul-Hasan or Ali Ibn Nafi, he was nicknamed Ziryab for the black colour of his skin and his melodious singing. This flamboyant powerhouse did not limit his talent



to any one field in particular.

After being tutored by the finest musician-teachers in Baghdad and Mosul, and consequently being threatened by his rivals, who had been mainly his mentors in Baghdad, Ziryab ventured out to Cordoba, which was being ruled by Arab-Berber Muslims. There, in the court of the enlightened ruler, Abdul Rahman III, Ziryab was pulled in as the Court Entertainer in 822 AD.

Ziryab was very much adored by his audience, and it was said he knew and composed more than 10,000 songs, and also brought innovation into music by recrafting the lute with rare materials like a lion cub's gut for strings. His lasting contribution to this day in the field of music remains his

improvement and mastery of the Oud, a middle eastern short neck lute type musical instrument, which to this day, is played in his native Iraq and also in his adopted homeland of Spain—a true performer winning hearts everywhere.

Ziryab is often credited with introducing perfumes to the lands he visited and the European continent at large. When it came to looking great and exuding panache, he was pioneering as well. He introduced shaving for men and short haircuts for both genders, with bangs that came to eye level, as a fashionable way of beating the fiercely hot weather conditions in those lands.

A true gastronome extraordinaire, Ziryab's influence is nowhere more prevalent than

on the dinner table where we are presented with the structure of the traditional three-course meal consisting of entrée, the main-course, and dessert. The tablecloth, which was supposedly derived from Erasmus's set of table manners actually came from his idea of covering the tables with leather covers and drinking from glassware rather than large, heavy goblets.

This great artist is also credited with introducing a number of exotic recipes which are now part and parcel of Spanish cuisine.

Like many of the educated class at the time who experimented in alchemy and other sciences, Ziryab's intellectual reach also extended to clothing, for which he invented colourful dyes and chemicals and introduced the idea of seasonal fashions.

He also created a chart for what clothing one should wear during the different times of the day. When it came to looking presentable, Ziryab was at the forefront for change, he introduced a type of toothpaste, encouraged twice-daily baths and developed the world's first deodorant.

From the dining space to the living hall to the baths to the podium, Ziryab's influence in our modern day and age has touched us all. A famed Yale historian, Maria Rosa Menocal, called Muslim Spain, "The Ornament of the World" and the epithet stands true for Ziryab as well, as he was one of the great ornaments who have graced the heritage of a spectrum of cultures.

**By Israr Hasan**  
**Photo: Collected**

## Handling anxiety attacks

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### LIGHT EXERCISE

When you exercise, hormones called endorphins are released into the bloodstream, which are responsible for body relaxation and a better mood. The endorphins help to keep the blood pumping, which improves our mood and decreases chances of panic attacks with time. For starters, light exercise can be walking or swimming.

Brain exercises also help one cope when they are facing an anxiety attack. These include a lot of different actions, but simple and easy ones can also help when done in a step by step process.

First, look at five different objects and spend some time thinking about each. Second, listen to four different sounds, they can be faint bird noises in the background, or clear ones or both. Examine them as well. Thirdly, touch three different objects and feel the distinct textures and temperatures. Then try to identify two distinct scents around you, and see if they can trigger any memories. Lastly, taste one object. It is a good idea to keep some sort of food on you, be it candy or gum. These make use of almost all your senses, and lets you concentrate on numerous things, which help to calm the mind.

### REACH FOR LAVENDER

Lavender is widely known for its stress relieving properties. Having some lavender essential oil always on hand is a good idea for those who often get panic attacks. Rub some on your wrists or forearms and breathe in the scent when you feel like you might be experiencing an anxiety attack. When not in a rush, drinking chamomile or lavender tea have the same effects. Lavender however should not be combined with other medicines or balms, since some contain chemicals which can lead to unwanted reactions.

### LEARN ABOUT STIMULI AND TRIGGERS

Anxiety attacks are sometimes a result of some specific triggers such as crowds or enclosed spaces or particular topics which make you worry like financial issues. Identifying these triggers, managing them, and finally learning to move past them is necessary. Although it is easier said than done, practice will make you better.

Limiting your stimuli is where you can start. Eliminate stimuli such as noises, sights or scents which make you uncomfortable. If you feel panicked in a crowd, go to a corner or face a wall, but overtime, try to overcome it because one cannot let go of the fear without facing it. Have friends accompany you to crowded or secluded areas, whichever

er makes you uneasy, so you will know that you have someone to help in case you feel anxious. After some practice, you will not feel the need for company anymore.

### HAVE A MANTRA

Having your own mantra ensures that you will be fine, even after an anxiety attack. Have your own phrase of encouragement, even if it is as simple as "This will pass" or "I am stronger," and repeating it on a loop internally relaxes and reassures you of your strength and lets a panic attack subside.

### PREVENTION

Practice all the exercises, be it breathing, physical or mental, on a regular basis. Exercises like aerobics really help to relieve tension and stress, and boosts overall confidence. Plan a proper balanced diet which will stabilise the blood sugar levels, and do not miss your meals. Reduce and avoid caffeine, alcohol and smoking, which tend to make panic attacks worse.

### THINGS TO DO WHEN SOMEONE EXPERIENCES A PANIC ATTACK

As a family member, friend or even bystander, if you see someone around you experiencing an anxiety attack, small actions like giving them space and remaining calm can help. You can help the person by suggesting or showing them the way to a quiet area. You can remind the person that

attacks always go away and it will pass. Help them with control and count their breathing. However, avoid asking too many questions, do not get them more anxious or state any negative comments or tell them to calm down. If they insist on being alone, give them space, but make sure they are within an eyeshot.

### LAST RESORT- PROFESSIONAL HELP

Sometimes, panic attacks can escalate or occur too frequently, which can leave a person very disoriented. If an attack lasts more than half an hour, or if the symptoms are getting worse, or if it is inhibiting the person socially, one should seek medical help.

Panic or anxiety attacks can occur for numerous reasons, but the main point is that it will always pass, no matter how hard it gets during an attack. So be mindful, exercise and consult with your peers and doctors, because with the right actions, panic attacks will go away for good.

**By Anisha Hassan**  
**Photo: Collected**

*Disclaimer — People experience panic attacks in varied degrees. Anxiety disorder is among the most disabling mental illnesses. If someone is having recurring panic attack, s/he should immediately seek professional help.*