

# A Sephardic Journey

by Eugenia Moliner-Ferrer



For the past two years my flute and guitar duo, The Cavatina Duo, has been on a musical journey, culminating in the release of our new CD *Sephardic Journey*. In fact, this journey began much earlier, in 1996, when after five and a half years of brutal war in the former Yugoslavia, I was able to travel with my husband and duo partner Denis Azabagic to visit his new home country of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the first time. During a visit with Denis's relatives, a most incredible thing happened. Upon learning that I am from Spain, Denis's great-aunt Razija began speaking to me in Spanish. While I was surprised by this, the rest of Denis's family were utterly astonished. Even Razija's daughter was in disbelief, because none of them had known that Razija could speak Spanish. How could this be? When and where did she learn the language? Furthermore, I realized that she was speaking a very old form of Spanish, known as Ladino, spoken by the Spanish Jews as long as 500 years

ago.

As the conversation progressed, Razija told us that her mother had converted from Judaism to Islam at the outset of the Second World War in order to survive persecution by the Nazi army. In so doing, her family was one of only two surviving families of Jewish origin in Denis's hometown of Tuzla. Razija then said something that we have never forgotten, 'With you the circle is complete—we are back in Spain.'

This experience presented a profound discovery that none of us would have ever have imagined. Razija told us that the Ladino language had been kept by her family for generations, over hundreds of years. She was a descendant of Sephardic Jews who were driven from Spain at the end of the 15th century, and we have learnt that her story epitomizes the remarkable experience of the Sephardim, so many of whom have managed to maintain their language, stories, traditions and culture despite centuries of persecution

and diaspora. In all of this, music has played a vital role, a key means of orally transmitting their language, stories and culture.

As we researched and discussed this in the years that followed, I made another remarkable discovery: my last names, Moliner-Ferrer, were ones that Jews in medieval Spain took from their professions (Moliner = miller, Ferrer = blacksmith) when they converted to Christianity in order to stay in Spain. From these shared connections with my Spanish roots and Denis's family history, we were drawn strongly to a dream that we would someday play music based on the beautiful Sephardic melodies we had come to discover.

Sephardic music has its roots in the musical traditions of the Jewish communities in medieval Spain and Portugal. After their expulsion from these regions in 1492, the Sephardic Jews migrated throughout the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Balkans. As they did so, they adapted their Ladino song texts to the musical styles and melodies of their new cultures, and thus what we call Sephardic music today is a rich mixture of musical styles found in Morocco, Turkey, the Balkans, and many other countries. It has come down to us largely in the form of unaccompanied female singing—songs traditionally sung while performing household tasks, but also its rituals surrounding weddings and other important family events. In addition to the beauty of so many of the melodies, the most remarkable thing about the Sephardic repertoire is how it seems to embody and communicate centuries of human experience, across different countries and eras.

We have come to see that every culture has its own rhythms of life, which its artists seek to reflect in their work. In the process of transforming their own experiences of life into acts of communication to share with others, they enhance the quality of both individual experience and social relationships between people. As musicians, by re-creating music from different places and times, we are

privileged to be able to communicate these shared human experiences, and perhaps we can even hope that doing so might help us to all live together with more mutual understanding and harmony. It was in this spirit that five composers were commissioned to write substantial new pieces for us based on the music of the Sephardic Jews, with the goal of building the flute and guitar chamber music repertoire and bringing this beautiful music to the 21st century concert hall and 21st century listeners.

The five composers come from a variety of backgrounds and employ a variety of styles, such as Clarice Assad and her Brazilian influence and Alan Thomas, who artfully mixes classical and eclectic styles. We have previously enjoyed fruitful collaborations with each of the composers, and the variety we find in their music is one of the things that makes the collection so appealing. For this project we also chose to augment our duo with string instruments, giving the composers a wider palette of sound on which to draw.

We were fascinated to see how the different composers would approach the challenge of creating new music based on Sephardic melodies, and have been truly delighted with the results.

Clarice Assad's *Sephardic Suite* for flute, guitar, and string quartet, consists of three movements inspired by love songs and relationships. Clarice always brings something unexpected, and in the score she asks for body percussion, we all do some new sounds, which is quite fun to do.

David Leisner describes his *Love Dreams of the Exile* for string quartet, flute, and guitar as stream-of-consciousness meditations on Sephardic folk tunes. David's writing is very delicate, and the melodies he used in this piece fit very nicely with his style of writing.

*Isabel* by Joseph V. Williams II was commissioned by Austin Classical Guitar and pays tribute to the tragic history of *Isabel de los Olives y López* and her persecution during the Spanish Inquisition. Joseph fantastically conveys the anguish of this girl, and makes use

of the multi-phonics with voice to create the effect of pain, screams, and terror.

Carlos Rafael Rivera's *Plegaria y Canto (al Bodre de La Mar)* for alto flute and flute, violin, and guitar represents the composer's vision of a proud, helpless soul approaching the edge of the coastal town of Borriana in Eastern Spain, pleading her misery as an affront to the Mediterranean Sea. Carlos really takes you on a journey. This piece is in a single 16-minute movement, and the sense of inner journey, from helplessness to hope, is brilliantly achieved with a musical thread that never fades.

Finally, our frequent collaborator and friend Alan Thomas has written a three movement *Trio Sefardi* for flute, cello and guitar, with each movement being based on one melody from the Sephardic repertoire. Alan always surprises us with his ideas. In the first movement he uses great variety of musical tools, from "jazzy" guitar solo to a fugato finale as a more "classical" form, then bases the second movement on a slow Milonga rhythm, with the Sephardic melody, and finishes with very fiery third movement, filled with joy. What a contrast, all in one piece!

Since the release of the CD and the concert premiere of the new pieces at the Ravinia Festival in March 2016,

we have continued to play these pieces in our concerts, especially with our recently-formed chamber group Fandango, in which we are joined by the American violinist Desiree Ruhstrat and the British cellist David Cunliffe. Our hope is that these new pieces will make a vital contribution to the flute and guitar chamber music repertoire, and that listeners get as much pleasure and meaning from hearing them as we have in playing them.

From a musical and artistic standpoint, we are gratified to see the old melodies find a new home in these works and fascinated by how each composer has used their own language to create a completely new composition. We closely collaborated with the composers in this process, which makes it very rewarding and personal. We like exploring folk music as a point of origin for our projects, as was the case with the Balkan Project (released in 2010).

Perhaps the main lesson learned on our Sephardic journey is that music, as an expression of human experience and the human spirit, connects us with each other, regardless of natural or man-made borders and regardless of the passage of time.

The Cavatina Duo's CD *Sephardic Journey* is out now on Cedille Records.

