

# The Music of the SEPHARDIM

Are many early music performances of Sephardic repertoire only an elegant anachronism?

By Judith R. Cohen  
and Joel Bresler

*"In an inspired choice, the first music heard by an actual audience in the extensively renovated [Alice Tully Hall], now called the Starr Theater, was not some brassy fanfare or festive overture, but three mournful, elegiac Sephardic Romances from the 15th century." ("At Last, Heavenly Acoustics Are Heard in the Hall," Anthony Tommasini, The New York Times, February 22, 2009.)*

WHILE WE WERE DELIGHTED that Sephardic music was used to inaugurate the renovated hall at Lincoln Center, is it churlish to point out that there are no such things as mournful, elegiac Sephardic romances from the 15th century?

## Sephardic music is not early music.

There has never been a single Sephardic melody (romance, i.e. narrative ballad, or other genre) traced back to pre-expulsion Spain or Portugal. Certain Sephardic romance *texts* date back to the late Medieval or early-to-mid Renaissance periods. So some groups seem to

An Algerian Jewish ensemble, from 1875.



believe that the music they are set to is similarly ancient. This Medieval umbrella is then extended to cover lyric songs dating back to only the late 19th century. To ascribe this repertoire to the 15th century is just plain wrong.

Sephardic music is not all romances, and most romances are not performed "mournfully."

Hespèrion XXI and most other groups rarely perform the narrative ballads, the romances. The vast majority of the present Ladino repertoire is not the ballad repertoire. But often other genres, typically love songs, are mistakenly labeled as romances.

Sephardic women rarely sing mournfully and elegiacally, unless it's on a day of mourning. In that case, they would sing songs (including some specific romances) for the occasion. These songs would generally not be used for concert repertoire, and certainly not for entertainment. Even romances with very sad subjects are usually sung rather matter-of-factly.

## How did the early music movement "discover" Sephardic music?

The Spanish soprano Victoria de los Angeles was the first mainstream classical artist to record Sephardic repertoire, doing so on her 1962 release *Spanish Song of the Renaissance*. This was also the first recording to use what might be described as Medieval or pseudo-Medieval accompaniment for Sephardic songs. Six years later, de los Angeles followed with *Songs of Andalusia*. A young musician named Jordi Savall played viola de gamba on this recording.

Savall and his wife, Montserrat Figueras, later formed the early music group Hespèrion XX (now Hespèrion XXI). In 1976, they released a two-LP recording titled *Weltliche Musik im Christlichen und Jüdischen Spanien* (*Music*

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from *Christian and Jewish Spain*). When preparing their Sephardic repertoire, the group started with songs from a collection by Isaac Levy. Levy collected his songs from traditional informants, but his arrangements were intentionally stripped of traditional Sephardic performance practices such as microtones, fluid rhythmic structure, etc. Hespèrion XX then undertook, according to the liner notes, “a sincere attempt to realize a performance practice...that was known to exist on the Peninsula...”

In other words, the songs were re-imagined as the group thought they might (or perhaps ought to) have been performed. Ladino song, like other oral traditions, has older roots developed over many years. In the Sephardic case, the music also comes from many wide-flung geographical sites and host cultures. As Judith has noted, “Many of the groups performing Sephardic music have ignored the living tradition and have chosen to re-invent a ‘historical’ one.” In fact, that very album had liner notes by professor Israel J. Katz, the first musicologist to publish about the myth of “Medieval” Ladino songs, which he did in 1973!

## Performance practices

De los Angeles and Hespèrion XX laid down a template that has often been used ever since: Medieval instruments, Medieval-sounding arrangements, Medieval claims for much of the music, and vocalists typically performing in a Western art song or early music style. This style is not remotely related to the way the songs are sung by the men and women (in this repertoire, especially the women) who keep the songs alive by developing them and adapting new melodies over the centuries, imbuing them with far different vocal styles, sometimes simple, sometimes virtuosic. But Sephardic women do not sing in early music style, and their songs are not accompanied by Medieval vielle or harp.

On this side of the pond, the earliest group to record Sephardic repertoire as



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early music was the Greenwood Consort, winner of the Erwin Bodky Award in 1975. Their 1978 release included six songs drawn from the print collection of Alberto Hemsí. They were soon followed by Voice of the Turtle, which grew out of the pioneering Boston-area area music group Quadrivium.

Voice of the Turtle ultimately recorded more repertory than any other group in the world. While their initial introduction to the songs came from neither Hespèrion XX nor Isaac Levy's collection, they too relied heavily on Levy's collection in the early days. To their credit, their director, the late Judith T. Wachs, supplemented published sources with very extensive archival research and contacts with Sephardim. On the elegiac front, Wachs said, “People came to us early on and said, ‘Why is everyone so sad? We're not so sad; we also like to laugh!’ So we got a clue.” Many other American early music groups now perform the repertory, including the Waverly Consort, the New York Consort of Viols, Brio, and the Peabody Consort, among others.

There are other approaches to the music, to be sure. A few performers have striven for authenticity, such as Israeli singers Hadass Pal-Yarden, Ruth Yaakov, Esti Kenan-Ofri, and Judith Cohen, who was originally with the Moroccan Sephardic group Gerineldo and later with her daughter Tamar. These artists have put considerable time and energy into studying the practices of traditional Sephardic singers and shape their performances to at least some degree with respect to vocal production, ornamentation, etc. The Pasharos Sefardis in Istanbul sing mostly lyric songs (rather than the older romance repertoire) in a traditional urban style.

Other ensembles, such as the Boston Camerata, realized that North African or Middle Eastern vocal and instrumental styles were more appropriate than early music approaches. The Camerata teamed overseas with l'Orchestre Andalou de Fes and domestically with the Sharq Ara-

bic Music Ensemble for concerts that included Judeo-Spanish repertory. Several other early music groups also injected a strong Arabic musical component in their performances, but they were frequently still fronted by singers using Western art song or early music stylings.

## Whose music is it anyway?

Naturally, good musicians always use creativity and inspiration, whether to perform a Ladino ballad, a Bach organ fugue, or anything else. But some musicians constantly invoke a mythological exoticism and the supposed antiquity of Sephardic song as an excuse to make of it what they will and justify it in the name of “creativity.”

If performers – especially highly influential ones – make claims for either antiquity or authenticity, it's fair to ask that they back them up. Too often, the prestige of the performers, and the descriptive language used when presenting their performances, are seen by audiences as reliable indicators of the music's origins and its sound being that of a “traditional” performance.

*The New York Times* review perpetuated the usual mythology of reinvented Sephardic music, a mythology well known to the principals of Hespèrion XXI. Judith Cohen first met them in Basel 30 years ago and has been discussing the issue with them and many others ever since. The songs played at Alice Tully Hall would have been just as beautiful without unfounded claims that they came from the 15th century. 🕯

Judith R. Cohen is a performer and ethnomusicologist specializing in Judeo-Spanish Sephardic songs, as well as in Medieval and traditional music; she is on the faculty at York University, Toronto ([www.yorku.ca/judithc](http://www.yorku.ca/judithc)). Her daughter, Tamar Ilana Cohen Adams (b.1986), often performs with her. Joel Bresler is a technology and publishing executive whose hobbies include discographical and historical research. His research site on the music of the Sephardim can be found at [www.sephardicmusic.org](http://www.sephardicmusic.org).