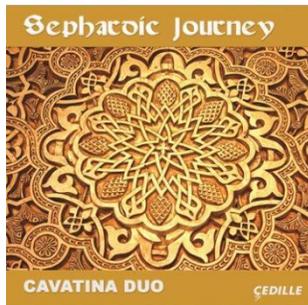


Audio-Video Club of Atlanta

Review by Phil Muse

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“Sephardic Journey” – Cavatina Duo (Cedille Records)

“Sephardic Journey” is the product of a multi-year quest by Spanish-born flutist Eugenia Moliner and her Bosnian-born husband, guitarist Denis Azabagic, to discover their roots in the *Sephardim*, the Jews who were exiled from Spain in 1492 by Queen Isabella with the power of the Inquisition as coercion. Eugenia knew her Sephardic roots; Denis discovered his quite unexpectedly in the course of a visit to his own people in 1996, after the smoke of war had cleared in Bosnia. (I will leave it for you to read in his program notes: it’s a charming story.) Fueled by their enthusiasm to shed light on a rich cultural past, reflected basically in the dark beauty and instinctive emotion of its folk music, they set about gathering the resources they needed for their project, titled “Sephardic Journey.” That included commissions to five talented present-day composers of the new world to compose vibrant new works of music utilizing authentic Sephardic melodies.

On this program we have *Trio Sefardi* by Alan Thomas, *Isabel* by Joseph V. William II, *Plegaria y Canto* (Prayer and Song) by Carlos Rafael Rivera, *Love Dreams of the Exile* by David Leisner, and *Sephardic Suite* by Clarice Assad. Several of these composers have written distinguished film scores, and that is significant as the film composer, like the folk singer, needs to “cut to the chase,” to get to the heart of the matter without much, if anything, in the way of prelude. Unlike the Moors, Muslims who were likewise exiled from Spain in 1492, the Sephardic Jews left no awe-inspiring monuments like the Alhambra. Nor was their language, a Judeo-Spanish mixture known as Ladino, particularly literary. Their legacy to the world is their wealth of deeply felt songs, and that is sufficient.

The composers, all of whom are currently active in America, set to work with gratifying results, so that the pieces of “Sephardic Journey” come together as a compelling program and not just a miscellany. In Rivera’s words, “My knowledge about Sephardic music was desultory, but Eugenia and Denis’s passion for it was contagious.” Rivera visualizes his own *Plegaria y Canto* as the lament of an isolated, yet proud, soul singing her sorrows to the sea in a coastal town. In the sadness of the song, which is not without an element of hope, he sees a metaphor for the inspiring journey of a people in exile. Thomas’ *Trio Sefardi* is in three well-delineated movements utilizing song melodies that define the experience of love. The second, based on “Yo

m'enamori d'un aire d'una mujer" (I fell in love with the scent of a woman) describes the intoxicating effect of a moonlight encounter, while the third, "*Una matica de ruda*" (a sprig of rue) trades on the double meaning of the word "rue" (which is also found in English folksong) as 1) the name of an herb and 2) regret.

Williams' *Isabel* bears witness to the plight of a young Sephardic woman, a "*converso*" who was tortured by the Inquisition for her secret faith and coerced into informing on her family. Surprisingly, considering the tragic history of those times, it is the only example of a "protest song" on the program, and even here the outrage is expressed covertly and poetically: who is this woman who has come into the garden and is pulling up the flowers? Love Dreams of the Exile by guitarist and composer David Leisner uses melodies of three songs that describe various aspects of love. "*Yo boli*" (I flew) equates the sad, frantic search for love to a bird flitting from branch to branch. "*Sus chico para amor*" depicts a youth who falls in love with a shepherdess and is told "You're too young for love!" And "*Va, buxcate otro amor*" (Go, look for another love!) is the final kiss-off, not without a surprising moment of tenderness and nostalgia. Clarice Assad, jazz vocalist, pianist, composer, and daughter of Sergio Assad, pours her talents into the three sections of Sephardic suite, which she visualizes as studies in human relationships: a young woman's love and betrayal in the first and the bickering of an older couple in the third. In between, we have the letting-go of an old love and the acceptance of a new one, an "in-between-place where feelings are still raw and unsettled."

All the works on this program are performed by Moliner and Azabagic, who are known professionally as the Cavatina Duo, with their accustomed style and feeling for rhythmic and sonic values. The sound of Moliner's alto flute is particularly notable for its warmth and dark, well-grounded color, allowing Azabagic's guitar plenty of room to create its own sonic space and range of moods. The supporting artists are all excellent: cellist David Cunliffe in Thomas' *Trio Sefardi*, violinist Desiree Ruhstrat in Rivera's *Plegaria y canto*, and the Avalon String Quartet, whose muted sounds make the perfect backdrop to the Leisner and Assad works. Kudos also to producer James Ginsburg, engineer Bill Maylone, and editor Jeanne Velonis, all top pros in their field.