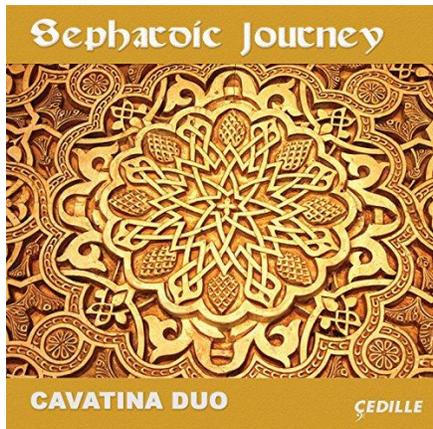


SEPHARDIC JOURNEY

- Cavatina Duo; 1Desirée Ruhstrat (vn); 2David Cunliffe (vc); 3Avalon Str Qrt



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For those who need, as I did, to brush up on what a Sephardic journey might be, here is a capsule version. Historically, Sephardi Jews are the descendants of the long-resident diasporic Jews who were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in the late 15th century by decree of the Spanish and Portuguese monarchs. They settled primarily in northern Africa and the eastern Mediterranean, taking with them many aspects of the culture of the countries they were forced to leave. This included, apropos this release, the language and music.

This particular journey began for a Bosnian guitarist, Denis Azabagic, when he took his Spanish wife, flutist Eugenia Molinar, home to Bosnia to visit family members he had not seen for years. His wife's amazement at discovering that one of his great aunts spoke an old form of Spanish—Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish—led to an exploration of the music that was also taken from Medieval Spain and Portugal. Fascination with the folk tradition they discovered led eventually to the commissioning of four of the works recorded here, works written to incorporate that rich musical culture that Azabagic and Molinar—she discovered her family came from the same roots—now embrace as their heritage. A fifth work, inspired by their advocacy, was given to them as a gift. All five are receiving premiere recordings.

So, what is it like? Each of the works are, by commission condition, based on Sephardic folk songs. All of the composers are guitarists themselves, excepting Clarice Assad, and so it is not surprising that a predominant flavor is that of the Spanish guitar. Strings, used in all but Joseph V. Williams's *Isabel*, often add a soulful Hebraic quality, frequently sharing with the flute the role of the folk singer. Alan Thomas who, in his three-movement *Trio Sefardi*, adds cello to the central duo, is typical in his choice of highly emotive source material: Songs of longing for home, and of love, from which Joaquín Rodrigo and other Spanish composers will come to mind. Thomas's use of alto flute in the seductive song of the central movement is particularly

appealing. Williams uses a love song, as well, for his single-movement work, but the Isabel is Queen Isabel of Spain, and the folk song is a thinly disguised lament for the Jewish martyr of the Inquisition, Olives y López, and protest against the queen. Williams creates a short but powerful transformation of the original, with a flute part that weeps with the song writer.

Carlos Raphael Rivera, too, cries the tears of the exile in *Plegaria y Canto (Al Bodre de la Mar): Prayer and Song (At the Edge of the Sea)*. He makes heartrending use of violin and mournful alto flute, but, as the composer points out, finds hope as well: “the perfect metaphor for the troubled yet inspiring journey of the Sephardic people.” It is a remarkably uplifting piece.

Two three-movement suites complete the program, both using a string quartet with the flute and guitar, to virtually symphonic effect. David Leisner’s *Love Dreams of the Exile*—“stream-of-consciousness meditations” on his chosen folk songs—deal with love: unrequited, rejected, or betrayed. He retains the essential Sephardic quality while introducing some more modern touches of color, phrasing, or emphasis, including some slashing flute and string figures, to portray the anger of the deceived lover. Brazilian-American composer Clarice Assad, in her *Sephardic Suite*, turns the perspective to the south and the northern African locale of the exile. Hers is also, arguable, the most programmatic of the treatments, with each movement telling the story of the song: lost innocence with Arabic dance music on the alto flute and drums provided by guitarist and cellist, loves melancholically old and ecstatically new, and an enduring love tested and triumphant. Fittingly, it ends itself, and the program as a whole, on a note of hand-clapping dance and celebration.

This music has been an absolute joy to hear: new in concept if less so in style. The Cavatina Duo and their performing partners the Avalon String Quartet and Desirée Ruhstrat and David Cunliffe of the Lincoln Trio—all Chicago based—are wonderful beyond praise. The recording and presentation are up to Çedille’s usual exemplary standards. I suppose there are some who do not like “Spanish” music. This is not for them. But this lovely, melancholy, but vital music of love, longing, and hope will charm the souls of any other listeners, especially in these passionately shaped and technically immaculate performances. Bravi!

Ronald E. Grames

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