

SONGS FROM HOME

The Sephardic songs of Israeli-born vocalist Ofri Eliaz are 500 years old, but they ring with immediacy and emotion.

Preview by John Chacona
Contributing writer

The last two decades have witnessed a great renewal of interest in Jewish music. Groups such as the Klezmer Conservatory Orchestra and the Klezmatics have brought the highly rhythmic village music of eastern European Jews to a new audience.

But there's another tradition of Jewish music that is only lately starting to receive attention. It's the sensuous music of the Sephardim, the Jews who were expelled from the Iberian peninsula in 1492. Erie audiences will have a rare opportunity to experience such music with the appearance of Ofri Eliaz at the Erie Art Museum Annex on Saturday.

Accompanied by Alex Skolnick on guitar and percussionist Camal Arsan, Eliaz is herself a latecomer to this affecting music. A 32-year-old native of Israel, now New York resident, Eliaz first encountered this music as a student at Jerusalem's School for Music from the East.

"When people ask why I am interested in this music, I say that I just fell in love with it and studied it and worked on my dialect with Ladino speakers," she said.

Ladino is the language spoken by the Sephardim, derived from medieval Spanish much like Yiddish — the language of the Ashkenazic, or eastern European Jews — was derived from Middle German.

After the expulsion, Sephardic Jews settled in the Mediterranean basin, from North Africa to Italy, Turkey, Greece, and the Ottoman Empire, what is now the Balkans. In each of these places, the music absorbed the influences of the local culture, but the sweet, sad Ladino language was a common element.

So, while you may recognize a tsifte-telli

rhythm from Turkey (the rhythm of belly dancers), the lyrics may well describe a Spanish wedding, and a very old one at that.

"These songs are very strong in musical structure [and] with the melody, but also connected to life," Eliaz told me by phone from her apartment on Manhattan's Upper West Side. "The songs are 500 years old and have to be very melodic to survive. Wedding songs, love songs, lullabies, drinking songs — songs for every event in life and these songs were part of life."

Eliaz's life in New York included training as a jazz singer at New York's New School for Social Research, where she is pursuing graduate studies in music therapy. I asked her if her jazz alter ego informs her singing of Sephardic material or vice versa.

"As for my voice, I don't think of myself as a jazz singer, but as a modern singer. Most singers sing [Sephardic songs] in a very classic, operatic voice, but traditionally, people sang it in a very live, full voice, like grandmothers sang to their grandsons."

The connection of generations informs and ennobles this music, especially the song for which Eliaz feels a special emotional connection, "Ir me quiero Madre."

"It's a song about Jerusalem that says, 'Mother, I want to go to Jerusalem, to walk on the soil, and be filled by it. I lean on him. I trust him. I trust the Lord of all people.'

"I'm from Jerusalem, and since I'm 10, I've lived in Jerusalem and I love that city. It's the most beautiful city in the world."

Vocalist Ofri Eliaz — with guitarist Alex Skolnick, percussionist Camal Arsan — will appear Saturday at 8 p.m. at the Erie Art Museum Annex, 423 State St. Tickets are \$12, \$10 for museum and JazzErie members, \$6 for students and seniors and are available at the Erie Art Museum, 411 State St., or by calling 459-5477.



Ofri Eliaz: 'I just fell in love with this music' • Contributed photo