

# Ladino Explosion

**For Ofri Eliaz, there's more to Jewish music than Klezmer.**

By Mary Armstrong

**L**et's play word association. Jewish music? Klezmer, right? The folk dancer or world traveler might think Israeli, the ultra hip might think of Ben Laden and his InterGalactic Jewish Music Festivals. It's rare to hear someone call out Ladino.

Yet, the National Museum of American Jewish History has a successful series of Ladino concerts, going back a number of years. This is as it should be, according to program director Steve Frank. The Museum's mission is to represent all of American Jewish experience. Klezmer is the music of the Jews who spoke a form of German, those who arrived here from Eastern Europe. Ladino is the music and language of the people who were ejected from Spain in 1492. Frank notes that the earliest Jewish settlers on this continent were Ladinos. The concert series' co-sponsors, Mikveh Israel, is a Ladino congregation which was founded in 1740.

This year's concert features Ofri Eliaz and the Sahar Ensemble (Say it: oh-FREE eh-lee-AHZ, SAH-har). Ofri is a Sabra, that is an Israeli born there, born of Sabra parents. She heard nothing but Hebrew in Jerusalem. However, something in Ladino music enchanted the singer in her. She began studying Ladino

in earnest at the School for Eastern Music in Jerusalem. By the time she came to New York to earn a degree in vocal performance from the New School, she was already established as a Ladino performer.

"When I came [to New York] I started a duo with a Ladino speaker, Shabi Katzir. He gave me another close look at the language and music, since he grew up with Ladino, spoke it at home with his parents."

Now Ofri is the leader of her own Sahar ensemble. Sahar is the poetic way of referring to the moon in Hebrew. She chose that because the moon symbolizes romance and mystery, the things she loves about the Ladino songs. Yet, she notes, there is an obvious side to the songs, too. Ofri tells this story of singing in a club in New York. "I looked up to find all these people dressed in white standing in the back!" It was the kitchen staff, themselves recent arrivals to New York, but from Latin America. They found the archaic Spanish perfectly easy to grasp. The secular songs speak of passion and frustration, birth and death and weddings, says Ofri, the kind of stories we all know well.

"These songs had to be really strong to survive 500 years," muses Ofri. She takes pride in the fact that you can hear traces of the Spanish Jews' wanderings in various arrangements, echoes of all shores of the Mediterranean, from Turkey to North Africa. The Sahar ensemble includes various types of percussion typical to the region: oud, guitars (both Renaissance-style and modern), violin and electric bass. Ofri urges listeners to take a chance. "This is world music, and Renaissance music. It's not about religion, it's about beauty."

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**Ofri Eliaz and the Sahar Ensemble, Sun., June 3, 3 p.m., \$10, \$8 for Museum members, seniors and students, at the National Museum of American Jewish History, 55 N. Fifth St., 215-923-3811, [www.nmajh.org](http://www.nmajh.org), reservations also can be made by e-mail to [nmajh@nmajh.org](mailto:nmajh@nmajh.org).**