

# MusicNightlife

## Celebrating sacred and secular songs

A golden evening  
of Sephardic music

by **Chris Slattery**

Staff Writer

If music has a climate, it will be pleasantly hot and sunny in Rockville on Sunday evening. That's when Ofri Eliaz and the Sahar Ensemble present "The Golden Age," a concert performance of traditional Sephardic songs in their original Ladino.

Ladino — it's the medieval Spanish dialect of the Sephardic Jews, a language kept alive and passed down through the generations. Amazingly enough, half a millennium after it began, the sacred and secular music of this nomadic people continues to gather admirers. And if hearing it brings to mind the sun-drenched lands of Greece, Turkey, Italy and Northern Africa, that's no coincidence.

"The music is so diverse," says Ofri Eliaz. "Because as the Jews migrated they blended with different cultures. You can hear the influences: Spanish, Flamenco, Turkish, Greek and Balkan. Each song is unique. The connection is the Middle Eastern flavor, that and a very melodic line."

It's that strength of melody that most appeals to Eliaz.

"I fell in love with the music," admits the 30-year-old musician and teacher, speaking from her home in New York City.

The Israeli-born vocalist doesn't claim Spanish descent — her parents were born in Israel, too — just an abiding passion for the bright and beautiful music that has lasted throughout the centuries.

"It's 500 years old," she says of the Ladino music she loves. "The melody has to be really strong to survive."

Fittingly enough, it's a story of strength and survival that brought Eliaz and the Sephardic tradition together. She had been singing since age 7, an artistic youngster with a penchant for the arts who loved to dance, paint and plunk out tunes on the piano, guitar and recorder. As a teen, she attended the High School for the Arts in Jerusalem, a sort of Middle Eastern version of "Fame." There, she majored in theater, looking forward to a career on the stage.

At 18, though, Eliaz joined the army, to complete her compulsory service to Israel. There, she was introduced to Ladino music, which she soon began to perform for her fellow soldiers. After her stint in the service, it was back to school — this time as a music student in college, studying the Sephardic tra-



Ofri Eliaz shines with a selection of Sephardic music. The Israeli-born musician "fell in love" with the Ladino tradition, and she shares her love this Sunday at a concert in Rockville.

dition and performing every chance she got.

"I decided to found a group to play Ladino with me," says Eliaz, who is pursuing a bachelor of fine arts degree in jazz vocal technique at New York City's New School.

That group, the Sahar Ensemble, combines Eliaz' unique vocal stylings with the talents of John La Barbera on oud, guitar, mandolin and bouzaki; violinist Joe Deninson; bassist Emmanuel Mann and percussionist Tomer Tzur.

When they perform on Sunday at Tikvat Israel in Rockville, Eliaz says the Sahar Ensemble is hoping to kindle a feeling of déjà vu in their audience.

"Some of these songs sound familiar to listeners," Eliaz points out, "even to those who aren't familiar with Ladino music."

Whether it's a new musical experience or a comforting evocation of memory, Sunday's concert will allow the warmth and beauty of the Sephardic tradition to take the spotlight once again. Whatever the weather, the music will shine, exuding a warm golden glow of tradition that the audience will want to carry off into the night.

Ofri Eliaz and the Sahar Ensemble will perform traditional prayers and songs of the Sephardic Jews in Hebrew and Ladino with an Israeli flavor on Sunday at 7:30 p.m. at Tikvat Israel, 2200 Baltimore Road, Rockville. For unreserved seating, tickets are \$18, \$15 for Tikvat Israel members (in advance) and \$15 for students and seniors. For reserved seating, tickets range from \$28 up. Call 301-762-7338.