Singing the Memory of Sepharad: Traditional Sephardic Song and its Interpretation

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Abstract
The transmission and interpretation of Sephardic songs is inextricably linked to Sephardic culture, and to this day represents a powerful marker of identity. It is the aim of this article to first contextualise traditional Sephardic song by outlining a brief introduction into the cultural background of the Sephardic Diaspora. Subsequently, I will introduce the various secular forms and genres of Sephardic traditional song, focusing on the modes of their interpretation by both contemporary Sephardic and non-Sephardic musicians. In doing so, I will propose a typology of performance approaches, with regards to the role that the re-imagining of Sepharad as a mythical land of the past plays in this process.

Keywords: Sephardic music, Judeo-Spanish song, interpretation

Introduction
The Sephardic Jews, or Sephardim¹, represent the second largest ethnic division within Judaism, the first one being the Ashkenazim, or German and Eastern-European Jews. In the narrowest sense of the term, Sephardim are the descendants of the Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the 15th century (Spain, 1492; Portugal, 1496), and those who assimilated culturally to them in the main areas of Sephardic settlement post-1492. The areas of the Sephardic diaspora are indicated in Figure 1:

Figure 1 – The Sephardic Diaspora (Sephiha and Weinstock 1997)
For the present discussion of traditional Sephardic music, only the areas of the Eastern Mediterranean (incl. the present-day state of Israel), the Balkan Peninsula and North Africa (the former Ottoman Empire) are relevant, as it is here that a specific Sephardic language and culture develop.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of North-African and Ottoman Sephardic culture is the use of a unique language variety known as Judeo-Spanish², which in broad terms descends from Medieval Castilian and from the 16th century onwards absorbs a variety of heterogeneous linguistic elements drawn from numerous contact languages. It will be through the medium of this language that Sephardim will construct their identity-building narratives and re-create the memory of their collective past in Sepharad.³

The modern decline of the use of Judeo-Spanish, which was a tendency already initiated at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries with the establishment of Western philanthropic organisations in the Ottoman Empire, and the foundation of French and Italian medium schools, was dramatically accelerated with the annihilation of vast numbers⁴ of its European speakers during the Holocaust; as the Judeo-Spanish language finds itself in a state of severe endangerment (Harris 1994), other aspects of Sephardic culture, what Matza (1990: 354, in Harris 1994: 277) defines as the “most tangible aspects of culture”, or, in Eliezer Papo´s words, the “artifacts of Judeo-Spanish culture” (Autoridad Nacionala del Ladino i su Kultura 2012: 41.15-41.20), such as cultural attitudes and beliefs, culinary traditions etc., have necessarily taken over the role of determining markers of Sephardic identity. Of these aspects, the musical tradition, and especially the traditional song repertoire, figures as one of greatest prominence (Harris 1994: 274).

Furthermore, from the second half of the 20th century traditional Sephardic music will become a virtual landscape which will allow Sephardim to revive the memory of their collective past irrespective of their linguistic competence, but it will also represent a space open for their re-encounter with Spain.

**Sepharad and the Sephardim**

The physical displacement of the Sephardim from their Iberian homeland which they called Sepharad⁵ began in 1492 and it was, according to historian Yosef Kaplan (in Nieto 2003: 8.49-9.11), one of the most traumatic experiences in the history of the Jewish Diaspora. The expulsion from Spain and Portugal represented the end of a Jewish presence which lasted c. 1400 years, and during which Iberian Jews became not only assimilated and identified with the land they inhabited, but also grew deeply emotionally attached to it.⁶

Due to their contacts on the European continent and the Mediterranean, Sephardim, or at least their elites, maintained a certain degree of awareness of the cultural and political developments taking place in Spain (Romeu Ferré 2011: 97). Spain, on the other hand, was almost completely oblivious of the fate of its exiled Jews, until the last decades of the 19th century, when Spanish senator Ángel Pulido “discovered” the Sephardic communities in Turkey and the Balkans, and wrote about them in his book Españoles sin Patria y la Raza Sefardi (“Spaniards without a homeland and the Sephardic race”), which appeared in 1905. Pulido became thus instrumental in creating the myth of a Sephardic nation attached for centuries to the memory of its homeland and speaking an archaic Spanish dialect (which was described as a “living museum of the Spanish language”) maintained out of nostalgia for a lost Jewish Golden Age in Sepharad. Interestingly and perhaps understandably, this myth, which became immensely popular henceforth, survives in different forms to this day (Romeu Ferré 2011: 98).

In studies which explore aspects of identity among contemporary Sephardim (Lewkowicz 2006; Romeu Ferré 2011), we appreciate a vast array of diverging sentiments: on the one hand, some Sephardim declare resolute rejection of Spain as the land of the Inquisition and persecution, and rather consider the Sephardic Diaspora, or, more recently, the land of...
Israel as new homeland for the Jewish people (Cohen 2012, 2014); other testimonies on the other hand express an emotional attachment to Sepharad in its Golden Age, which is envisaged as a timeless, imaginary land belonging to a mythical past where Jews were allowed to become poets, scholars, influential aristocrats and statesmen (Matilda Koen-Sarano, in Nieto 2003: 8.00-8.30). Overall Sephardim seem to perceive the Expulsion of 1492 as the beginning of their collective history and the individual accounts of the arrival of their ancestors into their new centers of residence as the pieces that compose the foundational narratives of their respective communities (Lewkowicz 2006: 85-86). Sepharad thus becomes a mythical, timeless land devoid of physical contours, which survives in collective memory as part of the imaginary, supra-national geography which the Jewish people have inhabited for two millennia due to the lacking of a land they could call their own (Weinreich 1980). This notwithstanding, the memory, or reflection of Sepharad, and the consciousness of belonging to its lineages, permeates Sephardic culture in the Diaspora to the present day; as I will now discuss, it is through the language and the imagery and metaphors embedded in the musical tradition where it currently takes most concrete shape.

The Sephardic song repertoire and its interpretation

Music has always been an indispensable component of Sephardic family and community life. In the course of my own field research which was primarily focused on the Judeo-Spanish language in Skopje and Salonika, and where among my interviewees was, among others, traditional singer David Saltiel whom I will refer to further, I couldn’t but notice the importance that Sephardim place on the knowledge of the songs of their traditional repertoire and the joy they take from their performance.

Sephardic writers who have attempted to capture and recreate the everyday life and customs of the vibrant Oriental Sephardic communities before World War II have, as a rule, taken great care to weave into their literary narratives the lyrics to the most popular folk songs and proverbs associated with the Jewish liturgical calendar and life cycle celebrations. To this day, when the majority of Sephardic Jews are no longer speakers of the Judeo-Spanish language, the performance of songs in Judeo-Spanish, in all their thematic and formal diversity, still continues to be an integral part of community life and an essential component of family occasions and collective festivals.

Brief typology of Sephardic song

Firstly, it is necessary to emphasise that, although Sephardic music has been and is frequently associated with Medieval and Early Modern Spanish musical traditions, there is, according to Judith R. Cohen (2009: 62) no extant musical air or its notation which could be positively traced to the period before the Expulsion of 1492. Rather, musicologists are in agreement that the Sephardic musical tradition as it is known today developed entirely in the Sephardic Diaspora, where it fed from the musical traditions of the lands the Sephardim inhabited after their arrival from Iberia.

The situation is somewhat different with regards to the textual material, where at least in certain genres themes and even entire textual passages have been identified as evidently derived from the Hispanic ballad and popular song traditions.

For the following classification, I will take as a point of departure the typology proposed by musicologist Susana Weich-Shanak (1996), one of the chief investigators in this area, and whose vast corpus of field recordings is currently held in the National Sound Archives of the National Library of Israel, in Jerusalem. More recently, sections of the collection have also been made available to international listeners via YouTube, under “Romancero / cancionero sefardí – Coleccion Susana Weich-Shanak”.

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Romansas (Romancero)\(^8\)

The first large section of the Sephardic song repertoire is the Romancero, or corpus of ballads or romansas. Romansas are narrative poems with a defined textual and musical structure which follows a unidirectional order of verses. They resemble, in their textual structure, the Medieval Spanish epic poems from which they are believed to derive (Armistead: web source): they are predominantly composed in sixteen-syllable verses with a caesura dividing the lines into two isometric hemistichs of eight syllables. The rhyme of romansas is assonant, always falling on the even octosyllabic sections, which is a trait also reminiscent of Medieval Hispanic epics. The assonant rhyme is generally constant throughout the romansa, which can be sometimes divided into shorter stanzas.

The themes of romansas are generally narrative. In the Sephardic repertoire, predilection is given to fictionalised and poetic narratives from the lives of either historical or fictional (generally high-born) characters, such as kings and queens, captive princesses and travelling knights, beautiful ladies and their servants and slaves. Although there is a reduced number of romansas which were composed in the Sephardic Diaspora (Armistead 1996: 11), the sources of a great portion of the Romancero repertoire have been documented in Early Modern Spanish songbooks such as the Cancionero Musical de Palacio (1505/1520), or in earlier European ballad/epic traditions.

Romansas are undoubtedly the most conservative genre of the Sephardic secular song repertoire. Although in broad terms the airs of known romansas are believed to have originated in the Diaspora\(^9\), Weich-Shanak has established musical links with late Medieval and Early Modern musical arrangements for Spanish ballads by well-known Spanish composers and vihuelistas such as Diego Pisador (1509?-after 1557), Alonso Mudarra (1510?-1580) or Juan del Encina (1468-1529?) (Etzion and Weich-Shanak 1988: 14-21). Overall however, the music of Sephardic romansas is strongly influenced by the musical traditions of the diasporic environment.

As Bohlman (2008: xxv) points out, “gender marks virtually every genre and practice of Jewish music”. This particularly applies to the Romancero repertoire, which is essentially performed and transmitted by women. In spite of its Hispanic epic origins, its main function was to serve as lullabies and simultaneously as educational exemplary songs for the older children of the household. To this effect, romansas were sung generally by a solo voice (occasionally with interventions of additional female voices in unison) without accompaniment.

Romansa “Hermanas reina y cautiva”, performed by Rina Benabu, Tangier (Collected by Susana Weich-Shanak)
Although within Sephardic music this is the most conservative genre and the one with most direct links with the Medieval and Early Modern Spanish tradition, both textually and musically, it is interesting that in terms of modern interpretation it is by far the least represented. Numerous factors may have contributed to the decline in the performance of romansas: the fact that it was almost exclusively a female repertoire performed in the privacy of the Sephardic home, and within closed circles of women certainly prevented it from being performed on stage. Consequently, it is a repertoire little known by the wider non-Jewish public, with the exception of the academic community, which has from the end of the 19th century onwards taken great interest chiefly in its textual aspect and its links with the Hispanic ballad tradition. As Bernardete (in Armistead and Silverman 1981: viii) states, the popularisation of the phonograph caused the decline of domestic performance and oral transmission of romansas. With the availability of recorded romansas there was no longer need to learn them from memory and thus the repertoires of traditional singers slowly fell into oblivion.

From an interpretive point of view, it is perhaps the length and intricacy of the texts as well as the complexity of the airs, which frequently involve the use of melismas and heavy ornamentation, that make romansas more challenging for both the modern interpreter and audience, and consequently less commercially attractive.

Kantigas (Cancionero)

The second type of Sephardic song is termed the Cancionero and is composed of kantigas (“songs”) as they are known in the Balkan-Ottoman areas, and kantes in North Africa. These are mostly lyrical songs with a strophic a-b-a-b structure (with only the 2nd and 4th lines rhyming) and a refrain following each stanza, frequently sung to a different melody than the stanzas. Kantigas are typical for their textual variation and versatility and they are often strongly influenced by the musical traditions of the environment. Some Sephardic kantigas are even known to be translations or parodies of Turkish songs (Weich-Shanak: web source). Kantigas present no textual continuity, they are rather brief lyrical compositions, and although textual similarities have been identified in kantigas and certain Medieval and later Spanish compositions (use of similar formulae and metaphors), the Cancionero repertoire is chronologically newer than the Romancero and is believed to emerge exclusively after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain.

Like the Romancero, the Cancionero is also a repertoire sung primarily by women, but conveying a different social function. While romansas are songs mostly destined to the private, domestic sphere, kantigas are songs of celebration, and most of them are thematically linked to wedding celebrations and courtship rituals. As such they were performed by collectives of women, often sung in unison to a musical accompaniment which consisted mainly of the frame drum or pandero, or the tambourine and occasionally of other predominantly string instruments, which were usually played by men.10

Kantiga “Ansina dize la muestra novia”, performed by Viktoria Israel (Archive of the Autoridad Nasionala del Ladino, Israel):
The third great section of the Sephardic song repertoire are the so-called koplas. These are, again strophic compositions, but in contrast with kantigas they are narrative episodes with historical, political or paraliturgical themes, as well the so-called “recreational songs”. They are generally musically indebted to the traditions of the areas Jews inhabited. Koplas, a very vital genre within Sephardic music, experienced exceptional popularity in the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 19th century, they were composed by known authors and subsequently printed in songbooks which contributed to their popularity, especially in the Sephardic centres of Salonika and Istanbul. The vitality of the genre is documented by the fact that there have been koplas composed up to modern times.

Koplas are predominantly a men’s genre, as they are at least partly associated with writing and printing (unlike the romansas and kantigas, which are almost exclusively orally transmitted by women), and they were performed to instrumental accompaniment as part of religious festivals (koplas de Purim) and both family celebrations and social occasions. There is also a small body of koplas celebrating the life cycle, such as the koplas de parida (“songs of the mother-to-be”) sung on the occasion of childbirth, but mostly this is a social-recreational, and religious (para-liturgical) genre.

The instruments traditionally employed in the accompaniment of koplas were usually local, mainly belonging to the string family, such as the oud and the violin (rabab in Morocco).

Notwithstanding the strict division of roles within traditional Sephardic society and the assigning of the different song genres to either men or women, currently the most popular forms of Sephardic song are, without a doubt, kantigas and koplas. Their strophic structures and attractive melodies make them ideal material for the modern interpreter and audience.

Diverse approaches to interpretation of Sephardic secular song

In the following section, I will refer to contemporary practices in the performance of Sephardic secular song and I will propose a differentiation of genres within this current, which has gained notable popularity in the last several decades, among Jewish and non-Jewish audiences alike. Although the description of the various styles of interpretation is at times challenging and one inevitably risks falling into generalisations, there are, however, certain noticeable traits defining distinct approaches to traditional Sephardic material which, in my opinion, legitimise this classification.

With the surge of scholarly interest in Sephardic music in the late-nineteenth century and its wider popularisation and revival in the twentieth century, begins the process of its
innovation: e.g. the introducing of instrumental accompaniment within genres which were traditionally performed vocally. This is a process that in the broader context of Jewish music initiates in the mid-nineteenth century (Bohlman 2008: 81). With the later development of the recording industry in the second half of the twentieth century, diverse approaches to the interpretation of Sephardic song have emerged. Sephardic music is, from the second half of the twentieth century, performed by a large number of soloists and ensembles, in a dazzling variety of musical styles, which are currently generally classified under the all-encompassing term of World Music. In my opinion, the preference of style on the part of the interpreter(s) is indicative, among other things, not only of individual musical taste and aesthetic choices, but also of personal attitudes and beliefs with regards to the concept of Sepharad and of the performer’s individual relationship to it: I believe that in the case of native Sephardic interpreters, musical style is to a certain degree reflective not only of musical innovation and changing musical tastes, but also, at least to a certain degree, of their varying attitudes with regards to their Hispanic heritage. In the case of non-Sephardic interpreters, their approaches to the Sephardic song repertoire reflect on the one hand the degree of awareness of and/or interest in traditional Sephardic musical practices, but also their individual interpretation of Sepharad as a powerful and attractive cultural symbol.

Two key moments can be identified when the Sephardic song repertoire gains popularity: on the one hand, the folk music movement in the 1960s with its interest in the traditions of ethnic minorities (particularly of those oppressed), and of exiled groups without land (e.g. Gypsies and Jews) awakens general public awareness of the often exotic musical traditions of the Other. During this period, Sephardic song takes its leap from an essentially Jewish context onto the wider, non-Jewish stage. The second wave of interest arises in the early 1990s and particularly around the year 1992, which marks the 500th anniversary of the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain. During this period there is an acute need, particularly on the Spanish side, to find ways to at least partially redress wrongs of the past, but also to find a much needed space for inter-cultural dialogue.

The traditionalist and informed approach

From the 1960s, and coinciding with the movement of ethnic revival, numerous interpreters, predominantly emerging from Jewish circles (e.g. Isaac Levi, or Ashkenazi singer Judy Frankel), but also from the Spain of the last years of the Franco dictatorship (such as Joaquín Díaz), either focused on the traditional Sephardic song repertoire, or included Sephardic traditional songs into their individual song repertoires. These singers and groups largely based their musical practices on archive research of traditional material and on field research of the oral song tradition still existing within after-war Sephardic communities, predominantly in the sphere of the Second Sephardic Diaspora (e.g. Gloria Levy).
A good example of traditionalist, informed performance is the Canadian group *Gerineldo* (founded in 1981) which includes among its members renowned ethnomusicologist Judith R. Cohen (who also performs as a soloist), Judeo-Spanish specialist Oro Anahory-Librowitz,
and bases its interpretation on profound knowledge of traditional Sephardic musical practices.

**Gerineldo, “Mi Pi El”**

Other examples include the Turkish ensemble *Los Pasharos Sefaradis* and duo Janet and Jak Esim:

**Los Pasharos Sefaradis, “Pasharo d’ermozura”**

**Janet and Jak Esim, “Por la tu puerta yo pasi / Gülpembe”**
In the performances of these artists, Sepharad emerges as a timeless and more or less remote place which linguistically, and as we have seen to a certain degree poetically, underlines their music; however, for these mostly Jewish vocalists and instrumentalists, Sephardic song is essentially the musical expression of their diasporic identity; an identity which, in spite of being defined by its origins in Sepharad, takes shape and fully develops away from its shores.

Currently, this approach is represented by a number of soloists and contemporary groups emerging from the existing Sephardic communities, predominantly in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean. See, for instance, the recordings of Salonikan traditional singer David Saltiel, the Sarajevo-born singer and composer Flory Jagoda, some of whose original compositions have become part of the Sephardic canon. Such is the case of the well-known Hannukah song “Ocho kandelikas” (Eight candles). Also worthy if mention are the Belgrade-based ensemble Shira U’Tfila, or the Istanbul-based group Erensya Sefardi.
The Medievalist approach

The need to come to terms with events of the past as well as the popularization of the concept of Convivencia of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Medieval Iberia as an utopian model for contemporary inter-cultural coexistence, motivated in the 1990s numerous predominantly Spanish interpreters to embrace and re-invent the Sephardic song repertoire in order to find a common ground where Jews and Christian Spaniards could co-exist on terms of tolerance. In my opinion, it is this underlying motivation that gives way to a Medievalist current in the interpretation of Sephardic music. This current, in spite of being essentially anachronistic and at times overly simplistic, enjoys nevertheless great popularity among wider audiences. Needless to say, mostly non-Sephardic interpreters from the Early Music genre participate in this interpretive philosophy.

As Ruth E. Gruber (2001) emphasises in her insightful work about the reconstruction of Jewish identity in post-War Europe, the inclusion of Jewish music into the repertoires of non-Jewish musicians is generally indicative of a certain intention, it is interpreted as a statement of sorts. In its rendering by non-Sephardi musicians (both Spanish and non-Spanish), Sephardic music becomes a space across boundaries and cultural divisions where a timeless image of Sepharad is re-created. Medieval Spain acquires the dimensions of the mythical land of Convivencia that entices the imagination of current generations, the promised land of tolerance and cultural dialogue.
Among early music performers who have included Sephardic material into their performances are worthy of mention the ensembles Hespèrion XX and XXI (dir. Jordi Savall), Ensemble Accentus, Sarband Ensemble, Spanish singer Rosa Zaragoza, the German-based Al Andaluz Project (German Early Music ensemble Estampie with participating musicians from Valencian group L’Ham de Foc), or the Belgian group La rosa enflorese.

Hespèrion XXI, “Cuando el rey Nimrod”

Ensemble Accentus, “Morenica”

Sarband Ensemble, “Porke yorash”
Andalusi and Oriental interpretation

An important current within contemporary Sephardic song is what could be referred to as the “Andalusi” style of interpretation. Interpreters of this style draw from the musical...
traditions of al-Andalus, the Medieval Muslim state of Iberia, whose cultural legacy survives embedded within the musical traditions of Andalusia and the North of Africa. This Andalusi tradition becomes embraced by the Sephardim in a process of cultural syncretism characteristic of the Mediterranean area, as Bohlman (2008: 50) emphasises: “Sephardic music at once juxtaposed Iberian and Arabic (Moorish) traditions from al-Andalus, and these together formed a classical stage preceded by the music of the Mediterranean.”

Frequently the Andalusi influence is combined with other Oriental influences (Arabic, Turkish) and Flamenco, sometimes in a fusion with contemporary musical elements, in order to convey a style which, while Oriental in its essence, provides ground for dialogue with the Hispanic legacy of Sephard. In contrast with the Medievalist approach which approaches the Sephardic material from a predominantly Spanish or “Christian” perspective, this is an essentially Jewish current.

Representative of this style are, for instance, Moroccan singers Françoise Atlan and Vanessa Paloma, the Spanish Andalusian/Moroccan group Radio Tarifa, or the Israeli-born singers Yasmin Levy or Mor Karbasi, in whose rendering of Sephardic songs we can identify the influence of Flamenco, and who also participate in the following style of interpretation.

Françoise Atlan, “Cantiga Morena”

Vanessa Paloma, “Al pasar por Casablanca”
A fourth important style of interpretation of Sephardic song is inspired by the Mediterranean and its symbolic value as both cultural crossroad, and as the space around which the First Sephardic Diaspora consolidates. It is a space of timelessness and cultural
intersection (Bohlman 2008: 40-41). Interestingly, in Jewish culture the Mediterranean also represents both the direction of dispersion (literally diaspora) from the land of Israel, as well as the way of the potential return to the Holy Land (Bohlman 2008: 48-49), becoming instrumental in both the exile, and the redemption of the Jewish people.

The all-encompassing and distinctive Mediterranean style has been popular among singers and songwriters since the 1960s. Interpreters present a synthesis of musical practices of diverse cultures across the Mediterranean basin, in an attempt to stress their common Mediterranean heritage. A representative of this style is, for instance, the Greek singer Savina Yannatou, who incorporates very diverse and multi-lingual song material into her repertoire in order to convey a multi-faceted image of Mediterranean culture and tradition.

Savina Yannatou, “Morena”

Conclusion

Although originally a genre almost exclusive to the Sephardic Jewish community and where vocal performance held pre-eminence over instrumental accompaniment, traditional Sephardic song is nowadays performed in a surprising variety of different styles, according to musical taste, ability and degree of knowledge of traditional musical practices. The musician’s understanding of the concept of Sepharad and their relationship to its cultural heritage also intervene in the performative process. While traditional song continues to represent an essential component of the oral tradition and cultural heritage of Sephardic communities, as well as being a powerful identity marker, for many contemporary interpreters Sephardic song in its different genres and variants allows Sepharad to be re-created not as a real geographical territory but rather as an imaginary landscape, rooted in a mythical timeless past.

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In the narrower sense of the term, Sephardim (in Hebrew, Ṣfaradim Tehorim, or “pure Sephardim”) indicates the descendancy from the exiles of Spain and Portugal. Currently, in the broader sense and especially in Israel, the term Sephardim denotes also the Oriental Jews who adhere to the Sephardic religious rite. I refer to Sephardi in the former interpretation.

The vernacular of the Sephardic communities of the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire is known under a variety of terms: Judeo-Spanish is a neutral term introduced and employed mostly by Romance scholars. It is also the term that I will use throughout the present article; the term Judezmo (from the Spanish judaísmo, literally meaning “Jewishness” or “Judaism”), is used by speakers and some scholars alike. The term Espanyol (“Spanish”) was traditionally used in the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire, alongside Djidyó or Djudyó (Sp. judío, “Jewish”). In Israel, Spaniolit (Spaniol + Hebrew suffix -it, used to denote languages) is also occasionally used. In the North of Africa, Judeo-Spanish is referred to by the term haketiya. Currently the term Ladino is becoming the most frequently employed to denote the Judeo-Spanish vernacular, which, while being common practice, is however not without certain controversy among the academic community with regards to its appropriateness in this context: Haïm Vidal Sephiha (1986, 1991, 1997), pioneering figure in Judeo-Spanish studies and first chair of Judeo-Spanish at the Sorbonne, proposes the use of this term uniquely to denote a language register used in word-to-word translations of Hebrew texts into Romance vernacular.

Currently there are 3.5 million Sephardim worldwide (Kern 2015) within a global Jewish population of 14,310,500 (Berman Jewish Databank: web source), out of which approximately 112,000 (Ethnologue 2016: web source) are competent Judeo-Spanish speakers.

Although the number of Sephardim who perished in Nazi concentration camps during World War Two amounted to three percent of the total deported Jewish population, it represented the demise of Judeo-Spanish culture in the Mediterranean (Rodrique 2005: 15-16). The numbers of Sephardim deported to concentration camps varied significantly from country to country. For detailed accounts of numbers of Sephardi Jews deported to concentration camps during World War Two, see Weinstock (Yad Vashem: web source) and Rodrigue (2005). Approximately eighty-six per cent of Greek Jews perished in the Holocaust, eighty per cent in the countries of former Yugoslavia, while in Bulgaria the number of those deported amounted to twenty per cent (Barnea 1986, cited by Jewish Telegraphic Agency: web source). In Salonika, the largest European Sephardic centre, the number of deported Sephardim reached ninety-six per cent.

The term Sepharad appears in the Book of Prophets, Prophet Ovadiah, book I, verse 20: “The exiles of the Israelites who are in Halah shall possess Phoenicia as far as Zarephath; and the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad shall possess the towns of the Negeb.” (Holy Bible 2007) Although its relation to any concrete geographical location remains unclear, from the Medieval period onwards, it becomes synonymous with the Iberian Peninsula.

The expulsion from Sepharad, known in the Sephardic tradition as Gerush Sefarad, was compared in 17th century Sephardic historiography to the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD which initiated the dispersion of the Jewish people. Coincidentally, according to the Alhambra Decree signed by the Catholic Monarchs Isabel of Castile and Fernando of Aragón on 31 March 1492, all Jews within the Spanish territories were required to convert to Christianity or to leave the country, within the period of one year.
1492, the period of allowance given to Jews to abandon Spanish soil was to expire on the Jewish High Holiday of Tisha Be’Av which commemorates this very event. The expulsion from Spain, therefore, is interpreted by Jewish scholars from the end of the 15th century onwards, as having a comparable transcendence to the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem (Papo 1999: 73).

7 Among such works are, for instance, Enrique Saporta y Beja’s novel En torno de la Torre blanca (“Around the White Tower”) (1982) and the abovementioned La Megila de Saray (“The Megillah of Sarajevo”) (1999), by Eliezer Papo.

8 I use the Aki Yerushalayim transliteration system in the spelling of the names of the popular song genres romansas, kantigas and koplas; I opt for Castilian spellings of the words Romancero and Cancionero (corpus of romansas and kantigas, respectively), as they are terms generally referred to in academic publications by ethnomusicology scholars.

9 The practice of collection and annotation of the airs of Sephardic romansas is only relatively recent, beginning systematically only in the first decade of the twentieth century. Therefore, virtually nothing is known of their interpretation prior to this date (Etzion and Weich-Shanak 1988: 5).

10 Although women are also known to have mastered these instruments, they apparently rarely did so outside of the private sphere, leaving public performance to men (Cohen 2009: 62).


12 See, for instance, the Salonikan kopa “La kantiga del fuego” (“The song of the Fire”), which was composed in commemoration of the Great Fire of Salonika in 1917, or the numerous songs composed on the aftermath of the Shoah, which generally follow the kopa form.

13 The following list is limited to the artists and recordings mentioned in the present article. For complete overviews of Sehardic song discography, see Cohen (2003, 2010).