

## Notes on the Program

### *Anenu: Answer Us*

On the eve of the New Year, *East of the River* evokes the cycles of life—both sacred and secular. From synagogues to Shabbat dinners, from wedding parties to kitchen hearths, with songs about the joys, sorrows, and yearnings of everyday life, this program celebrates the rich traditions of the Sephardic diaspora.

### *The History*

Sephardic music can refer simply to practices adopted by Jewish communities scattered worldwide after expulsion from Spain and Portugal in the 1490s. But its roots stretch back much further. For centuries, Jews thrived in Al-Andalus, that large part of the Iberian Peninsula then ruled by Muslims. There they developed a unique Hebrew liturgy and a flourishing body of secular song rooted in Old Spanish. Historically the liturgical songs or *piyyutim* were mainly sung by men in synagogues, whereas the secular songs, commonly sung in Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) were passed down at home, by women. Forced into exile, Sephardi brought their sacred texts and beloved folk poetry with them. More easily forgotten was the music, based wholly in oral tradition.

Not all the old tunes were lost. But new melodies and rhythms could be discovered in the far-flung countries—many of which were part of the Ottoman Empire—that welcomed the exiles. Sephardim adapted to each new locale, assimilating instruments like the *oud* (an unfretted, plucked lute), the *kanun* (plucked or hammered zither), and various drums. Balkan rhythms, also Turkish and Arabic *makamat*—modal systems that fostered richly nuanced melody—became part of Sephardic music culture too. Because Sephardim encountered local music and musicians on a regular basis—in the marketplace, cafés, private parties and more, we include works from the Ottoman Turkish classical repertoire in tonight's program. Two things should be noted about all this music: (1) it was largely developed within the oral tradition, which encouraged both preservation and creative reinvention; and (2) multiple sorts of improvisation—ranging from simple decoration to collective re-composition—are essential. Every musician involved is actively collaborating *in the moment*. In this season of contemplation and renewal, may this music offer a moment of serenity and hope.

### *The Music, Song by Song*

#### *Adon Ha'selichot*

Beginning in the 11th century, Jewish liturgical poets developed a Hebrew genre built on strophic and metrical patterns of Arabic poetry. Our program includes several such *piyyutim*, each treated in a creative contemporary manner. This work ("Master of Forgiveness") is among the oldest and most well-known. Over the years it became closely associated with the custom of reciting *Selichot* (penitential prayers). From the Hebrew month of Elul until Yom Kippur, Sephardic communities sing this poem daily, usually in a shared chant between cantor and congregation that grows in intensity from stanza to stanza. Structured on the Hebrew alphabet, it calls out God by 22 names, one for each letter, praising and describing God and His deeds. Between each stanza, the refrain repeats a simple plea: "We have sinned before You; have mercy on us."

#### *Yigdal*

The words of *Yigdal* list the thirteen Principles of Faith given by Maimonides in his commentary to the Mishnah. Sung at the end of the prayer service, *Yigdal* was set to many different tunes and gained great popularity. Our version opens with improvisational meditations by Tal Mashiach and Kane Mathis before introducing the familiar text.

#### *Ein Keloheinu*

A simple, upbeat hymn that occurs near the end of Shabbat morning services. In this version, unique to the Sephardim, text alternates between Hebrew and Ladino. One aficionado calls this text a “rapid-fire blessing machine,” satisfying the requirement that Jews offer 100 blessings a day. Whereas on Shabbat, the Amidah contains only seven blessings of praise and thanks, the problem is cleverly solved in *Ein Keloheinu*. In our performance, an instrumental interlude created by East of the River drives home the joyful point.

#### *Kürdi Peşrev*

Ottoman classical music may sound lively and straightforward, but its theoretical underpinnings are considerably more complicated. It is far too easy to define a makam as a “modal system” or scale. But besides a specific set of melodic intervals, each makam comes with rules for composing and performing it, including such elements as registral development (basically, how high or low the pitches may be clustered) and cadence points (musical pauses or conclusions). A *taksim* (instrumental improvisation) with the same makam can stand alone or act as an introduction to a longer piece. (*Kürdi Peşrev*, for example, may be preceded by *Kürdi Taksim*.) One noteworthy feature of *Kürdi Peşrev* is its 32/8 *Usul* (rhythm cycle), an unusually long pattern unique to Turkish music. As with many song titles, a makam’s name may offer a clue to its regional or ethnic origin—in this case, Kurdish.

#### *Porke Yorach*

Like the piyyutim, Sephardic romances (*romanceros*) adopted meters, rhythms, and forms from classical Arabic poetry. A romance is not always “romantic,” but is more typically *narrative*—a story song or lengthy dialogue with many stanzas. These “women’s songs” can range from the pious to the playful. Among the most enduring are many sad love songs. Their themes may be strikingly similar—faithless lovers who desert innocent young women—but each offers up a haunting melody that lodges in the heart, as with *Porke Yorach* (“Why Are You Crying”). *Chalumeau* (an ancestor of the clarinet) and oud provide a wordless but soulful performance.

#### *Anenu*

One of the oldest and most well-known piyyutim in Selichot prayers. A plea to God to answer the prayers of the people of Israel, its recurring motif is “Answer us” (*Anenu*), based on Elijah’s prayer on Mount Carmel: “Answer me, O Lord, answer me” (1 Kings 18:37). It is sung during the month of Elul and the Ten Days of Repentance and heralds the arrival of *Adon Ha’Selichot* (“Master of Forgiveness”; see above), sung immediately afterward. These two piyyutim represent the emotional and spiritual climax of the Selichot prayers. Like *Adon Ha’selichot*, *Anenu* is performed as a call-and-response chant between cantor and congregation.

#### *Rast Sirto*

In this piece from the Ottoman tradition, *Rast* is the makam, *Sirto* its form. *Rast* is considered a fundamental makam in Turkish music, often evoking feelings of joy, peace, and serenity. *Sirto* refers to a traditional Greek dance form in which dancers hold hands to form a chain or circle. An extremely popular work, it is widely performed and often recorded.

[Intermission]

#### *Una Tarde de Verano*

Nina Stern’s performance of this Sephardic romance (“One Summer Afternoon”) features a set of variations she composed on its traditional tune. They were inspired by 17th- and early 18th-century composers like Jacob van Eyck and the English composers who contributed to *The Division Flute*. Published in 1706 by John Walsh, it was patterned after widely circulated earlier collections of variations for violin.

### *Achot Ketana*

Associated with Rosh Hashanah, marking the Jewish New Year. Textually, everything except the last refrain hurls imprecations at the departing year: “Let its curses conclude!” In part this may reflect the life journey of a people perpetually in exile, forever Othered. Fate was too often unkind. Still, the last stanza proclaims: “Let the year and its blessings begin!”

### *Invocation*

Using a frame drum and throat singing, *Invocation* explores the primal connection between drum and voice. Here Shane Shanahan dances a sonic duet with the 5000-year-old spirit of the frame drum. Transcendent vocal harmonics sail above the earthly pulsation of this drum, which traces its history back to the ancient Middle East, where it was largely played by women in religious ceremonies. The shamans of some cultures still use this drum as a vehicle to communicate with ancestors in the spirit world.

Throat singing originated in Tuva (Central Asia) and then spread to Tibet and Mongolia. It allows a vocalist to sing two pitches simultaneously: the fundamental is heard as a drone, while the overtones that contribute to that drone are heard as high-pitched whistling tones. The original version of *Invocation* can be found on Shane's album *Audacity (Live)*.

### *Anzi dice la nuestra novia*

Of all Sephardic women's songs, wedding songs are most numerous. Traditional weddings were multi-stage events and had songs associated with each stage. The singing was likely to be cheerful, its lyrics blending spiritual, practical, and erotic advice. In *Anzi dice la nuestra novia* (“Says the Bride-to-Be”), each stanza names a part of the bride's head, only to have the bride herself extravagantly rename it. This version comes from the Island of Rhodes and is still sung to the bride on the eve of her wedding by Sephardi women descendants of the island.

### *Hiçaz Sirto*

*Hicaz* is the makam, *Sirto* its stylistic form—in this case an exuberant chain or circle dance. And yes, it really was composed by Abdulaziz, once mighty Sultan of the Ottoman Empire.

### *Ija Mia*

We end with a playful *romancero*, *Ija Mia* (“My Daughter”), in which a mother, desperate to find a match for her daughter, parades a list of potential suitors. (The daughter prefers—of course—someone else.)

- Lyn and Lawrence Schenbeck