

# La vida es un pasaje: a life in Sephardic song

*Troveresse medieval music ensemble*





### Troveresse medieval music ensemble

Helen Dell (director): *voice, portative organ*

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with guest artist Ami Hasson: *percussion*

La vida es un pasahe: a life in Sephardic song presents a life, or various possibilities for life in the songs of the Sephardim, the Spanish-speaking Jews who were expelled from Spain in 1492 and made their way to various parts of the globe, taking with them a language, a culture and their magnificent music. These songs, of birth and death, love and hate, joy and sorrow, loss and longing, are remarkable for their poetic and musical beauty and for what they communicate of the indomitable human spirit.

All but one of our songs (Üsküdarâ, which is in Turkish) are in the language usually known as Ladino, a dialect of Spanish which the Sephardim retained in the new countries in which they settled after their expulsion.

While the songs change as they travel, taking on musical and linguistic characteristics of their new homes, many of them retain musical and poetic links with Spain. ‘Gerineldo’, for instance, can be traced to a Spanish romance, ‘Quién hubiese tal ventura’ found in Diego Pisador’s *Libro de música para vihuela* (1552: f.5).\*

Our readings are taken from other traditional Sephardic songs and from writings of the Jewish poets of medieval Spain: ‘My heart is in the East’ by Judah Halevi (1075?-1141?); ‘Where are the graves’ by Moses Ibn Exra (1055?-1135?); ‘The hour in which I am’ by Samuel Ha-Nagid (993-1056).

Helen Dell

### Translations

#### 1 La vida es un pasahe

Life is a passage where one seeks to gain advantage. Death is a voyage to the world of truth.

#### 2 Cuando el rey Nimrod

When King Nimrod went out into the meadow, he looked at the sky and the starry vault. He saw a holy light in Jewry where had just been born, Abraham our Father. Let us now hail the new-born Lord, may he be marked with the goodly sign, this child, that the prophet Elias has appeared unto us, and we shall give praise to the true one.

\* Musical similarities between the two were noted by Judith Etzion and Susana Weich-Shahak, ‘The Spanish and the Sephardic Romances: Musical Links’, *Ethnomusicology*, 32:2 (1988).

#### 3 Nani nani

The son wants to sleep, the mother’s son. May he grow up to be big. Ah! Sleep my soul, my life, for you father is coming with much joy. Open the door for me, open up for me my lady, for I come very weary from ploughing the fields. Ah! I will open the door for you for you come weary and you will behold your son sleeping in his cradle.

#### 4 Durme querido hijico

Sleep little darling, sleep with no fear nor pain, close your beautiful eyes, sleep with happiness. Soon you will leave your nappies and start going to school and there, my little darling, you will learn your ABC. Then you will leave school and go to the market place and there, my little darling, you will learn to buy and sell. Then you will leave the market place and go studying and there, my little darling, you will become a doctor.

#### 5 Üsküdarâ

When I was going to Üsküdarâ it started to rain. The Katib jacket is long and the cuffs of his trousers are stained with mud. The Katib is waking up, his eyes are full of sleep. The Katib belongs to me and I belong to the Katib; others have nothing to say. My Katib wears well starched shirts. On my way to Üsküdarâ I found a handkerchief in which I put a loukoum. I was looking for my lover and I found him by my side.

#### 6 Por la tu puerta yo pasí

I passed your door and found it locked, so I kissed the lock; it was as sweet as if I had kissed your cheek. I passed your door with all my

friends. I stopped at your window, playing the mandolin. I passed close by your door and saw you in the garden and I asked for a rose: “Not opened”, you replied. When I returned I found the rose fallen. With the petals of that rose I will make a robe to wear.

### **7 Morena me llaman**

They call me the dark one but I was born fair. I have lost my fairness from my elegant promenading. He calls me the dark one, the king’s son. If he calls me again I’ll go with him.

### **8 Yo Hanino, tu Hanina**

I am Hanino, you are Hanina, these shall be our names, and children born of us, Aman, will be like the moon and the sun, Derman. O the sweet words you speak to me, may the good Lord hear them; Aman, for me you are the sun, Derman, for me you are the sun.

### **9 La madre de la novia**

The mother of the bride asks for indulgence; when she marries off her son you will eat better. Good food, good company! The mother of the bride asks for indulgence. When the bride is circumcised you will eat better. Good food... The mother of the bride asks for indulgence; when the tephilin is put in place you will eat better. Good food... The mother of the bride asks for indulgence; when Judah is betrothed you will eat better. Good food...

### **11 Por que llorax**

Why are you weeping, fair girl, white flower? I’m weeping for you, my knight; you are abandoning me and I’m so young. I’ve got such little children, crying and asking for bread.

If they ask for their father what should I say? Into the purse went the hand and a hundred doubloons it gave. What will this cover, for bread or for wine? If it isn’t enough, there’s plenty more. You’ll sell vineyards and fields by the sea. Seven years you’ll wait. In the eighth you’ll marry. Take a young gallant exactly like me.

### **12 Y una madre**

A mother eats roasted her beloved son. Mother, look at my eyes which have read so much law. Do not eat me roasted, your beloved son. Mother, look at my forehead on which tephilin has been placed. Do not eat me roasted, your beloved son. Mother, look at my mouth which has spoken so much law. Do not eat me roasted, your beloved son. A mother eats roasted her beloved son.

### **13 Noches, noches**

Nights, good nights, nights for making love. Ah! what nights, my mother, that seem never to arrive. Nights, nights, in my chamber, tossing in my bed like a fish in the sea.

### **14 Durme, durme, mi angelico**

Sleep, sleep my little angel, little son of your nation, infant of Zion, suffer no sorrow. Ah! why do you ask my name? and why I don’t sing? Ah! my wings have been clipped and my voice has been silenced. Ah! world of sorrow.

### **15 Yo m’enamori d’un aire**

I am in love with an air, with the air of a woman, a very beautiful woman, the darling of my heart. I am in love with the night. The moonlight deceived me. If it had been day I

would not have been captivated.

### **16 Como la rosa en la güerta**

Like the rose in the garden and flowers that haven’t bloomed is a young girl at the hour of her death. It was a sad hour on that day when she was taken sick. Like the queen on her bed she fell ill and fainted away.

### **17 Gerineldo**

Gerineldo, Gerineldo, my elegant gentleman, I should like to have you at my service for three hours tonight. As I am your servant, ma’am, you must be joking with me. I am not joking, Gerineldo, it’s the truth I’m telling you. Ah, at what time shall I come, lady, at what time shall I come to the palace? At midnight, when the King is asleep. Midnight has already passed. Gerineldo has not come. Curse you, Gerineldo – and I who fell for you! As she spoke these words, Gerineldo came to the palace. Who is this, and what is he, who is sighing at my gate? It is Gerineldo, lady, I have come for what I promised. Amid sighs and embraces, the pair slept together. I shall kill the Queen, and live with her sigh. I shall kill Gerineldo though my kingdom perish. Get up, Gerineldo; we are both undone! They have placed the good King’s sword here as a witness against us!

### **18 A la nana y a la buba**

To the grandmother and the grandfather, let the child sleep. God is looking after them, let the child sleep. To the children of misfortune, let the child sleep.



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Front cover: miniature entitled 'Tolerance and Migration' by Lemah Dinçtürk, Istanbul. Reproduced by permission.

*Troveresse* is available for all functions and festivities.

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## La vida es un pasahe: a life in Sephardic song

# Troveresse

### *Prologue*

**1** La vida es un pasahe trad. Morocco 1'54"

### *Birth*

**2** Cuando el rey Nimrod trad. Bulgaria 1'48"

### *Infancy*

**3** Nani, nani trad. Morocco 3'18"

### *Childhood/youth*

**4** Durme querido hijico trad. Greece 3'20"

### *Love*

**5** Üsküdarâ Turkey, popular 19thC song 3'45"

**6** Por la tu puerta yo pasí trad. Andalusia (Spain) 2'50"

### *Marriage*

**7** Morena me llaman trad. Balkans 2'30"

**8** Yo Hanino, tu Hanina trad. Balkans 1'29"

**9** La madre de la novia trad. Morocco 3'05"

**10** La vida es un pasahe reprise trad. Morocco 0'36"

### *Parenthood*

**11** Por que llorax trad. Greece 4'47"

**12** Y una madre trad. Morocco 2'48"

### *Insatiable longings*

**13** Noches, noches trad. Orient 3'33"

**14** Durme, durme mi angelico Leon Algazi (Balkans) 2'06"

**15** Yo m'enamori d'un aire trad. Andalusia 3'05"

### *Death*

**16** Como la rosa en la guerta trad. Andalusia 2'54"

**17** Gerineldo trad. Morocco 4'03"

### *Third age and back to the beginning*

**18** A la nana y a la buba trad. Balkans 2'33"

### *Epilogue*

**19** La vida es un pasahe reprise trad. Morocco 1'16"