

MUSIC ACCORD

ROBERTO SIERRA

Songs from the Diaspora (2006)

Program Notes

Songs from the Diaspora is a cycle of seven songs inspired by the forced migration of Jews from Spain in the late 15th century. The words for the songs come from verses written in scattered locations, including Jerusalem, Sarajevo, Turkey, and Bulgaria. In 1492 a royal decree from 'Their Catholic Majesties' (that was their official title), Fernando de Aragon and Isabella de Castilla, put an end to the largest and one of the most important Jewish settlements in Europe. The expulsion of these Spaniards—who for centuries had made important contributions to the arts and sciences and were an integral part of the fabric of Spanish culture—was not only a tragic event for the countless people who had to leave the land they called home, but also a great loss for Spain. This politically and religiously motivated expulsion forced the Jews to leave the Sepharad (the term they used for the Iberian Peninsula) and wander to find new places to live. With them they brought their language (Ladino), their music, and their poetry. You can still find Sephardic poetry and music, largely unchanged by time, because many wonderful songs have been passed down through the centuries from one generation to the next. Not long ago it would not have been unusual to hear in Sofia, Bulgaria an old grandmother singing a fragment from *De las mares altas*.

In my settings, I selected some of those texts that reflected a sense of longing and made references to the Diaspora, as well as some of those that represented aspects of the singers' lives as ordinary people. Many times what has remained is just a fragment of a tune, but in most instances the lyrics are found in several complete verses. In completing the melodic fragments, I tried to do so in a seamless fashion. When I wrote these songs I wanted to re-create the spirit as reflected in the melodic fragments, and to evoke with the accompaniment a sound world that reflected the beautiful and profoundly moving imagery expressed in the verses.

The cycle opens with the song titled *De las mares altas* ("From the High Seas"), which tells the story of how the queen became jealous of a beautiful girl who came from a far-away land dressed in gold and pearls, crowned with sapphires. The next song, *Échate a la mar y alcançalo* ("Go to the Sea and Get Him"), originated in Jerusalem and also makes references to the sea, to going away. Here the theme of the wanderer is paired not with exotic imagery but rather with the language of daily routines, almost childlike in its simplicity: the water of the ocean becomes the bathwater where one is washed, purified.

El rey de Francia tres hijas tenía ("The King of France Had Three Daughters"), from Izmir, Turkey, resembles many medieval romances and tells the story of the three daughters of the king of France. The song describes how the princesses labor in the palace, and how one day the youngest one falls asleep while embroidering. As the queen tries to wake her, she tells her mother of the beautiful dream she was having, but the queen quickly explains (perhaps as a warning) the symbolic nature of the dream: "The moon is your mother-in-law, the star 'Diana' is your sister-in-law, the three birds are your brothers-in-law, and the golden pillar is your boyfriend, the son of the king." The mother-in-law as subject is a common thread in the Sephardic tradition, and its negative connotations could not be more clearly exposed ('My mother-in-law is stronger than death itself') than in the song that follows: *Mi suegra la negra* ("My Mother-in-Law the Evil One") which originated in Filippopolis, modern-day Plovdiv in Bulgaria.

The next two songs are from Sarajevo. *Camini por altas torres* ("I Wandered by the High Towers") brings us back to the Diaspora: 'I navigated in lands where the cock doesn't crow, where nobody knew me. Rain falls: from the heavens, tears from my eyes.' *De qué lloras blanca niña* ("Why Do You Cry, Fair Child?") also tells about crying and sadness, but this time it is a girl who cries for the love that goes away and never comes back.

The cycle closes as it opened, with the ocean and a song from Sofia. *La Serena* ("The Siren"). In this song the ocean is the world of the siren, that mysterious and mad creature who tempts sailors to love her.

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Songs from the Diaspora

Composer: Roberto Sierra

Instrumentation: sop, pno, string quartet

Premiering Artists: Heidi Grant Murphy, soprano; Kevin Murphy, piano; St. Lawrence String Quartet

Duration: 15'

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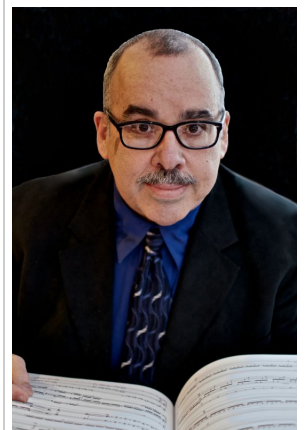
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Roberto Sierra. Credit: Virginia Sierra

Kevin Murphy. Credit: Steven E. Purcell

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