Surprise Discoveries about Mutual Heritage
Set Musicians Denis Azabagic and Eugenia Moliner
On a Voyage into the Centuries’ Old Music of Spanish Jews

As Cavatina Duo, they will present their newest project, Sephardic Journey, at Spertus Institute on April 17.

(CHICAGO) Guitarist Denis Azabagic and flautist Eugenia Moliner have a lot in common. Both are classically trained chamber musicians who perform internationally as solo performers—and together as Cavatina Duo. Although Eugenia is from Spain and Denis from the former Yugoslavia, they both studied in the Netherlands, were they met in Rotterdam in the early 1990s. Both have made their home in Chicago, where, as musical partners and husband and wife, they are Artists-Faculty at the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University.

But it was a surprise about their family histories that led to their latest musical adventure. As adults, both learned that they are descendants of Spanish Jews. From that discovery emerged their newest project and its accompanying CD, titled Sephardic Journey, for Chicago’s Cedille Records. For this project, the internationally acclaimed duo commissioned contemporary compositions inspired by centuries-old Sephardic music from the Jews of Spain.

Denis Azabagic and Eugenia Moliner will be performing the music of Sephardic Journey on Sunday, April 17 at 2 pm at Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership. For this concert, part of Spertus Institute’s ongoing exploration of Jewish art and culture, they will be joined by violinist Desiree Ruhstrat and cellist David Cunliffe. Tickets are $18 ($8 for students) and can be purchased online at spertus.edu or by phone at 312.322.1773.

Sephardic Journey, premiering at the Ravinia Festival in March, includes new works based on old Sephardic melodies as well as a piece based on a story by award-winning writer Nathan Englander. At Spertus, the concert will include performances of Isabel (which pays tribute to the tragic history of Isabel de los Olives y López and her persecution during the Spanish Inquisition), Trio Sefardi (three movements, each employing one melody from the Sephardic repertoire for its musical material), Acrobats (from Englander’s The Tumblers), and Plegaria y Canto (inspired by a vision at the coast near Borriana in Eastern Spain).

The story of discovery that led to Sephardic Journey is rather incredible. In 1996, after years of war in the former Yugoslavia, Azabagic was able to return with Moliner to visit family and friends. In Azabagic’s own words,
“During one visit with my relatives, my great-aunt Razija Prćić began talking to Eugenia in Spanish. Eugenia, who is from Spain, was startled, but the rest of us were utterly astonished. Even Razija’s daughter, my aunt Azra, was in disbelief. How come this lady was speaking Spanish? When did she learn it? Furthermore, Eugenia realized that Razija was speaking a very old form of Spanish language, known as Ladino, spoken by the Spanish Jews as long as 500 years ago. As the conversation progressed, Razija told us that her mother had converted from Judaism to Islam at the outset of the Second World War, in order to survive persecution by the Nazi army. In so doing, her family was one of only two surviving families of Jewish origin in our hometown of Tuzla.”

Azabagic continued, “As we were researching this in the years that followed, my wife found out that her last names, Moliner and Ferrer, were names that the Jewish people in Spain took from their professions (Moliner means miller, Ferrer means blacksmith) in order to convert to Christianity and stay in Spain.”

Through their work as Cavatina Duo, Azabagic and Moliner break convention in the pairing of their instruments and in their musical selections. They have captivated audiences with electrifying performances in major venues and festivals including Ravinia’s Raising Stars and the Harris Theater series (here in Chicago), Da Camera Society (Los Angeles), Aix-en-Provence Summer Festival (France), the National Concert Hall of Taipei (Taiwan), National Center for the Performing Arts in Beijing (China), Kolkata International Guitar Festival (India), and the Foundation Principe Felipe and Palau de la Musica (Spain).

Denis Azabagic is a 24-time prize winner in international competitions and has been described as a “virtuoso with flawless technique” by Soundboard Magazine. At the age of 20, he was youngest winner of the prestigious international guitar competition Jacinto e Inocencio Guerrero in Madrid.

Eugenia Moliner has been acclaimed as “brilliant” by the British Flute Society magazine. She has collaborated with Chicago Symphony and Rotterdam Philharmonic principals and co-principal players, the Rotterdam Baroque Ensemble, the National Philharmonic of the Netherlands, and the Montebello Ensemble, among others. She has also appeared as a soloist with symphonies around the world.

Desirée Ruhstrat has earned top prizes at Carl Flesch, Julius Stulberg, and the Mozart Festival Violin Competitions. David Cunliffe was the recipient of the Terrance Weill and Leonard Hirsch Quartet prizes and the Lady Barbirolli Chamber Music Award. Ruhstrat and Cunliffe appear as guest artists on the Sephardic Journey recording.

The musicians will be signing CDs following their performance.

Spertus Institute is located at 610 S. Michigan Avenue. Discount Parking is available for $11 with Spertus validation at the Essex Inn, 8th Street and Michigan Avenue (two blocks south of Spertus). More information can be found at spertus.edu.

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