



The multicultural group Shira u'tfila, with musicians from Serbia, India and Israel including the group's leader and oud player Stefan Sablic (below)



Former Yugoslavia sits on a cultural faultline where the Ottoman met the Habsburg Empire, where Islam met Christianity and where the ethnic and religious complexities resulted in a bloody dismemberment of what was Yugoslavia. But it was also a unique meeting place of the two traditions of Jewish music – the Ashkenazi and Sephardic.

Basically, Ashkenazi culture developed in Eastern Europe with the Yiddish language and klezmer music, while Sephardic culture, with the Ladino Jewish language, came from Spain and Portugal via the Ottoman Empire where Sephardic Jews were invited to settle after their expulsion from Sepharad (the Iberian peninsula) in 1492. "Historically there were big Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities in Yugoslavia, the Sephardic community looking towards Istanbul and the Ashkenazi looking towards Vienna," explains Stefan Sablic, the leader of Shira u'tfila. "This is where the two traditions met." The heart of Sephardic culture in the region was Sarajevo, now the capital of Bosnia, but there were also important communities in Pristina, now the capital of Kosovo, and Belgrade. During the siege of Sarajevo, Benevolencija, a charity set up by Jakob Finci, the leader of the Jewish community, to bring medical supplies in and get people out, was acceptable to Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats alike, because of its Jewish identity.

Shira u'tfila are one of very few groups playing Sephardic music in former Yugoslavia. "It is important because there aren't many people doing it and it is part of the heritage here," Sablic insists. "It was very strong tradition and it's interesting because it has all these layers of multiculturalism in the songs."

Some of the repertoire started in Ladino in medieval Spain, gained Turkish additions in Istanbul and finally south Slavic elements to round it off in the Balkans. "The song 'Mi Kamoha' [on their Orange World CD *Sephardic Songs from the Balkans*, reviewed in #56] has words in Serbian, Turkish, Ladino, Aramaic and Hebrew," explains Sablic. "They all fit together and it works beautifully."

Sablic plays *oud* (lute) and sings lead vocals with an ensemble of filigree *qanun* contributing delicate arabesques, oriental violin, throaty Balkan clarinet, string bass, percussion and *tabla* played by the Indian-born Akash Bhatt. They are one of the most interesting bands on the Sephardic live music scene, exploring a little-known musical repertoire on the fringes of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empire. In the last month or so, they've performed in the Sephardic Spring season in Geneva, the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and one of the best centres of world music in Europe, Rasa in Utrecht.

As well as leading Shira u'tfila, Sablic is also a theatre director – his main job – and cantor in the synagogue in Belgrade, an elegant 1920s neo-classical building and the only functioning synagogue in Serbia. The Jewish population in Belgrade is no more than 2,000 (it was 12,000 before World War II), most of them secular, so Shabbat services in the synagogue attract only 30-40 people, although it's full for Jewish holidays.

Before World War II, there was a beautiful oriental-style Sephardic synagogue in Belgrade, which was destroyed by the Nazis, and another destroyed by the Communists after the war. The remaining Ashkenazi synagogue survived only because it was used as a bordello by the Nazis during the war. "We

have a very specific service now," explains Sablic, "that mixes Ashkenazi and Sephardic melodies in the service."

Sablic grew up in Tito's Yugoslavia with no religious upbringing. "One of the good things about the Communist time," he says, "was that it wasn't important whether you were Jewish, Christian, Muslim or nothing – we were all brothers and sisters." He first went to a synagogue as a young man, 15 or 20 years ago, and became interested in the music of the liturgy, based on Middle Eastern *maqams*. In 1999, as the situation was getting unpleasant in Yugoslavia, he left and spent two years in Israel where he did his postgraduate studies in theatre directing and also studied cantorial singing and started playing the oud.

It was when he returned from Israel, late in 2000, that Sablic started Shira u'tfila – meaning 'Songs and Prayers' in Hebrew. "I guess we are trying to find a way to re-establish an audience for this music and to make it more listenable by a wider range of people," explains Sablic. "This music has an important history here and I think after several years with our current line-up we've found our sound."

Shira u'tfila started rather spontaneously with Sablic inviting percussionists (on *darbuka* and *bendir*) and a bass player to join him which developed into concerts and recordings. The band has now recorded seven CDs – their last, *Sephardic Songs from the Balkans*, getting a ringing endorsement in *Songlines*: 'Although Israelis dominate the Sephardic scene, much of the finest Judaeo-Spanish music on disc comes from musicians with a Greek or Turkish background. So it's



refreshing to encounter a group who come mostly from the former Yugoslavia [with an eclectic and accomplished performing style, spiced up by an Indian percussionist and a German fiddler.]

The latest CD, *Biviendo en Kantando* (Life as a Song), is an intriguing project that unearths unknown repertoire from the region. It was sparked off by Sablic's discovery of [www.sephardicmusic.org](http://www.sephardicmusic.org) – an amazing website hosted by Joel Bresler with samples of 78rpm Sephardic recordings. Sablic used it as a shopping list for Ladino songs from the



Clockwise from top: a selection of 78rpm Sephardic recordings which Shira u'tfila revisit on their latest album; the interior and exterior of Belgrade's only functional synagogue; the veteran Victoria Hazan, who recorded some of the old 78s in her youth; Shira u'tfila performing recently

Balkans, mainly recorded in Istanbul, Thessaloniki and New York from 1907 to the 1920s. "Almost 90% of the repertoire [on the new disc] comes from these recordings," explains Sablic. "It was a revelation because most of these songs are unknown and unsung. In the Sephardic world there are 15 or 20 hit songs that get recycled again and again. So I was inspired to bring these songs back. We have added things here and there, but the spirit of the songs has remained."

Accompanying the 18 tracks by Shira u'tfila is a second bonus CD, featuring the 78rpm recordings that inspired them. The main singer on them is a man called Haim Effendi (1853-1938), who made the first known Sephardic music recording in Istanbul in 1907 and, in the early 20th century recorded more songs than any other Sephardic recording artist. But not much is known about him. He wasn't a professional classical cantor like Isaac Algazi (1889-1950) who became the most celebrated cantor of his time. Effendi was a star singer catering for the popular tastes of the day in several different languages, which, pre-World War II, included a large Sephardic market. Effendi has a powerful, declamatory voice singing from a vanished age,

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accompanied by a solo oud, or a small ensemble, in the style of the day.

But Shira u'tfila's approach is about making these songs live now. 'Aman Dermenji' is a Greek/Turkish-style popular song about a miller and a girl. Sablic heard it on [sephardicmusic.org](http://sephardicmusic.org) in a 1926 recording by Elias Behar and then realised he'd heard the same song sung in Belgrade by an old rabbi from Kosovo. It's a dialogue between a woman and a miller who doesn't accept her love until she gets her knickers off. It hardly sounds like a song for a rabbi, but maybe religion has got

more puritanical since then and Sablic links it into a similar Greek *rebetika*-style song with splendid violin and clarinet solos.

What would help Shira u'tfila is to find a charismatic, perhaps female, vocalist. Sablic's strengths are in finding this repertoire and arranging the music. It's in the live performance and interaction of this multicultural group – with origins in Serbia, Israel and India – that they really take off, playing a multi-layered style of music. As Sablic puts it, "the music is about dialogue and the joy of the moment" and that comes across on stage. ●

**REVIEW** *Biviendo en Kantando* is a *Top of the World* review in this issue – track 4 on the CD  
**PODCAST** Hear one of the songs and the 78rpm recording on which it is based on this issue's podcast

**BALKANS** Simon Broughton talks to the leader of a group keeping Sephardic music alive in former Yugoslavia

# SONGS & PRAYERS