**MUSIC**

**Sephardic dreams**
Sarah Aroeste on Ladino culture and her upcoming show at the Holocaust Memorial Center

by Debbie Miszak

**MT:** How did you come to learn this language?
**Aroeste:** I didn’t grow up speaking it fluently, but it was in my family. It was my grandfather’s first language, and when his family came to the U.S. in the early 1900s, they were escaping war. When they came, they wanted to leave the so-called “old country” behind, so they left behind a lot of their culture, including the language.

**MT:** So, how did you get into music?
**Aroeste:** I grew up as a musician — a very serious Western classical musician. I didn’t know that I would be a Ladino singer, but growing up I considered myself a musician from a young age. I played lots of instruments, and I studied opera very seriously. I thought I was going to become an opera singer, which led me to study in Israel, where my opera coach was coincidentally an expert in Ladino music, and that’s where the story begins. I fell in love with the music, and after awhile I knew that’s where my heart was leading.

**MT:** How do you walk the line of upholding tradition in your music, while remaining very modern?
**Aroeste:** I have a very strong belief about cultural preservation, which is that you can’t always be looking backwards in order to preserve a culture because it will stay static and die out. I’d say that most of the work that I’ve done for the last five years has actually been composing new material, and that’s really what I’m most proud of because I really believe that if we don’t start creating new material then the culture will die out. My most recent album was actually a children’s album (Ona de Desperar), because I understand that my own children may not speak Ladino fluently, but I want them to grow up in a world where they know that Ladino is still alive.

**MT:** Following this children’s album, are you going to go back to doing more experimental albums like Grecia?
**Aroeste:** That is a great question. So, I’m actually headed back into the studio next month! I’m recording a holiday album, which is again another departure, something new I’ve never done. I’m recording that next month, and after that album, I think I’ll go back to that sort of edgy, experimental, and put out a whole album again.

**MT:** You keep yourself pretty busy. Can you tell me a little bit about your upcoming performance at the Holocaust Memorial Center?
**Aroeste:** They approached me because it was brought to their attention that their programming has been focused on Ashkenazi. When people think of the Holocaust, they mostly think of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany. But, in fact, Greece was hit the hardest as far as the percentage of Jewish deaths. And with that, you lose an entire culture. The reason most people have never heard of Ladino today is because we were decimated. There is certainly many beautiful traditional Sephardic musicians, but I think they wanted somebody who could bring a fresh perspective and tie it into the personal family history I have related to the Holocaust. I have some very direct ties to Greece. I screen black and white footage from the 1930s of my own grandparents in Greece while I perform, so I make it clear that I’m not just a performer taking someone else’s heritage. I combined my personal stories with some traditional music, and I hopefully show a lot of respect to the tradition and where it comes from.

**MT:** What are your hopes for Sephardic culture moving forward?
**Aroeste:** You know, I’m a realist. I understand that no one will ever speak Ladino again as a first language. With that said, a lot of people have asked me what the point is. It’s not just a Sephardic thing, it’s not even just a Jewish thing. Before World War II, the most major event that completely changed the geography of the European map was the Spanish Inquisition. We don’t talk about it because we’ve become so — and this is without judgment — rightfully so, we’ve focused so much time and energy on the Holocaust. But before then, it was the Spanish Inquisition. I think there is so much value to keeping the music and stories alive, and my hope is that there will be more people like me writing music. I always tell people about Sephardim today — that we’re small in number, but not small in importance.

Sarah Aroeste performs on Sunday, March 9, at 7:30 p.m. and 7 p.m., at Orchard Lake Rd., Farmington Hills; holocaustcenter.org

music@metrotimes.com @metrotimes