

I.  
A. HEMSI

Op. 51. - (Xa)  
(SERIE ULTIMA)

# Coplas Sefardies

( Chansons Judéo-Espagnoles )

pour

Chant et Piano

ESPAÑA	1492
MEDIO-ORIENTE	1928

## « C O P L A S     S E F A R D I E S »

OP. 51. (Série Xa et dernière)

(Chansons Judéo-Espagnoles)

pour

CHANT et PIANO

par le

Prof. ALBERTO HEMSI

Les versions littéraires, musicales et pianistiques de cette GRANDE COLLECTION de CHANTS JUDÉO-ESPAGNOLS, inspirées par des éléments traditionnels, repérés, notés, corrigés et complétés par l'auteur auprès de nombreuses communautés SEPHARADITES D'ORIENT, ont été arrangées, reconstituées, composées à nouveau, librement stylisées pour chant et piano, et publiées pour la première fois par :

le Professeur ALBERTO HEMSI

correspondant de l'

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Professeur ALBERTO HEMSI

## MIS ULTIMAS PALABRAS

Muchas, muchísimas, son las que desde hace ya cerca de medio siglo, escribí en torno a esta publicación folklórica del fraternal amigo Alberto Hemsí, y una vez concluida con el décimo cuaderno, juzgo pertinente suscribir las palabras que se pueden leer aquí.

Fortificaron una inquebrantable amistad nuestro amor a la música, la comunidad de ideales y el convencimiento de que esas manifestaciones tan ligadas a la pretérita cultura hispánica no se habrían emprendido y revalorizado sin contar con un espíritu generoso como el de aquella persona que aunaba la doble faceta de investigador y de compositor. Cuando alboreaba esa publicación mucho me satisfizo escribir para el primer cuaderno un laudatorio prólogo y expresar mi júbilo ante las realidades positivas puestas ya en marcha, y para las cuales profeticé gran éxito.

Fueron comentados con sumo elogio los primeros cinco cuadernos al ver la luz antes de una fatídica guerra mundial. Con ésta los inevitables trastornos políticos y bélicos turbaron la paz del mundo y perturbaron a millones de seres humanos. Después los supervivientes lamentaron los horrores que no hubieran querido conocer y que no podrían olvidar. Recobrados más tarde la quietud y el sosiego, Hemsí, como tantos otros, y cada uno dentro de sus actividades, cultivó nuevamente a las tareas a que parecía destinado, o mejor dicho, predestinado, y un denuedo propio de los años juveniles le permitió culminar esa labor teniendo a París como campo de su actividad, de igual modo que había tenido en Alejandría sus inicios. Todo ello sin perjuicio de componer y editar otras producciones musicales, tanto profanas como místicas. Ante la colección de "CANCIONES SEFARDIES", ¿cómo no felicitar cordialmente a su autor, a la cultura hispánica y a los filarmónicos interesados por tan peculiar producción?

Ahora, para concluir este apéndice, vaya una pertinente anécdota. Muy pocos días antes de comenzar nuestra Guerra Civil en Julio de 1936, obtuve por duplicado las pruebas de imprenta de la reseña escrita por mí para comentar en la revista "Las Ciencias" el cuarto cuaderno de "COPLAS SEFARDIES". Devolví a la imprenta un ejemplar y todavía conservo el otro en mi archivo. Un párrafo de esa recensión decía textualmente: "Esta nueva aportación de Hemsí a la difusión del cancionero judeo-español, a semejanza de cuantos la habían antecedido, tiene una armonización revestida con las mejores galas de la técnica moderna, pues el piano, desdeñando toda vulgaridad en el acompañamiento, suministra sonoridades exquisitas que aumentan el encanto de esas canciones típicas". La fratricida guerra paralizó la publicación de aquella revista. Una vez restablecida la, anhelada paz tres años después, reanudó su publicación, aquella docta revista e insertó mi referido comentario, pero con la particularidad de que entonces se omitió al pie el nombre del autor de esos párrafos que era el de éstos de ahora, es decir:

José SUBIRÁ  
Academico-Bibliotecario  
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## MY LAST WORDS

Over the past half century I have written not a few words, indeed very many, around this great work of folklore published by my friend and comrade, Alberto Hemsí, and now that the tenth album has brought it to a conclusion, I think this the right time to add the words which may be read here.

An unwavering friendship has been strengthened by a love of music, ideals common to both of us and the conviction that the reappraisal of these manifestations, linked with the past of Spanish culture, could not be undertaken or brought to fruition unless they depended on a wide and generous spirit such as that in which was united the double aspect of research worker and composer. From the very beginning of this publication, it was with the greatest satisfaction that I wrote a laudatory prologue to the first folder expressing my delight at the positive beginning of an undertaking for which I prophesied a great success.

Before the second world war when the first five albums appeared they were highly praised in commentaries. With this war inevitable political and military upheavals disturbed the peace of the world and brought distress and disruption to the lives of millions of human beings. Afterwards the survivors regretted the horrors which they would have preferred not to have known, and which they could not forget. Later with the return of peace and tranquillity, Hemsí, like so many others each in his own field, harnessed himself once more to the tasks for which he seemed destined, or rather predestined, and a zeal like that of youth allowed him to reach the end of his labours, with Paris as the focal point of his activity as Alexandria had been in the early days. All this has been done without affecting the composing and editing of other musical productions, both secular and mystical.

Before this collection of Sephardic Songs ("Chansons Sefardies") it is impossible not to extend our warmest congratulations to the author, to Spanish culture and to the orchestras which have contributed to this so personal achievement.

Now to conclude this appendix I will quote an anecdote relevant to it. A very few days before the outbreak of our Civil War in July 1936, I had obtained a copy of the proofs of the critical article I had written for the review "Las Ciencias" giving my commentary on the fourth album of the Coplas Sefardies. I gave one copy to the printers, keeping the other in my files. One paragraph of this review said word for word: "This new contribution by Hemsí to the diffusion of the Judeo-Spanish cancionero, like all those which preceded it, has a harmonisation which owes much to the finest subtleties of modern technique, for the piano, scorning any vulgarity in the accompaniment, supplies exquisite tones which increase the charms of these traditional songs". The fratricidal war prevented the publication of the review. Once peace, so greatly desired, had been restored three years later, the learned journal resumed publication and inserted my deferred article, with this particularity, that the name of the author of these paragraphs was omitted at the bottom of the page, the author being the same as today, that is to say

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Ahora, después de medio siglo, este admirable hombre jamás cesó de testimoniarme una amistad a la cual consagro el mayor aprecio. Como estoy talmente ufano de, tal amistad me place mencionarla aquí y sellar así mi profunda gratitud por todo cuanto hizo en mi favor. Nombrado, mucho más tarde, Académico y Bibliotecario de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando de Madrid, el Excelentísimo Señor D. José Subirá continuó ayudándome con sus inapreciables consejos y me exhortó a proseguir mis investigaciones y mis labores, vaticinando que en el porvenir esos trabajos serían reconocidos por doquier, dado su considerable interés cultural, pues suministrarían el eslabón que aún faltaba entre la música española y la del pueblo sefardita.

#### A. HEMSI

## THE SEPHARDIC COPLAS

### (Epilogue)

It was in 1919, on my return from Italy to my home town of Cassaba in Asiatic Turkey, that a chance encounter revealed to me the original elements of Judeo-Spanish traditional folklore.

Formerly these fundamental ideas had been related to me by relatives and compatriots who, like my ancestors and myself, were descendants of those people exiled from Spain in 1492 by the Catholic Kings Ferdinand and Isabella.

In this same year (1919), the province of Izmir was invaded and occupied by Hellenic forces, and my home town suffered the same fate. My parents had been born there; they were still living there, and despite alarming rumours had no intention of leaving it. However, on account of the fighting and gun-fire that continued ceaselessly night and day, the small Jewish community, settled in the town since time immemorial, gradually was further and further reduced in size. The peaceloving young people went away, and their elders were not long in following them. This continual uprooting of the older generations, the guardians of our ways and customs, was a particular cause of regret. In addition, rather than helping me in my investigations, it made the pursuit of my researches, at that time only just started, more difficult. Nevertheless the first documents I collected encouraged me to pursue my researches even more energetically. Should some evil omen have been seen here ?

Noone could have foreseen the future. In the event, it was a terrible catastrophe which in 1922, suddenly struck the entire town. The Greek army, with the Turkish soldiers hard on their heels, set fire to all parts of it before evacuating the city.

The terror and amazement of the unfortunate inhabitants can easily be imagined, at the sight of the flames devouring their dwellings, forcing them to flee hastily to the fields.

It remains true that the few documents I had collected just before this blaze, gave me the feeling that I was standing on the threshold of a wonderful cave, like that of Ali Baba, which I had the opportunity to explore at will. Since that time I must confess that I cannot remember how many people I have contacted, nor communities and towns visited, nor how often I have stayed, for shorter or longer periods, in five countries of the eastern Mediterranean. My investigations were in no way limited to poetry and song. Folklore constitutes a whole world, and I was anxious in particular to know that of my people.

Thus everything expressed therein interested me to the highest degree, as everything destined to disappear from the memory of mankind formed the object of my liveliest concern.

But neither my will, nor my concern were in themselves sufficient to provide for the material and pecuniary exigencies of the many travels, time spent in various places and many other obligations which would have to be faced if wider studies were to be undertaken. For this reason I decided to speak of this to noone, nor ask for help from anyone.

Today, after so many years of voluntary isolation, in the face of ten lavishly produced albums, comprising sixty poems and songs, spread over hundreds of pages and preceded by explanations written according to the particular circumstances of each, I feel it necessary to give to any possible future readers certain basic information of a technical nature in order properly to introduce this silent labour of mine, spread over many years, in the study of these venerable remains of one of those traditions with a double history : the Hebraic and the Hispanic.

The earliest material I collected consisted of numerous disconnected snatches and fragments of lines. To be sure some poems were more or less complete, with innumerable variants. But when I compared them to others with the same title I became aware that the subject matter was different. From time to time lines of poetry lacked a coherent rhythm, either because in certain pla-

ces some words were missing, or because the line endings did not agree, using neither assonance nor rhyme. Thus I was obliged to choose traditional words in order to replace certain neologisms. The same technique had to be applied when it was a question of words borrowed from a foreign or non - Hispanic language.

As for the style, the process of comparison had to be pushed as far as possible, to allow me to choose the most polished amongst those phrases which were most suited to the style and language of the period. After that the development of literature and poetry over past centuries had to be most closely analysed, to permit comparison of the numerous fragments on card. It was only after this preparatory work that I was able to begin the task of reconstructing the 230 poems in a work as yet unpublished to which I have given the title : "Cancionero Sefardi". The 60 poems of the "Coplas Sefardies" have been extracted from this collection.

My work could not stop at this stage. Amongst thousands of lines were words which were frequently incomprehensible and in need of translation. These words were sometimes archaic, or of Hebrew origin, from "Ladino" or various neighbouring languages, and sometimes neologisms introduced into the language by generations which have since disappeared and now obsolete. This was the work of a linguist added to that of an archeologist "sui generis". In fact each special usage, each word, is translated at the foot of the poem.

After having in this way restored the literary portion, I turned to the problem of the music.

Here I was faced with the work of an ant! For it was never decreed that a composer should transform himself into a "restorer" of melodies. This kind of work was comparable to that of the archeologist, as has been said earlier. Nevertheless, patiently and lovingly, I began to piece together bits of tunes amongst the thousands of melodic fragments that I had previously carded. Sometimes chance associations made the task easier for me. Sometimes too I discovered fragments which suggested to me a melody of a "modal" or "tonal" character. Occasionally they might be fragments with rhythms unusual in Western music.

This is the case with beats such as  $5/8$ ,  $7/8$  or  $9/8$  etc, or even with certain beats joined together such as :  $5 + 7 = 12$  or  $5 + 7 + 9 = 21$  etc. This kind of beat, in the theory of Oriental music given the name : "Dor", gives rise to halting rhythms called : "Aksak". These rhythms alternate binary and ternary time. This is the reason for the "skipping" or "limping" movements.

Elsewhere the "coplas" were constructed now according to a modal, now according to a tonal system, the primary problem being clearly to differentiate the one from the other. Once this difficulty had been overcome, another much more complex one had to be faced, that of the composition of the pianistic sections, whose elaboration proved quite complicated. For it was by no means a question of providing a simple accompaniment for the songs concerned, but to situate them in a framework of symphonic paintings, which would as far as possible evoke the ambiance, the mood, the subject and the melody. Despite my memories of so many popular demonstrations, which I had been privileged to attend, I must admit that I met with great difficulties in the composition of these sketches. These difficulties being of an imaginative, rather than a technical, nature. Thus I often found myself obliged to compose again and again the music of a single song, only to change my mind a few days later. Those who have been engaged in the sort of work I am describing here will, I am sure, be able to discern the truth of what I say, as one separates the true grain from the tares.

Up till this point I have dealt with the genesis of this great collection of poetry and song. If for fifty long years I had not undertaken this kind of work with the personal sacrifices of all sorts it entailed, no one would have been in a position to understand the literary and musical heritage of a Mediterranean people with Hispanic customs and language.

The publication of the complete collection must be divided into two stages : the first five albums were published in Alexandria in my "Edition Orientale de Musique", and the five

others in Paris. Thus on account of my travels, the five earlier albums are dated 1932 to 1938, and the five later ones 1969 to 1973. It is needless here to say that the publication costs of the 10 albums have been born by the author!

When, in 1924, I wrote from Rhodes to the Director of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Madrid, with the aim of gaining precise information on the possible future importance of the material I had so far collected, the director in question, Monsieur Bordas, advised me to contact a young Madrid musicologist, called José Subirà.

Well, for half a century, this admirable person has never failed to honour me with his friendship, which, needless to say, I prize very highly. Of this friendship I am so proud that I would like to mention it here and in this way express my profound gratitude for all he has willingly undertaken on my behalf.

Having become senior member Librarian of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando in Madrid, the most excellent Señor Don José Subirà has continued to assist me with his invaluable advice. Thus he has urged me to pursue my investigations and realizations, telling me that a day would come when my work would be recognized, as of considerable cultural interest, since I had discovered the missing link between the traditional music of Spain and that of the Sephardic people.

(Trans. Mrs. Y. BRETT'S)

A. HEMSI