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THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF ALBERTO HEMSI

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Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Master of Sacred Music Degree

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
THE LIFE OF ALBERTO HEMSI	4
THE MUSIC OF ALBERTO HEMSI	16
APPENDIX A	31
SOURCES CONSULTED.	41

INTRODUCTION

Of its many characteristics, one that especially identifies and publicizes a culture is its music. The folkloric music of any culture tells its story: it lauds its leaders, recounts issues that concerned its people, celebrates life cycle events and expounds on the peoples' views of life inside their own culture as well as the cultures that surround them. This is particularly true of the Sephardi Jewish culture.

Alberto Hemsí, a Sephardi Jew of Turkish origin, was one individual who recognized a cultural treasure in the songs of the Sephardim. It was his life's work to preserve a large number of the secular songs (and additionally some religious music) of the Sephardi culture. These songs were passed down through the generations from mother to daughter. In order that these songs not disappear from the legacy of the Sephardi people, Mr. Hemsí collected, cultivated and transformed many of these melodies by writing accompaniments that combined Western and Eastern musical elements. He thereby gave the music new life and accessibility to Western culture for performance on the concert stage, while preserving the integrity of the music. It is to these ends, the preservation of the culture's music and its formal presentation to the West, that Hemsí made his contribution.

In the many years that I have been listening to and singing Sephardi songs, I have been acutely aware of the great appeal they hold for the Ashkenazi Jewish community and for music lovers in general. The exotic modalities, the colorful storytelling and the musical celebration of life cycle events bring a new dimension to a predominantly "European" ear.

The mission of the Reform cantorate is not only to create meaningful worship through music throughout the liturgical year, but also to bring the vast repertory of music from the international Jewish community to the American Jewish public and to the general public. It is our responsibility to see that this music is passed on to the next generation, whether it be for use in the Synagogue or for the listening pleasure of a concert-going audience.

The foresight of Alberto Hemsí has given the Reform cantor a way to present the music of the Judeo-Spanish heritage to the world. This body of musical literature, which once only existed in an unaccompanied form, is now to be shared on the concert stage. It is of greatest importance that we in the Ashkenazi community recognize the historical value of the music of the Klal and incorporate Sephardi music for our secular and sacred use. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to present the life and music of Alberto Hemsí in the form of a Master's project. We are a people of a rich and diverse culture. It is our duty as Reform cantors to retell our collective history through our music. Mr. Hemsí

was a man of vision and creativity. He has helped to rekindle a heritage of a dispersed people that the Expulsion could not crush.

THE LIFE OF ALBERTO HEMSI

Alberto Hemsí was born in 1897 in Cassaba, Turkey, in the province of Anatolia.¹ The son of Italian subjects, descended from those Jews who suffered the Expulsion from Spain, Hemsí moved to Izmir at the age of twelve.² It was there that he received his secular and religious education at the Alliance Israelite Francaise.³

Izmir, at the turn of the twentieth century had one of the most highly developed Jewish communities (intellectually and institutionally) in the Ottoman Empire.⁴ The official census report of 1927 shows the total Jewish population of Izmir as 17,094 out of 81,454 Jews in the Empire. Izmir was known as the "cradle of Ladino literature" at the end of the nineteenth century, publishing newspapers, song pamphlets,

¹ There is a discrepancy as to the birth date. Israel Katz in his dissertation gives the date as 1898 as does the Concise Encyclopedia of Jewish Music. However it is believed by other scholars that the 1897 date given by Sra. Alegria Bennoun (Hemsí's daughter) is correct.

² A synopsis of Hemsí's life written for a recording produced by Beth Hatefutsoth - Museum of the Jewish Diaspora relates the date of the move as "about age ten". In the remainder of this paper, all dates cited shall be taken from the Cancionero Sefardi by Alberto Hemsí, which is in press at this writing. Permission to use material from this volume has been given by the editor, Dr. Edwin Seroussi.

³ Sra. Alegria Hemsí Bennoun of Paris, France, interviewed by author, July 1992, tape recording, Paris, France.

⁴ Edwin Seroussi, Mizimrat Qodem: The Life and Music of R. Isaac Algazi from Turkey (Jerusalem: Renanot - Institute for Jewish Music, 1989), 14-15.

poetry and translations of other documents into Ladino.⁵ The city was also cosmopolitan and quite immersed in European culture. Izmir was hostess to a multitude of European musicians of various genres (opera, concert musicians, musical theater, etc.).⁶ Jewish musicians of the time were well-versed in Turkish art music as well as in traditional Jewish music. The Jewish community of Izmir founded its own brass band whose members were students at the Allience Israelite Universelle school.⁷ This group often gave benefit concerts to support other Jewish institutions in the community.⁸

Due to his exceptional musical talent, Hemsî studied composition with Shem Tov Shikayar (1840-1920) and Jewish music with the famous R. Isaac Algazi (1889-1950).⁹ Isaac Algazi, in particular, was considered one of the greatest Turkish musicians of his day, an artist and scholar of Hebrew liturgy and poetry, and Turkish classical music. He continued a tradition begun in the sixteenth century by Jewish poet-musicians who combined Jewish liturgy, poetry and musical tradition, with the Turkish classical music tradition and

⁵ Encyclopedia Judaica, 1971 ed., vol. 16, col. 1551.

⁶ Seroussi, Mizimrat Oedem, 17.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Israel Katz, Judeo-Spanish Traditional Ballads from Jerusalem: An Ethnomusicological Study, Two volumes, vol. 1 (New York: The Institute of Medieval Music, 1972), 98.

created a fusion of the two cultures.¹⁰ Undoubtedly this had a profound effect on Hemsí, as he maintained a relationship with Algazi and, in fact, tried to create a fusion in his own arrangement of Sephardi songs--a fusion of Ladino, Oriental and Western cultures.

Hemsí's talent was recognized. He received a scholarship from the Societe Musicale Israelite de Smyrne and in 1913 he was sent to the Royal Conservatory of Music of Milan.¹¹ It was there that he studied with the famous musicians of the day: Pozzoli, Delochi, Andreoli, Gatti and Zampieri.¹² While at the conservatory, Hemsí apparently was disturbed by the lack of attention paid to Jewish music and its place in the world of music. Dr. Seroussi notes in his introduction to the Cancionero Sefardi that the ignorance regarding Jewish music gave Hemsí more impetus to collect and harmonize the music of his heritage:

...I had at the Conservatory in Milan a celebrated professor of music history, Giusto Zampieri. He talked about all the peoples of the globe and their music, [but] never about ours... I was disappointed by his silence.¹³

Hemsí convinced his professor to discuss the topic of Jewish music in class. Unfortunately he was more disappointed with the lecture:

¹⁰ Seroussi, Mizimrat Qedem, 34-35.

¹¹ Alberto Hemsí, Cancionero Sefardi, ed. Edwin Seroussi (Jerusalem: The Jewish Music Research Centre of The Hebrew University, 1993) in press, (In Memorium, Sra. Alegra Bennoun), 6.

¹² Bennoun, A., interview.

¹³ Hemsí, Cancionero Sefardi (introduction by Seroussi), 21.

...Concluding, he [Zampieri] regretted that he cannot play Jewish melodies since these do not exist anymore because they were all lost...This for him and for other attentive pupils meant - a people divested of sentiments, of soul. In other words, a people which, although its ancestors were able to elevate themselves with music to a sublime conception of God, completely lost the moral and sentimental bond to its own race. What a profound disappointment! Profound! I am one of those Jews divested of soul, of heart and sentiment. Did not the hazzan from Cassaba sing the melodies of our ancestors? Are not the innumerable songs "Yigdal", "Kol Nidrei"... all those songs that lulled our childhood and our faith that elevate our hearts to ecstasy...the ancient heritage of a race born while singing "alleluyah"?

Today more than ever, there is an agreement on the imperative and categoric necessity of collecting and publishing hundreds of religious melodies. This [project] not only contains the seeds of musical and artistic fertility but is also a necessary element toward the unification of the ceremonies for all Sephardic synagogues of the Orient.

Concerned with all that which can raise the dignity of our race and our intellectual patrimony, it is my duty to call the attention of my brethren and fellows to this lacuna in our modern Jewish culture. If we neglect now the arid and thankless task which we are facing, we will collaborate with an inevitable fate by completely abandoning the mystical flowers of our musical language to wither away and we would have missed the favourable moment for saving the sacred heritage of our ancestral generations which disappeared in previous centuries...¹⁴

It was to this end, the preservation of the music of the Sephardi culture, that Hemsí dedicated his life. His project of collecting and publishing the "religious melodies" did not come to fruition. He did, however, collect a large portion of the secular melodies (life cycle, narratives, etc.) of the Sephardim.

Hemsí's stay at the Conservatory of Milan was interrupted

¹⁴ Ibid., 22-23.

by the onset of World War I. As an Italian national, he was conscripted into the Italian army. (His brother had volunteered for the war effort and was killed in the first few days.) Hemsí was wounded and stayed in the hospital for two years. His recovery was not complete and his plans to play piano professionally never came to pass because of permanent damage to his arm. He received many medals for his valor in the war.

Upon the completion of his studies in composition and arranging, he returned to Turkey and was greeted with songs of welcome by his grandmother.¹⁵ The rendition of these songs reawakened the realization that the songs that were being passed from mother to daughter might not survive many more generations. He began to collect Sephardi songs at home--those songs of his grandmother. Other family members served as the first informants of his 'research.' The seeds of the dream of a musical heritage that had been sown earlier were about to come to fruition for Alberto Hemsí.

From 1919 to 1923 Hemsí taught theory and piano and was the conductor of the Societe Musicale Israelite in Izmir.¹⁶ In 1923 he settled in Rhodes. It was there that he began his research and collection of Sephardi songs. He was supported in his research by the B'nai B'rith Lodge at Rhodes from 1925-

¹⁵ Bennoun, A., interview.

¹⁶ Hemsí, Cancionero Sefardi (In Memorium, by Sra. Alegra Bennoun), 7.

1926.¹⁷ Hemsî collected songs from singers whom he called "his collaborators".¹⁸ In particular, one of his informants (from whom he collected songs as she was singing lullabies to their children in Egypt) was his wife Miryam Capelluto.¹⁹ She had learned these lullabies from her maternal grandmother. Mlle. Capelluto was a piano teacher, whom he met while in Rhodes.²⁰ Young Jewish women from "good" families in Rhodes did not work, and often learned to play piano (giving piano lessons was obviously not considered 'work').²¹ They married and moved to Alexandria, Egypt where in 1928 Hemsî was offered the position as music director of the Eliahou Hanabi synagogue.²²

In an article by Bension Taragan in Les Communautés Israelites d'Alexandrie, 1932, there is a short history of the "Temple Eliahou Hanabi" which notes that in 1928, le Conseil de la Communauté Israelite announced that it engaged M.

¹⁷ Ibid., 23.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Mme. Miryam Capelluto Hemsî of Paris, France, interviewed by author, July 1992, tape recording, Paris, France.

Mme. Hemsî related in the interview by the author the following story. It was her custom to sing these Sephardi lullabies to her daughters in order to put them to sleep at night. Hemsî would often run into the nursery, pen and paper in hand, and ask her to stop singing and start the lullaby over again so that he could transcribe it. This apparently happened on several occasions.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Alberto Hemsì, a young composer of music, a specialist in Jewish music and graduate of the Royal Conservatory of Music of Milan.²³

Alexandria, Egypt was a thriving community when Hemsì accepted the position of music director. It was very cosmopolitan and in fact much more European than Cairo. The populace in Alexandria included large communities of Greeks, Spaniards, French, Turks, etc. There were many concert appearances by visiting European artists. The Yemenite born Israeli singer, Bracha Zefira also sang in Alexandria. There she met Hemsì and sang his songs in Egypt, and later in Paris.²⁴

While music director of the Temple Eliahou Hanabi, Hemsì created a large, successful musical life in the synagogue. He wrote liturgical music for the synagogue to be used in services (Sabbath and Festivals) and at life cycle events. He organized an adult amateur choir (only men were allowed to sing at Sabbath and Festival services; women were permitted to join the choir for weddings) and created a children's chorale which sang on special occasions. Apparently the musical life of the synagogue was greatly enriched by Hemsì, who added many programs that did not exist in the synagogue prior to his appointment. A small orchestra was created for weddings and

²³ Bension Taragan, Les Communautés Israélites d'Alexandrie, 1932 (translated from the French by the author), 66.

²⁴ Bennoun, A., interview.

special occasions (this group included strings, flute, trumpet, etc.). The brass band and the chorale were used in processions welcoming Jewish dignitaries to town. The religious community gradually became used to the additional repertoire of music for use in and out of the synagogue.²⁵

Hemsi's children's choir was special. Children whose parents could not afford to have them participate in such an exclusive program ordinarily, were subsidized by the Jewish school. Entrance to the choir was by audition.²⁶ In addition, Hemsi founded a Brass Band ("Fanfare") of the students at the Jewish community school which was associated with the synagogue.²⁷

The Hemsi family (which included three daughters) was not particularly religious, but as befitted his position as music director, Hemsi and his family observed Sabbath and Festivals according to Turkish Sephardi tradition.

In addition to his duties in the synagogue, Mr. Hemsi was a translator for the Turkish Embassy in Alexandria.²⁸ He taught at the Conservatory Giuseppe Verdi and gave courses in harmony, solfege and composition (he also taught privately). In 1929 Hemsi started a music publishing house--Edition Orientale de Musique. He published all of his own music and

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

the music of other composers such as J. Huttel, J. Takacs and F. Gravina. He was most prolific in composing from 1929 to the beginning of the second World War. He made several trips outside of Egypt to do research and collect Sephardi songs.²⁹ Outside of the Jewish community, Hemsí had many Egyptian friends and gave private lessons to both Arabs and Turks of the community. Mr. Hemsí's students included Dr. Fawzi, Minister of Education and the father of the Queen.³⁰

Hemsí despaired over the destruction of the Jewish communities during the world war--in particular the Sephardi communities of Salonika and Rhodes. It was in these communities that he had done much research. He was encouraged by Jose Subira of Madrid (a long-time friend and contributor to the publication of his Coplas Sefardies) to continue his work, particularly in composition.³¹

At the advent of the State of Israel, the situation of the Jews in Egypt changed drastically. A number of Jews left Alexandria, particularly from 1948 to 1952. With Nasser's rise to power, Jewish Egyptians began to be treated badly.³² Many Jews of French origin left Egypt and claimed their French roots. The Hemsí family stayed on in Alexandria. It was not until 1956 with the Suez campaign, that the family considered

²⁹ Hemsí, Cancionero Sefardi (introduction by Seroussi), 30.

³⁰ Bennoun, A., interview.

³¹ Hemsí, Cancionero Sefardi (introduction by Seroussi), 35.

³² Bennoun, A., interview.

leaving. After the Suez war, the non-Jewish community became afraid to associate with Jewish members of the community. Hemsí's students cancelled their private studies with the explanation that they were under surveillance by the government. The size of Hemsí's classes and his chorale decreased.³³

In 1957 the family made the decision to leave Alexandria for Paris, France. Mr. Bennoun, the husband of Hemsí's daughter Alegra, was of French origin (although he was born in Egypt). He claimed French citizenship and in 1957 the family settled in Paris. The adjustment was relatively easy. Alexandria had been quite European and Paris seemed familiar.³⁴

Hemsí quickly created a professional life for himself in Paris. He worked as music director in two Sephardi synagogues in Paris--Berith Shalom and Don Isaac Abravanel. He was also invited to be a professor of liturgical music at the Seminaire Israelite de France, teaching Cantors and Rabbis both Ashkenazi and Sephardi music rites.³⁵ It was in Paris that Hemsí completed the last five volumes of his Coplas Sefardies (the first five volumes were completed and published in Alexandria).

Until his death in the Fall of 1975, Hemsí continued

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

working on his music. His last composition, Mazal Tov, was written after his retirement to the country. He was quite ill and his diabetic condition had caused a loss of vision. He and his nine year old grandson Jean-Jacques Bennoun, collaborated on the project--Hemsi writing and dictating, and Jean-Jacques checking the composition for mistakes.³⁶

Alberto Hemsi came to Paris in much the same way as he had gone to Alexandria--ready for a challenge and to create, in each country, a multi-faceted musical life for himself. Hemsi was a difficult person according to his daughter, Alegra Bennoun. Apparently many people complained about him. The fact that he had alienated many people seemed to be a reason why his music not performed frequently.³⁷ He alienated the Egyptians when he described their music as primitive. The hazzanim of Turkey also were not pleased with his attitude towards Turkish classical music and its validity in Jewish liturgical music.³⁸

Hemsi had a great desire to see the new State of Israel. He had developed a relationship with the Israeli singer, Bracha Zefira. Her performances in Alexandria had led her to Hemsi and his compositions. After Hemsi had moved to Paris she was a welcome visitor in his home. Composer Paul ben Haim

³⁶ Bennoun, A., interview.

³⁷ Ibid. Sra. Bennoun noted that Hemsi may well have been a difficult person--"in keeping with his Sephardi character."

³⁸ Hemsi, Cancionero Sefardi (introduction by Seroussi), 28.

was also a good friend. Unfortunately a morbid fear of airplane travel kept Hemsí from travelling any long distances. And although he was considered a Zionist, Alberto Hemsí never saw the State of Israel.³⁹

Angry that the music of the Sephardim was not well accepted in music circles or in the Ashkenazi community, Hemsí continued to compose and champion the cause of Sephardi music.⁴⁰

Hemsí dedicated his life's work to the preservation of a musical culture that he feared would disappear in the next generation. His vision of a fusion of musical cultures--east and west for the glory of Sephardic culture--was at the heart of his work. His music reflects his vision, and that vision has contributed greatly to the renewed interest in the Sephardi musical heritage.

³⁹ Bennoun, A., interview.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

THE MUSIC OF ALBERTO HEMSI

Acculturation is defined as "the process of change in artifacts, customs and beliefs that result from the contact of societies with different cultural traditions. The term is also used to refer to the results of such changes."⁴¹ There are two types of acculturation. The first type is a kind of free "borrowing" and a modification of cultural elements that occur when different cultures maintain an interchange that is without "military or political domination." This type of acculturation is called "incorporation," which occurs when new elements are integrated into an already existing culture.⁴² The second type of acculturation is called "directed change."⁴³ This type involves military or political domination. It is more complicated in that there is a high level of interference into the dominated culture. The processes by which this second type takes place include: (1) "assimilation"-- "the almost complete replacement of one culture by another" and (2) "cultural fusion" -- "a new synthesis of cultural elements differing from the two original... and "reaction against aspects of the dominant culture."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, Ready Reference and Index, Vol I, pub., William Benton (Chicago, 1974).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

The problem, as Hemsí saw it, was that the music of the Sephardi heritage was dying out--not only the people who were the transmitters of the music, but the functional aspects of the music as well. He feared the possible extinction of a major resource of the Sephardi people. The problem then presents an ultimatum: allow the music to become extinct, or change part of its language for a new appeal to a wider audience so that the music will be capable of further transmission.

How does one make the transition from the original function of synagogal and life cycle music to the concert stage? Can the audience ever have the sense of a living functional music by hearing the new form? Which is the dominant culture that one hears? In fact, what is the musical standard adhered to by each separate culture?

One of the issues in acculturation is that it often takes place on an unconscious level. Over a period of time, customs, art, literature, music begin to merge in a way that the population may not be aware of for many months or years into the future. Hemsí by his compositions, took the music out of an unconscious and raised it to a conscious level, a kind of "directed change" acculturation.

This new language poses a problem for the purists. The tradition of Sephardi music had always been to be unaccompanied, whether in liturgical chant or in the secular folkloric music. Hemsí, and other arrangers as well (Yehezkel

Braun, Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Leon Algazi, to name a few) saw the answer for the preservation of a dying tradition to be the addition of instruments and western harmonies. The purpose of the arrangements: the presentation of Sephardi music to a world-wide audience from the concert stage.

To this end, Alberto Hemsí created a "new Sephardi music" for use on the European concert stage. It was a way to showcase the Sephardi culture and rich musical heritage. Its transfer into the greater world was yet another example of how to deal with a folkloric music. Hemsí was influenced in this realm by many composers. He looked to the music of Bartók, Kodály, Ravel, De Falla and Rodrigo as examples of how formally to present an indigenous folk music to a wider musical audience. Hemsí also was influenced greatly by his teacher, R. Isaac Algazi, who incorporated elements of Turkish classical music into his cantorial music.

The music of Alberto Hemsí can be considered an acculturation (change in "music" that results from the contact of different societies with different indigenous music). Hemsí's goal was not only to preserve the music of the Sephardim, but to incorporate both Oriental (Middle Eastern, i.e. Egyptian) and Western (European) elements, so that the resultant music would have a world-wide appeal (as well as the appeal to the cultures intimately involved). Hemsí freely "borrowed" from each culture's musical language and "incorporated" all elements into a new existent language that

we find in Hemsí's major Opus, the ten volumes of the Coplas Sefardies. It is this process--the process of acculturation that one should keep in mind while listening to and in the study of the music of Alberto Hemsí. The Coplas Sefardies are a collection of sixty Sephardi songs for which Hemsí wrote piano accompaniments. These "traditional" melodies which Hemsí collected take on new life and meaning by the addition of the piano accompaniments that include Western harmonies and Oriental musical devices such as improvisatory imitation (also found in cantorial music). The resultant music, a synthesis of cultures, provides a type of fusion that creates a "new culture."

Hemsí had already studied Turkish music, western music theory and composition, and was surrounded by the folk music of the Sephardim. Additionally, he heard Greek and Arabic (and more specifically, Egyptian) music. He was surrounded by a kaleidoscope of sounds which influenced him and gave him ideas for his compositions.⁴⁵ In order to understand Debussy, one must know that he was exposed to the sound of a gamelan, tuned in an equal tempered system. Ravel was greatly influenced by Spanish music and Milhaud by the indigenous music of Brazil. All of these composers were inclined toward the exotic and incorporated that sound into their own compositions. Hemsí as well was greatly affected by his

⁴⁵ Sra. Alegria Bennoun states in her interview with the author that her father, Alberto Hemsí was avidly interested in all types of music, particularly jazz.

environment and desired to create a synthesis of sound that would have a far-reaching effect.

Hemsi collected the songs from 1923 to 1938 from Izmir, Istanbul, Rhodes, Salonika, Egypt (or the Middle East) and published them himself, from 1932 to 1973. The first five books were published in Alexandria from 1932 to 1938 at his own music publishing house, Edition Orientale de Musique, that he established in 1929. The last five were published in Paris from 1969 to 1973.⁴⁶ These sixty songs (six songs per volume) comprise the bulk of the actual melodies that Hemsi collected on his field research trips.

In the forthcoming book by Hemsi, Cancionero Sefardi, edited by Dr. Edwin Seroussi, it should be noted that only 44 melodies appear (Hemsi collected only sixty-six melodies) and that Hemsi collected "232 songs and 115 variants; a total of 334 items."⁴⁷ Hemsi categorizes them according to their function.⁴⁸ The categories of songs have been divided by Seroussi and his collaborators into "generic and functional categories: romances, canciones, coplas, and liturgia traducida (translated liturgy)."⁴⁹ This is more of a collection of poetry and literature than actual music, but it

⁴⁶ Alberto Hemsi, Coplas Sefardies, Op. 51 - (Xa) pour Chant et Piano, Epilogue (Paris, 1973), XIII.

⁴⁷ Hemsi, Cancionero Sefardi, (introduction by Seroussi), 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 18.

is fascinating to see that for each melody there are many verse variations within the same geographic community and equally interesting to note the differences from community to community.

Hemsi collected these songs and their poetic variations from the members of the various communities that he visited. He had no recording equipment, and therefore transcribed everything by ear. Seroussi notes with regard to the Coplas Sefardies that "after comparing the version of the melodies included in Sepharad (Hemsi book) and their arrangement in Coplas Sefardies, one concludes that Hemsi's arrangements remained remarkably faithful to his original transcriptions. Therefore, 22 melodies appearing in the Coplas Sefardies alone were included here, detached of course from the piano accompaniment."⁵⁰

It is Hemsi's piano accompaniments which make his contribution unique. What were the factors that influenced his arrangements? Are they gross overstatements for the glory of the accompaniment alone? The scholar Israel Katz is quite vocal in his opinions of these accompaniments:

Hemsi's keen interest in composition completely overshadowed his pretended scholarly approach. He was intent on harmonizing the melodies he had collected, thus taking them out of their modal context and forcing the irrationally sung intervals into the tempered interval of the Occident for the purposes of concert performance. Any person who has heard ballads from the areas represented in Hemsi's collection will immediately agree that his melodies have been doctored to suit the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 48-49.

composer's honest but scholarly naive intentions.⁵¹ There seems to be somewhat of a disagreement with the new findings of Seroussi and his colleagues in terms of "doctoring" the melodies. Hemsí appeared to be following the national trend with his compositions.

After World War II a new trend developed in Egypt. Egyptian composers began to try to combine Arabic and European traditions to create an "Egyptian Art Music" that used the Arabic maqamat and traditional melodies and western forms and compositional techniques.⁵²

Hemsí clearly was keeping current with his Arab colleagues. He was not however using Arabic instruments such as the Kanoun and Oud (capable of quarter tone tunings and harmony). His modus vivendi was the harmonization of the music with piano.

One of Hemsí's goals, before World War I, was to be a concert pianist. Although he was no longer able to play in public, the piano was clearly his vehicle for musical expression. The bulk of Hemsí's music is written either with piano accompaniment or written for the piano itself. The piano for Hemsí was the grand instrument capable of great expression and clearly suited to his purpose of concert performances of the Sephardi music.

⁵¹ Israel Katz, Judeo-Spanish Traditional Ballads, 216.

⁵² The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, ed. Stanley Sadie, (London, 1980) Vol. 1.

For the pianist, the Hemsí arrangements present a substantial challenge (heretofore all references made to Hemsí's arrangements will center around the Coplas Sefardies and a few liturgical works: Yismehou, Kal Nidre, Benedicho Su Nombre). The clearly pianistic qualities of the arrangements indicate a thorough knowledge of the keyboard, its many possibilities and its limitations. The parts lie well in the fingers of a highly accomplished pianist (for these are not accompaniments to be attempted by the intermediate pianist). Hemsí explores a large range of notes and a multiplicity of harmonies. He is highly specific in marking dynamics, tempi, key and time signatures and markings of expression.

What differentiates Hemsí from his colleagues (in the arrangements of Sephardi music) is the grand scale on which he recreates the simplest folk song. Clearly this is part of his desire to call attention to a previous "unknown" music.

Many of the songs in the Coplas Sefardies begin with elaborate introductions to set the tone of the song and to showcase the piano with all of its versatility. For example, in the romance El rey por muncha madrugada (See Appendix A), the piano accompaniment sets the scene (which is not included in the text of the song): It is in the pre-dawn hours. The King, restless and pensive, has spent the night in the church praying and thinking. He comes to the Queen's chambers and quietly enters...the Queen, not realizing that it is the King who has entered the room, speaks to her lover. The song ends

as the Queen looks in the mirror at her image--a foreshadowing of her death for having been an adulteress.

The romance is a particular form of song. Although the title of Hemsí's work is Coplas Sefardies, coplas and romances each have unique characteristics, functions and histories.

"... The most ancient kind of song is the romance. These songs which combine epic and lyric elements, unfold stories, part of which have a defined historical background, while others...take place in undefined places and times. The heroes of the romances are usually royalty: kings and queens ...It should be noted that women have a central role in the stories.. At the foundation of the story is some sort of conflict that is resolved in the end...sometimes happy and sometimes tragic.

In the process of passing from one generation to another, some interesting changes occurred in the content of the romances. Some express the adjustment to the special way of life of the Jews in exile.⁵³

Hemsí opens the romance with the markings Grave e sonoro. Broad sweeping chords in the bass (bars 1-4) marked piano and under a slur create the pre-dawn eeriness. In bar 5 Hemsí overlays the chords with a melodic variation on the vocal line. The mood abruptly shifts and the rhythm moves from a slow 3/4 time to an allegretto in 3/8. The agitation and tensions builds (from bars 10 to 24) and climaxes with driving chords (bar 25). One is immediately engaged in the pre-dawn hours, senses the ensuing drama and is shocked, by the chords (bar 25), into listening to the narrative. Hemsí, without words, has given the listener the background to the narrative.

⁵³ Edwin Seroussi, ed., Zer Shel Shirei Am Mipi Yehudei Sepharad, collected and transcription: Shoshana Weich-Shahak, (Jerusalem: Renanot - Institute for Jewish Music, 1991), 6.

Each subsequent verse takes on a different pianistic and harmonic character. The accompaniment to the second verse, as the Queen brushes her hair, changes momentarily to a light renaissance (harp like) feeling with the chords and melodic statements primarily in the treble clef (bars 53-70). Between each verse is a bridge that foreshadows the next verse. The bridge to the last verse [as the Queen will see her image for the last time in the mirror] becomes heavier, more dissonant and leans more toward the bass, until we feel at the final chords the Queen's realization of her own death.

Unaccompanied, this song tells an historical narrative that can be related with all of the drama and mystery that the human voice can evoke. However, the picture created with the addition of this particular accompaniment doubles the drama, paints extra scenery and punctuates the vocal narrative.

One could argue with the purists that the accompaniment creates an aura of excitement and intrigue that a single vocal line could not carry alone. Moreover, if the purpose of a romance is to tell the history of the people, then bringing that history to a larger population is as important as the preservation of the melody. Hemsí was clearly successful in calling attention to the melody and to the story.

As a performer, having sung this particular piece on the concert stage, I feel that the piano supports the vocal line well and does not detract from it. It is interesting to note that in singing the song without piano, the performer has a

sense of incompleteness. Hemsí has succeeded in creating "Sephardi Art Song" in much the same way the Egyptians of his day were trying to create Egyptian art music.

The next piece of music is an example of the creation of an Oriental/Western fusion (See Appendix A). It is more tonally complicated and the phrase structure is quite different from the previous romance. The cantica Una Matica de Ruda (the cantica comes under the heading of songs of courtship) consists of a dialogue between mother and daughter. The mother questions the daughter concerning the flower she is carrying. The daughter replies that it is from a young boy who fell in love with her.

The text is a simple structure of four stanzas with four lines each. The rhythmic structure is also simple so that the melody repeats well for all four stanzas. Again we see the long pianistic introduction (the first 20 bars). The melody is divided into two sections: section A is a four measure phrase repeated (bars 21-28) and section B is thirteen bars long (bars 29-41). Unlike the El rey por muncha madrugada which was a simple AABB of 4 measures each for each stanza, Una matica de ruda is structured in such a way that the beginning is shorter than the ending section. It falls into three parts, the B section being divided. From bars 29-33 is section B, which then splinters off into a 4 bar phrase (c1) and bars 38-41 coming to a resolution (c2).

The notation is misleading because the A and B sections

are written in two different tonalities. The B flat in the opening key signature appears to designate F major when it is not. The B section (bar 29) shows five flats and this is deceiving because a natural is present throughout the piece. Additionally, all of the G's are flat, and Hemsî continually notates the G flat where the indication is not needed.

One then needs to look at the scale structure of such a piece in order to clarify its tonality. Noted below is the scale as it appears in the Una matica.

MAQAM HIJAZ

The Turkish maqam Hijaz is the scale presented (although this is not a simple Hijaz scale--in Turkish music sometimes the G in the Hijaz scale is used for variation.⁵⁴ Hemsî clearly tried to notate the Oriental scale into European musical language for Western consumption.

In this piano accompaniment, the bass F dominates in the introduction. When the melody begins, the drone changes to C

⁵⁴ Eliyahu Schliefer. Lecture on Arabic/Turkish maqamot. Notes (Jerusalem, 1992)

and the F is no longer quite as prominent. In the end the tonality returns to F. The harmonic language in this piece is very dissonant (unlike El rey). In the chords one finds 4ths and 5ths or 2nds. By having this kind of dissonance, Hemsî tries to capture the Oriental flavor, making it different from the usual European harmonizations (however, the methods he employs are taken directly from French music of the end of the 19th century like Saint-Saens or Rimsky Korsakov -i.e., Orientalists). With this kind of harmonization, Hemsî creates an atmosphere. A tapestry effect is woven by overlaying dissonances on the melodic line. Hemsî does not, in this case, try to harmonize every chord and therefore creates a similar atmosphere to Arabic vocal music accompanied by drone and imitative instruments.

Hemsî's technique is to extract parts of the melody and place them in strategic places as an inner voice--actually a European concept. This technique creates dissonance, and gives the effect of imitation and woven melodic lines that appear in different voicings throughout the piece. The melody is faster moving than the harmonic inner voice. The inner voices are moving in a slow scalewise fashion against the melody (bars 51-53).

For variety, Hemsî varies the accompaniment for each verse (both in this piece as well as most of the others--sometimes the changes are small, but he almost never repeats himself exactly from stanza to stanza). The vocal lines are

also slightly different, and it is incumbent upon the singer to check carefully for the slightest variation in dynamics, accented notes or ornaments (see bars 21/55; 24/58; 32-33/66-67, etc.).

Dynamics are of course written in European markings. These are not necessarily how the Sephardi women would sing them. However, the dynamic outlook is geared to the Western listener and singer as well.

From studying the scores of Hemsí's works one may feel, like the purists, that the piano is overwhelming to the singer and to the audience. It is my opinion as a performer that no matter how grandiose the piano accompaniment may seem, the singer is not overpowered nor the words lost in a splash of sound. Hemsí's writing includes the voice as part of the ensemble.

Alberto Hemsí succeeded greatly in his life's undertaking as a preserver of culture. In recent years (and certainly due to the 500 year commemoration of the Expulsion from Spain) there has been a renewed interest in Hemsí's works. There are new recordings being made. Singers such as Mira Zakai of Israel are programming his works on classical recitals (Hemsí's music works well when programmed with music by De Falla or Rodrigo). Other singers such as Flory Jagoda and Hazzan Alberto Mizrahi program Hemsí's music. As a direct result of this project, I hope to convince other cantors to program this music as well as continue with my own

performances of this music.

Hemsi was a pioneer with vision and perseverance. It was he alone (and certainly with the help and encouragement of Jose Subira) who published his own music, and continued to write and persevere in an environment that was not always welcoming. He has left a legacy that the Sephardi community can be proud of. The Ashkenazi Jewish community has welcomed the additional repertoire of Sephardi music as well as the window into history that this music has afforded us. And to the general music community, Hemsi has left a particularly important message to pioneer composers and musicians and to future communities where either type of acculturation has occurred: find a common ground for dialogue and shared culture. Music proves itself time and again to be a universal and healing language. Let us allow Alberto Hemsi's spirit and ambition to guide us to new expression.

El rey por muncha madrugada.....

A. Hemsí op. 8-2

Grave e sonoro

5

p *cresc.* *dim.*

10

Allegretto

poco rit. *suddenly* *p* *f*

15

cresc. *molto*

20

dim.

[25]

[32]

p

El rey por mun - cha ma - dru

f marcellati

pp

m. s.

leggero

[30]

ga El rey por mun - cha ma - dru - ga On

m. d.

[35]

de la rei - - na i - va On - do la

poco cresc.

[40]

rei - - na i - va

f

(b)

45

50

dim. Grave e sonoro, come prima
p

Allegretto 55

pp poco rit. *m. s.* *sf* *p*

60

llos A la rei - na to - pòen ca - ve - llos, Pei - nán - do -

65

se sus..... des - tren - sa dos; Pei - nán - do - se sus..... des - tren - sa -

f *p* *cresc.*

dos

più forte

75

80

dim. . . a . poco . a . poco

85

Come prima

Con es - pe - jo

pp *rellutati* *simili* *mf* *m. d.*

90

deo - ro en su ma - no Con es - pe - jo deo - ro en

m. d.

su ma - no Mi - rán - do - se su bel ga - la -

no, Mi - rán - do - se su bel ga - la - no

.....

poco rall. e dim.

pp come uneco *(1) riten. assai* 110

su bel ga - la - no

p *col canto* *pp*

Una matica de ruda...

[36]

Andantino

A. Hemsí op. 22 - 2

Measures 1-4 of the piece. The music is in 2/4 time, key of B-flat major. The right hand plays a melody of eighth notes, and the left hand plays a bass line of eighth notes. The first measure is marked *fz* and *con semplicità*.

5

Measures 5-9. Measure 5 is marked *CRISC.*. The melody continues with eighth notes, and the bass line features a more active pattern. Measure 9 is marked *fz*.

10

Measures 10-14. The melody is marked *fz* throughout. The bass line has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. Measure 14 is marked *fz*.

15

Measures 15-19. Measure 15 is marked *a tempo*. The melody is marked *pp*. The piece concludes with a *para rall.* marking.

20

con grazia

[37]

U - na ma - ti - ca de..... ru - da,.....

simili

25

*un poco più mosso
cresc.*

U - na ma - ti - ca de..... flor,..... Hi - ja

cresc.

30

mí - a mi..... que - ri - da..... Di - me a mi..... quen

35

poco meno

te..... la..... dió..... Di - me a mi..... quen

40

te... la... dió...

col canto

a tempo

45

50

calando dolcemente e rall.

a tempo

55

1.^o Tempo

U... na ma... ti... ca de ru... da... U... na ma...

pp

gliss.

60

un poco più mosso
cresc.

[39]

ti - ca de flor. Me la

cresc.

65

dió un man - ce - vi - co. Que de

70

mi se e - na - mo - ró.

Poco meno

allarg.

Que de mi se e - na - mo - ró.

col canto

allarg.

pp

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