Lavaba La Blanka Ninya

a Sephardic Jewish *romance*
for SSA *div.*

arr. Sarah Riskind

Background Information

The Sephardim are descended from Jews who settled in modern-day Greece and other Balkan countries, Turkey, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt after being expelled from Spain and Portugal in the 1490s. Due to persecution in the 20th century, many Sephardic Jews now live in Israel, France, the Americas, and other parts of the world. The term "Sephardic" is often used to represent all Jews who are not Ashkenazi, or traditionally Yiddish-speaking Jews from German or Eastern European background, but there are also groups that fall into neither category.

"Lavaba la Blanka Ninya" is a monophonic *romance* of the Sephardic Jews, passed from generations of mothers and daughters through oral tradition. Because Sephardic music was not notated until the 20th century, it is difficult to discern the age of most Sephardic melodies. "Lavaba la Blanka Ninya" is one of many *romances* with structural similarities to medieval Spanish narrative ballads, though its text has been traced to a Greek ballad. Most Sephardic music reflects the Ottoman and Arabic cultures of the Mediterranean more than the Iberian peninsula, except for influences in the 20th century and beyond. Commercial artists and composers have interpreted Sephardic music in a range of styles, but it is important to understand that the harmonies, vocal timbres, instrumentation, and rhythms usually create more of a reimagining than a literal presentation of tradition.

The main melodic source for this arrangement is a recording on Avner Perez's Maale Adumim Institute database, accessible at http://folkmasa.org/avshir/shirp.php?mishtane=1849. The singer Renée Bivas-Sevy was born in Salonica and lived in Israel after World War II until her death in 2012. Other recordings of this ballad are located in record numbers 1766, 832, 693, and 163, and Susana Weich-Shahak includes transcriptions of several informants in *Romancero Sefardí de Oriente: Antología de Tradición Oral*. Weich-Shahak's video of Bivas-Sevy singing "Lavaba" in 1996 is also available on YouTube.

Most *romances* are traditionally sung unaccompanied, solo or unison, by women performing domestic activities such as caring for children. "Lavaba la Blanka Ninya" accompanies a custom in which families wash wool for the pillows and blankets of a couple soon to be wed. It is a highly melismatic, unmetered ballad that exhibits the microtonal character of the Ottoman *makam* modal system. The approximate rhythm is transcribed from the Bivas-Sevy recording at record #1849.

Performance suggestions:

- I have adopted the ꜀ symbol from Turkish music because "Lavaba" is based on a scale that uses this microtone for the second step. A ꜀ is technically one *koma* flat (1/9 step), but in this song it is often sung lower. Singers can use the quarter tone between E and Eb as a goal for E꜀.
- Treat the rhythmic notation as a loose guide for the florid lines more than a strict depiction of timing
- Singers do not have to line up the melismatic pitches entirely
- Florid lines may be sung by 1-5 soloists if the entire section is impractical
- Listening to these field recordings is strongly recommended!
- The tempo is extremely fluid
- The conductor may experiment with a brighter and less *bel canto* sound, but this arrangement prioritizes vocal agility and harmony over using a low register.

Text

The Judeo-Spanish language spoken by the Sephardic Jews is most commonly called Ladino, but other regional names include Spaniol, Djudezmo, Djudeo-spanyol, and haketía (Moroccan Judeo-Spanish). Since it was originally written in the Hebrew Rashi script, there are now many spelling systems and countless dialectic variations in pronunciation and vocabulary. This arrangement primarily uses Bivas-Sevy's pronunciation, with the spelling system from the Ladino magazine *Aki Yerushalayim* that is used on the popular online discussion group Ladinokomunita (https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/Ladinokomunita/info).

Pronunciation Guide:
- Vowels: same as Spanish
- Consonants: same as Spanish, except:
  - z is voiced, as in English
  - j is ʒ, as in French "jour"
  - g is a hard g, as in English "gate"
  - s at the end of a word is voiced, as in z

In this ballad, a husband returns after a long time at war to find his wife weeping for him. Unrecognized, he tests her faithfulness, and in many versions she tests him in return. The last two verses in this arrangement are not from the Renée Bivas recording, but they complete the story in a way that is more fulfilling for an audience.

Translation

Lavaba la blanka ninya, lavaba i espandia, Kon lagrimas la lavaba, kon suspiros la spandia.	The fair woman was washing and putting linens out to dry, with her tears she washed and with her sighs she dried.
Por ayi paso un kavayero, kopo d'agua le demando, De lagrimas de sus ojos siete kantarikos le incho.	A knight passed by and asked her for a cup of water And she filled for him seven jugs from her tears.
"Porke yorash, blanka ninya, mi sinyora, porke yorash?" "Todos vienen de la gerra, al k'aspero no ay venir mas."	Why do you cry, fair maiden? Milady, why do you cry? Everyone comes back from the war and the one I wait for does not return.
"Dame sinyal, mi sinyora, sinyal del vuestro marido." "Alto, alto komo 'l pino, i derecho komo 's la flecha."	Give me a sign, milady, a sign from your husband. He is tall like a pine tree, straight as an arrow,
"Alto, alto komo 'l pino, i derecho komo 's la flecha, Su barvika roya tiene, empesando la despuntar."	He is tall like a pine tree, straight as an arrow, his beard is blond, just starting to appear.
"Ya lo vide, mi sinyora, a la gerra matado sta; Un' ora antes ke muriera, tres palavrikas me avlo."	I saw him, milady, he was killed at war; three things he told me one hour before he died
"Un' ora antes ke muriera, tres palavrikas me avlo: 'Mujer ermoza tengo, ijikos komo es el sol,'	Three things he told me one hour before he died First, I have a beautiful wife, second, I have children [that shine] like the sun,
La otra es, mi sinyora, ke me kazara yo kon vos, La otra es, mi sinyora, ke me kazara yo kon vos."	and third, that I should marry you. and third, that I should marry you.
"Onde siete anyos l'asperi, otros siete lo vo 'sperar, Si al de ocho non viene, bivdika kedara eya."	I have waited for seven years and seven more I will wait, and if by then he does not come, she [I, *but avoiding bad omen*] will remain a widow.
"No yores mas, blanka ninya, no yores ni kieres yorar, Yo soy el vuestro marido, el k' asperas de la gerra."	Do not cry, milady, I am your husband for whom you waited to return from the war.
"Si sos el mi marido, sinyal de mi puerpo dares." "En el pecho de ezkiedro, ayi tenes un buen lunar."	If you are indeed my husband, you should have a sign from my body. Under your left breast you have a nice freckle.
Se tomaron, se abesaron, i a echar se irian. Se tomaron, se abesaron, i a echar se irian.	They embraced and kissed, and they went off together. They embraced and kissed, and they went off together.

Translation: Susana Weich-Shahak
"The Traditional Performance of Sephardic Songs" in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Music,* ed. Joshua S. Walden

Lavaba La Blanka Ninya

Freely, approx. ♩=60

SOPRANO 1

SOPRANO 2

ALTO

mm

solo

mm

1.La - va-ba la blan ka ninya, la-va-ba i es pan - di - o,

kon la - gri-mas la - va - ba, kon su-spi-ros la span - di - a.

tutti

2.Por ayi paso un ka va - ye - ro, ko-po de a-gua le de - man - do,

"Da - me sin-yal, mi sin - yo - ra, ma - ri - do,

4."Da - me sin-yal, mi sin - yo - ra, sin yal del vues-tro ma - ri - do."

"Al - to, al-to ko-mo'l pi - no, i de-re cho ko-mo's la fle - cha."

Al - to, al - to i de - re - cho

Al - to, al - to i de - re - cho

5."Al - to, al-to ko mo'l pi - no, i de-re-cho ko mo's la fle - cha,

5."Al - to, al-to ko mo'l pi - no, i de-re-cho ko mo's la fle - cha,

su bar-vi-ka ro - ya__ tie - ne,__ em-pe-san-do la des- pun - tar."

su bar-vi-ka ro - ya__ tie - ne,__ em-pe-san-do la des- pun - tar."
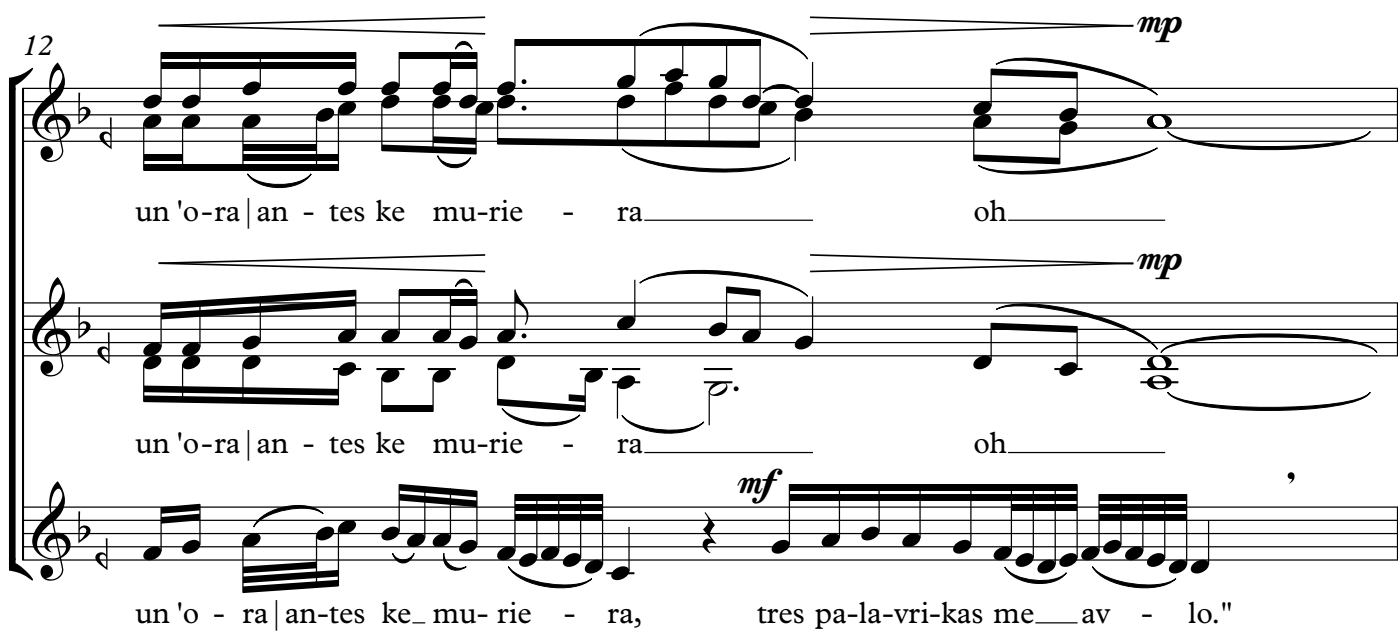
Ah_____ a la ger - ra ma-ta - do sta

Ah_____ a la ger - ra ma-ta - do sta

6."Ya lo vi-de, mi sin - yo - ra, a la ger - ra ma-ta - do____ sta;____

un 'o-ra | an - tes ke mu-rie - ra_____ oh_____

un 'o-ra | an - tes ke mu-rie - ra_____ oh_____

un 'o - ra | an - tes ke_ mu-rie - ra, tres pa-la-vri-kas me__ av - lo."

13

p

ooh

p

ooh

mp

7."Un'o-ra|an-tes ke mu - rie - ra, tres pa la vri-kas me___av - lo:___

14

(oh)

(oh)

'Mu - jer er-mo-za ten - go, i ü-kos ko-mo el___el___sol,'

15

mf

8.La ot-ra es, mi sin - yo - ra, ke me ka - za-ra yo___kon___vos,

mf

8.La ot-ra es, mi sin - yo - ra, ke me ka - za-ra yo___kon___vos,

La ot-ra es, mi sin - yo - ra, ke me ka - za - ra kon vos."

9."On - de sie-te an-yos l'as - pe - ri, ot-ros sie - te lo vo 'spe - rar,

On - de sie-te an-yos l'as pe - ri vo pe - rar

Si al de o-cho non vie - ne, biv-di-ka ke-da-ra e - ya."

ad lib.

Si non vie - ne ooh

f *ad lib.*

non vie - ne ooh

9