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Time to Wake Up to Ladino Songs for Today's Kids

For the better part of two decades, Sarah Aroeste's artistic mission has been not only to preserve the musical and linguistic riches of Sephardic culture and the Judeo-Spanish dialect Ladino, but also to generate a new vitality through the music that will keep the traditions alive, exciting, and relevant.

The Berkshires-based singer's first three recordings – *A la Una: In the Beginning* (2003), *Puertas* (2007), and *Gracia* (2012) – capture the passion, sultriness, drama, and Northern Mediterranean sound of European Sephardic music. By her third album, she was not only interpreting songs, but also writing new ones, working within the tradition but adding contemporary touches. For years, she has entertained audiences at music festivals around the world as a performer, and was a finalist in Israel's "Festiladino" competition of original Ladino songs in 2008.

In 2013, Aroeste was expecting her first child, and started writing about the thoughts and emotions she was experiencing. A sweet ballad titled "*Komo vas a ser*" (How Will You Be?) was a product of that time. When daughter Irit arrived and Aroeste found herself immersed in the routines of motherhood – mealtime, playtime, bedtime, happy time, crying time – she realized that she wanted to pass down a bit of her family's heritage in a fun and child-friendly way. Finding a dearth of existing options, she began writing Ladino songs with lyrics that re-



flected her growing daughter's experience of the world, set to the types of music a child might be accustomed to hearing these days.

The result of Aroeste's efforts is her new recording, *Ora de Despertar* (Time to Wake Up), a collection of 11 original tunes that she describes as "bouncy, whimsical children's songs that happen to be in Ladino. I grew up on American musical traditions, and when I

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started writing an album for kids, that's what I used." For example, "Las Komidas," a food song, is pure surf music, while "Mi Familya" has a lively New Orleans bomp. She said she thought of using some of the instruments familiar in Sephardic music, but decided against it, preferring to keep things contemporary.

Aroeste explains that there are virtually no songs passed down in Ladino expressly for children, and what few she was able to track down through her contacts among experts and enthusiasts of the language consisted of choral music and lullabies. "And lullabies really are for parents, not kids," she says. Modern-sounding Ladino songs for children are unlikely to have been written, as "no one grows up speaking Ladino as a first language anymore," she says. Among the challenges of keeping Ladino alive today, Aroeste explains, is that European Sephardim tended to be insular, with traditions being passed down within closed communities and around the family dinner table. During the Holocaust, the European Sephardic population was decimated, and much of that oral culture was lost. The State of Israel has invested heavily in preserving field recordings and other archival material, but it has been up to artists like Aroeste, exploring her own roots, to keep Ladino vital.

With *Ora de Despertar*, Aroeste is taking the tradition in a new direction for a new generation. She uses no English on the recording – "I never do English," she says, "I'm all about the Ladino" – but has been creative in figuring out how to use the songs to teach

the basics of the language to a child. Each of the 11 songs on album has an accompanying music video, available online, that will help youngsters visually understand what the tunes are about. Both the songs and the videos have the all-important Again Factor – you know, "Mommy/Daddy play it again." None of the songs, however, are Jewish themed – Aroeste said she might try an album like that some day, but wanted *Ora de Despertar* to focus on the daily business of a child's life.

Aroeste, whose second daughter, Dalia, was born last October, says that



Sarah Aroeste

the album has given her a special bond with her eldest, Irit. "It gives me great joy," she says, "to see her ears perk up when she hears the music and say, 'You wrote that for me.'"

Ora de Despertar is available through Amazon and iTunes. For more information and links to purchase, visit www.saraharoeste.com.