

Songs of Sepharad

Ladino music and oral tradition as evidence of migration

Subject	Music, History, Language
Grade level	Secondary and undergraduate (adaptable)
Duration	One 60-minute class period
Skills	Source analysis, spatial reasoning, oral-tradition literacy
Tools	Sephardi Spaces database and world map, ChatGPT/Copilot, StoryMaps

Overview

Sephardic communities carried their music across five centuries of migration, from the 1492 expulsion from Iberia to the communities of Salonika, Istanbul, Sarajevo, and later New York and Seattle. Ladino songs, including romances (ballads), coplas, and wedding and lullaby songs, preserved medieval Spanish alongside Hebrew, Turkish, Greek, and Balkan elements absorbed along the way. Students treat a single song as a historical document and trace how its melody and language record a community's route.

Learning objectives

Students will be able to:

- Explain how oral tradition carries and reshapes cultural memory across migration.
- Identify linguistic and musical borrowings that mark a community's route.
- Use the Sephardi Spaces database and world map to connect a song to specific places, people, and dates.
- Produce a short annotated presentation linking a piece of music to a migration story.

Materials and tools

- Sephardi Spaces database and Sephardi world map.
- One or two Ladino recordings, for example a romance such as “A la una yo naci” or a Flory Jagoda song.
- AI tools for translation and theme work: ChatGPT or Copilot.
- Optional: StoryMaps or ArcGIS to plot the song's geographic journey.

Connection to Sephardi Spaces

Ask the AI research assistant, “Find Sephardic figures connected to music or Salonika,” then locate those figures on the world map. Placing a song's origin and migration path onto the same routes traveled by people in the database makes oral transmission concrete and geographic for students.

Lesson sequence (about 60 minutes)

Warm-up (10 min). Play one Ladino recording without translation. Ask students to note which languages they think they hear and what mood the music conveys.

Guided analysis (15 min). Provide the lyrics. Using an AI tool, students produce a translation and highlight words that are not medieval Spanish. Discuss what those borrowings say about where the community lived.

Mapping (20 min). In pairs, students use the Sephardi world map to trace a plausible route for the song's community and identify one database figure connected to that place or period.

Share-out (15 min). Each pair presents their song's route in two minutes: origin, path, one borrowed word, and one connected person.

Assessment

- Exit ticket: one paragraph explaining how a single song can serve as evidence of migration.
- Rubric focus: accuracy of the migration route, quality of textual evidence, and clarity of the database connection.

Extension and differentiation

- **Extension:** Students record a short “diaspora playlist” with liner notes citing database figures.
- **Support:** Provide a translated lyric sheet and a shortlist of three map locations.
- **Cross-curricular:** Pair with a music class to compare modal structures across regions.