



# Françoise Atlan

The French singer was one of the first artists to help revive interest in Sephardic repertoire and history. **Simon Broughton** reports on her impressive career

Jean de Peña

The singer Françoise Atlan describes her repertoire as inhabiting three worlds. In one sense she means Jewish, Christian and Muslim, the three faiths that cohabited in Moorish Spain. But she also combines, in her words, “my roots, my heart and my knowledge,” in her interpretations of this material. In recent years there’s been a revival of interest in Sephardic music, thanks to a new generation of performers like Mor Karbasi and Yasmin Levy. But Françoise Atlan was one of the first to really explore this repertoire, with its rich layers of language, history and migration.

Atlan was born in the South of France to Maghrebi Jewish parents. Her father was an Algerian Jewish Berber (Kabyle) and her mother a Moroccan Jew from Tangiers. They settled in France in 1963. “I grew up with this double culture, Occidental and Oriental,” she says. “When I was very young I went to the synagogue with my father and discovered the power of the voice – the way Sephardic people sing the prayer. It’s very striking.”

Aged six, Atlan started learning piano and singing from her mother and then studied classical music at the conservatoires in Saint-Étienne and Aix-en-Provence. At first she was performing contemporary music. Her first recording, aged 22, was as a soloist in *Cantigas*, a choral piece by the (French/Spanish) composer Maurice Ohana (1913-1992), who personally selected her for the solo part. It was at university that she met Sephardic music scholar (and now Babel Med director) Sami Sadak, who encouraged her to research and sing Sephardic music.

She recorded her first solo album *Romances Sefardies* in 1992 and its follow-ups *Entre la Rose et le Jasmin* in 1995 and *Noches* in 1997. Recorded in a Capuchin cloister, these albums feature minimal accompaniment on *oud*, flute, cello and percussion. It’s Atlan’s pure, clear voice that is the focus.

“It was my musical intention to be faithful to the song,” she says, “but 25 years on it sounds a bit ‘classical’ to me. But for the classical people I am traditional and for the traditional people I am a soprano. I just try to manage my roots, my heart and my knowledge.”

What certainly made a big change to Atlan’s approach was going to live in Morocco for a decade to re-connect with her roots. This meant going deep into the Arab-Andalus repertoire, both Jewish and Arabic, and studying with Mohamed Briouel, leader of the Orchestre Arabo-Andalou de Fès, one of the most respected Andalusian orchestras in the country. “My parents had left North Africa and I wanted to remake this connection,” she says. “It was more than an artistic decision. It was a

reparation and a medicine to understand where I come from. If I don’t know where I come from, how can I go anywhere? It’s now easier to be Jewish in Morocco than in France.”

Her time in Morocco – in Marrakech and Fes – also meant she was a regular performer at the Fes Festival of Sacred Music where singers versed in the Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions are highly valued.

On record, her work with Mohamed Briouel is preserved in a superb recording of Arab-Andalus repertoire with the Fes orchestra called *Andalussyat* (2003) featuring songs with lyrics in both Hebrew and Arabic. Several years earlier she’d taken part in *Alfonso X el Sabio: Cantigas de Santa María*, with Briouel and the early music group Camerata Mediterranea. These are songs to the Virgin Mary supposedly composed by the Spanish king Alfonso the Wise, the ‘King of the three religions’ in the 13th century. What is clear from the rich illustrations of musicians in the manuscripts – with their different skin colours, instruments and clothes – is they came from very diverse backgrounds. Joel Cohen, the conductor of Camerata Mediterranea, brought in Briouel’s Orchestre de Fes and soloists from Morocco and Europe.

Just as Atlan sings music from three religious traditions, there are also three worlds of Jewish Sephardic song – that of Moorish Spain, mostly romances, and those of the two regions the Jews migrated to after the Spanish expulsion of 1492: North Africa (the Western tradition) and the Ottoman Empire (the Eastern tradition). The music of the Eastern tradition is another world from the Western one. Although the lyrics might be sung in the Spanish-like Ladino language, the music has absorbed the *makams* of the Ottoman tradition. “It’s a whole other style which I wasn’t ready for, at first,” Atlan admits, “but now I am ripe for this. It’s very deep.”

She recorded this Eastern repertoire on *Aman! Sefarad* with a group from Thessaloniki, En Chordais. The instrumentation (oud, violin, *kanun*, percussion) lends an Eastern flavour. “There’s a Yom Kippur song in Hebrew with a completely Turkish melody,” Atlan explains. “It’s a to-and-fro between different people. Often I am crying when I sing this music.”

Women have a crucial role in the performance and transmission of Sephardic music. The liturgical music belongs to the men, but the women have the songs of life, love, and the different ways to cook an aubergine.

“We have to thank Isabella and Ferdinand for this,” says Atlan. “If they didn’t expel the Jews we wouldn’t have this repertoire. And this is the Jewish character, to look at the positive things and be resilient.” ♦

## BEST ALBUMS

**Camerata Mediterranea**  
*Alfonso X el Sabio: Cantigas de Santa María*  
(Erato/Apex, 1998)

This is a landmark recording of 13th-century hymns to the Virgin Mary supposedly by the Spanish king Alfonso the Wise, as interpreted by the Camerata Mediterranea, led by Joel Cohen. Françoise Atlan is one of the leading soloists on the album. The hymns are dark and smoky, and passionate and spiritual.

**Françoise Atlan**  
*Romances Sefardies*  
(Buda Musique, 2015)

Françoise Atlan’s first three solo CDs, *Romances Sefardies*, *Entre la Rose et le Jasmin* and *Noches* have been re-released and are now available as a double CD. These are pioneering recordings, with music from both the Eastern and Western traditions, which presaged the subsequent revival in Sephardic music.

**Françoise Atlan**  
*Andalussyat*  
(Buda Musique, 2003)

With Mohamed Briouel and the Orchestre Arabo-Andalou de Fès, *Andalussyat* is a groundbreaking recording of the Western (North African) Sephardic repertoire demonstrating the shared tradition of Arabs and Jews.

**Françoise Atlan**  
*Aman! Sefarad*  
(Buda Musique, 2014)

This is another superb disc, which looks at the Eastern Mediterranean and music from Constantinople and Salonika. Atlan recorded it with En Chordais, who are based in Thessaloniki, and there’s a clear Eastern flavour: “There’s a Yom Kippur song in Hebrew with a completely Turkish melody,” Atlan explains. Reviewed in #107.

## IF YOU LIKE FRANÇOISE ATLAN, THEN TRY....

### Mor Karbasi

**La Tsadika**  
(Gibraltar Productions, 2013)

Mor Karbasi is an Israeli-born Sephardic singer who also has Moroccan roots. She explores those roots in *La Tsadika*, her powerful third album. Dennis Marks claims that here ‘the balance between Ladino classics and original compositions is now just right’ in his review of the album in #100.