



## 'The Sarajevo Haggadah: Music Of The Book' Returns To Putney

By Susan Keese | June 14, 2014

A musical recreation of the 600-year odyssey of a medieval Jewish prayer bookp returns on Saturday to Putney, where the work was first performed earlier this year.

*The Sarajevo Haggadah: Music of the Book* was developed and premiered by Bosnian-born accordionist Merima Ključo during a residency at Putney's Yellow Barn. It's been playing to sold-out concert venues around the country.



A Haggadah is a Jewish prayer book, used in celebrating the Feast of Passover. But the Sarajevo Haggadah owes its survival to people of many faiths and cultures. The richly illustrated manuscript originated in Barcelona in the 1300s, at a time when Christians, Jews and Muslims lived together in harmony. When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, a Catholic inquisitor smuggled the book out of the country.

The Haggadah eventually found its way to National Museum in Sarajevo. A Muslim cleric kept it hidden in a Mosque to protect it from the Nazis during World War II.

Merima Ključo thinks it's a wonderful story. "Every Bosnian is proud of the Haggadah," she says. Ključo says her country embodied that spirit of diversity when she was growing up.

"Such a wonderful, multicultural, multi-religious country where everybody was celebrating all religions and all holidays together," she says. "And the next day, in a very short time, they were turned against each other. It didn't take long. It's scary."

Ključo was studying music in Sarajevo when the war broke out. She fled Bosnia in 1993. A few years ago she read *People of the Book*, Geraldine Brooks' novel about the Sarajevo Haggadah.

"And that's actually when I began to think about how it would be to make a musical story about it," she says.

During a residency at Yellow Barn in March, Ključo brought her project to fruition and presented

a multimedia composition for piano and accordion that includes video images from the Sarajevo Haggadah. One image shows a group of women at a Passover table. A dark-skinned Moorish woman is seated among them.

"And that's what's so beautiful," Ključo says. "To see a Moorish woman sitting at a Seder table celebrating a holiday which was obviously not a Moorish traditional holiday!"

The music in this part of the piece, titled "Al Mora," is taken from a Sephardic song in which three sisters share their hopes for the future. Those hopes are dashed in the movement that follows, played by pianist Seth Knopp.

"What happens next is Alhambra Decree," Ključo says, "Which is a painful, painful moment in the history, where the document was written by the king and queen of Spain saying that all Jews should leave."

The music reflects the turmoil of those times. But for Ključo, the story is not so much about the violence that threatened the Haggadah and the Jews through the centuries. It's about people helping one another, and the power of culture in the face of violence. It's interesting that such a story surprises us, she says, when it should be completely normal.