

The Rhythms of Exile

The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony is using Sephardic music to teach students about the often overlooked culture, language and origins of Sephardic Jews.

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Rachel Howard had a song in her heart. The 9-year-old student at Valley Beth Shalom school knew the lyrics, but wasn't sure how she might set the sad story of her great-grandmother to music.

Only after Rachel was introduced to the offbeat rhythms and melancholy melodies of Sephardic music did she dream up a daring concerto of drums and flutes. Her composition about her great-grandmother's childhood during the Holocaust goes something like this.

A little girl's afraid, the Nazis scared her so,
Her mother and father, they were killed, little did she know.
O America! O America. You're my freeland.

Rachel and more than 750 fourth-grade students in Jewish day schools across Southern California are learning the sounds and origins of Sephardic music and culture.

In a project conducted last month by the educational outreach program of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, four professional musicians took their instruments into Reform, Conservative and Orthodox schools where they played Sephardic compositions, lectured on Jewish history and taught students elements of orchestral music.

As part of the program, students created artwork with stories and colors that resembled a composition of Sephardic music. The program culminated in two private concert performances by the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony in which students listened to the works they had studied.

Though many Jewish day schools already include music as part of the curriculum, Elizabeth Gilbert, educational director of the Jewish Symphony, said most teaching takes a secular approach. Gilbert, who is a flutist with the orchestra, said the Sephardic education project differs in that religion forms an integral part.

For many students, especially those in Orthodox schools, the musical program ties in with theology already being taught in their studies, she said.

"We really focus on Jewish religion and culture. It gives them an idea of where this music came from, what the people were like, and the Ladino language that they spoke. The Sephardic music becomes a vehicle to get them to understand their Jewish heritage better."

Sephardic refers to Jews from Spain, Portugal, the Middle East and North Africa and their culture. The name comes from Sepharad, a Hebrew word used in the Bible to identify a place of exile that from early on was identified with the region now known as Spain.

The Sephardim developed a liturgy and set of religious customs based on their Mediterranean culture that is distinct from that of Ashkenazi Jews, who settled in Eastern Europe. The Sephardim also created their own language, Ladino, a mixture of Hebrew and Spanish. Although the majority of American Jews are of Ashkenazi heritage, the Los Angeles area has a substantial Sephardic community. Heritage of Folk Tales

To keep their culture alive, Sephardim used folktales passed down from one generation to the next.

Those rich folk tales were often set to music as the folk songs that form the vast majority of Sephardic music. In the Sephardic music project, students learn about the four types of folk songs: ballads, canciones, coplas and Ladino prayers.

For the monthlong education program, children listen to several works, including movements from "The Suite Sephardic" by Joseph Ness. The collection of folk songs depicts parts of the Torah and how it relates to daily life.

Also included is a guitar concerto by the late Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, which he composed on a ship voyage from Italy to America. The symphony, which echoes elements of flamenco guitar, is the composer's remembrance of Spain.

Dr. Noreen Green, artistic director and founder of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, said that for many of the fourth-grade students, the discovery that there were Jews in Spain is surprising.

"Yes, we hear about that," she said. "Ashkenazi music is more common to them. Their ears are more attuned to it. Since Sephardic music uses elements of Spanish and Arabic music, it evokes another emotional bone in their body."

The symphony, composed mainly of Jewish musicians, including several members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, performs mostly music of Jewish composers and with Jewish themes. The Sephardic music program was conceived by Green with a grant from the Maurice Amado Foundation. The program started in 1996 with six day schools and 400 students, and has grown to include 14 schools with more than 750 students.

Numerous studies have shown that music can enhance the education of elementary school students by augmenting cognitive function, improving language skills, and strengthening memory retention. Though Green designed the program as music education, she chose Sephardic music to communicate the richness of Jewish history.

"We didn't just want to play in schools. We wanted them to learn about their culture and then experience the music," Green said. "That's consistent with the mission of our orchestra."

Shira Adler, a cantor with the Jewish Symphony and one of the instructors in the Sephardic project, said the program is most fulfilling when the music touches a student's religious identity.

"We're all different in the way we teach the students. I try to focus on the spiritual. This is the way we pass down our religious culture, no matter where you came from," she said.

Earlier this week at Ohr Eliyahu Academy in Culver City, Leslie Lashinsky captivated a classroom of wide-eyed fourth-grade girls with the sounds of her bassoon. Mouths dropped open as Lashinsky blew into the instrument, her face turning a bright red with every passionate note. After playing several Sephardic folk songs, she asked the students to describe emotions they felt as they listened.

"In one of those songs, I dreamed that I was walking through a graveyard," said Ariella Hill. "It had kind of a spooky feeling."

Hadassa Klerman was amazed to learn of the Ladino language spoken by Sephardic Jews.

"I knew there were a lot of dying languages, but I never heard of Ladino. I didn't know there was such a thing," she said.

Leah Krombach seemed to sum up her classmates' emotions best.

"Wow, Sephardic music. I just feel it's very powerful."