

# Thanks for the Melodies

**An innovative program uses traditional music to help Jewish seniors reconnect with their heritage.**

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"Go, cantor, go!" urged Beth Elliott. The traditional Jewish wedding song she was playing on her viola had struck a chord with the white-haired Alzheimer's patient. A smile creased his face, and in a clear, steady voice, he began to sing. Elliott extended her hand, he took it, they danced.

Former cantor William Nussen, 79, was among about 35 residents in varying stages of Alzheimer's disease gathered for a workshop in a dining room at the Jewish Home for the Aging in Reseda.

The first-time project was presented by the 7-year-old Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, which is dedicated to exploring Jewish culture through music by Jewish composers. Here, the group used music as a tool to awaken the memories of the home's residents. Memories long repressed, memories of childhood, weddings, bar mitzvahs and holidays.



Los Angeles Jewish Symphony violist Beth Elliott makes music with Holocaust survivor and onetime cantor William Nussen, 79, during a workshop.

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At the home's two Reseda campuses--Eisenberg Village and Grancell Village--where the average age is 91--about 240 seniors participated in the program, funded by the Jewish Community Foundation and culminating Monday with an enthusiastically received standing-room-only concert at Eisenberg by the orchestra.

At the session's end, resident Florence Alexander, a sprightly 88, was asked what she got out of the program. She replied simply, "Pleasure." The life she'd been reviewing has dealt her some blows, including the murder of a son 11 years ago in an ATM holdup, but she chooses to focus on the positive and was quick to mention, "I have a gentleman friend," also an Eisenberg resident.

For violist Elliott, 40, and bassoonist Leslie Lashinsky, 48, the teaching artists who conducted classes at Eisenberg, it was a case of getting more than they gave. At the final meeting, Elliott told her Alzheimer's group, "Thank you so much. You've changed my life."

It was a tough audience. Persuading three or four of the Alzheimer's group to clap and sing at any one time was a victory. One woman circled the room repeatedly, silently clutching a teddy bear. Several dozed, heads on the table.

Not all who took part in the project, called "Linking Our Heritage: Sephardic and Ashkenazic Music in Life

Cycle Events," suffer from dementia. There were groups for the alert and independent and for the physically, mentally or emotionally fragile. Everyone took part on their own terms. As Alexander said, "What I don't like, I discard."

Some just walked out if they felt like it, others interrupted the music with loud outbursts ("This cranberry is a good drink!"). Minor territorial squabbles erupted over things such as chairs.

The majority of residents are Ashkenazic Jews, with roots among the Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europeans, but some are Sephardic, descendants of Jews originally from Spain and Portugal. Although they share the bond of Judaism, their music and customs differ. Sephardic Jews related to the soulful melodies sung in Ladino, a blend of Spanish, Hebrew and Middle Eastern languages. "Everything has a little cry in it," as one resident put it. The Ashkenazics related to the sweeter Yiddish tunes.

Although many said the Jewish holidays weren't as important to them once they'd left their parents' homes, the music and the mention of Hanukkah and Passover Seder meals shared with loved ones now gone brought both smiles and tears.

Nothing evoked more response than discussion of food--gefilte fish, matzo ball soup, beef brisket, all traditional Seder fare. In Lashinsky's group, Jules Berlinsky, 89, whose parents were born in Poland, eagerly talked about bubulah, "a large pancake" made with matzo meal and "lots of wine. It's delicious."

Even when tinged with sadness, these memories are "a healthy thing," said Annette Brinnon, corporate director of operations for the home. "They could not have gotten to where they are without all of those memories being a part."



Musician Beth Elliott, right, dances to the song 'Hava Nagila' with Alzheimer's patient William Nussen at the Jewish Home for the Aging.

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This program, similar to one the orchestra has in place in Jewish day schools, was "tweaked" by symphony education director Ilizabeth Gilbert for seniors. She calls it "an aesthetic approach to learning about music. You're learning about the music, but you're also learning a lot about yourself. We wanted to really connect them to parts of their lives they hadn't lived for a long time."

Because those with Alzheimer's frequently have access to long-term memory, Gilbert added, it is important to "bring them back to their roots, their heritage, life before the retirement facility. It reminds them that they've done things that were very worthwhile, they've brought a lot to the world. Even a sad memory might trigger something that isn't sad. Even [with] a bad memory, there's goodness surrounding it a lot of times."

#### Music With Rich Associations

Clare Bonomo, 83, loved "the music, the cheerfulness, the gaiety--and they tell you the history with the music." Taking a nibble of a pastry from the refreshment table, she added, "And of course the goodies are excellent."

One segment focused on Jewish weddings. For her Alzheimer's group, Elliott ran through the ritual--the ketubah (contract), the seven blessings given by the rabbi, the traditional breaking of a glass. "And then we all yell, 'mazel tov (good luck)!'," she said, her voice rising, her feet stomping. A few residents joined in--"Mazel tov!"

"Did you have a ketubah at your wedding?" Elliott asked one woman. She thought for a moment, then said, "I can't remember."

Music, always, was the centerpiece of the sessions. Klezmer music to clap to, the often spirited Sephardic music, the Ashkenazic lullabies that had been sung to them so many years ago. Listening to a Hanukkah song, Nussen, the former cantor, remembered getting his first suit with long trousers.

There was also music that caused them to relive the unthinkable. It got Nussen to talking about his native Hungary, about escaping from a Nazi concentration camp when he was 21, just walking out. "I was so lucky."

Elliott listened, then said, "Thank you for sharing that with me" and kissed him on the cheek.

As Leslie Lashinsky explored the music with her active, independent group, alternating tapes with short pieces on her bassoon, she asked the seniors to let the music in, "let the sound take you to the emotional places, connect you to the wonderful rich lives you've led. You can tap, you can clap, you can dance if you like."

Out of the blue, one woman started singing, "My Yiddisher mama, I miss her more than ever now. . . ." Lashinsky told her, gently, "We'll play lullabies later."

This group was provided with Play-Doh for sculpting, notebooks for journal-keeping, colored marker pens and paper. "I want you to open your artistic selves up," Lashinsky said. "See what the music makes you do. There's no right and no wrong."

For some reason, a Sephardic melody made a man in this group tell about seeing the Xavier Cugat orchestra play the Waldorf Astoria many years ago. Well, said Lashinsky, "That's slightly removed from Sephardic music, but wherever it takes you is just fine."

Foreign-born residents shared music and traditions from their homelands--Russia, Hungary, Turkey, Latvia. One tune that seemed universal was the rousing "Hava Nagila," which never failed to get almost everyone clapping and a few up and dancing.

As Elliott played it, moving among the wheelchairs in the fragile group, a woman on a stretcher chair feebly lifted one arm in time to the music.

Jules Berlinsky, who's lived at the home for five years, was sorry to have to miss two of the four weekly sessions, but they conflicted with his barbershop quartet practices. "We just sing for our own [pleasure]," he said. He was pleased to have just found a piano accompanist among the residents. "She hadn't played since she played in the Catskills 60-some years ago." Another enthusiastic participant was Bessie Lieberman ("like Joseph"), 88, who'd been moved to tears by the playing of a Yom Kippur song dear to Ashkenazic Jews. "It overwhelms me," she said. "I can't explain it. But knowing what's going on over there [in Israel], it just overwhelms me." A contented five-year resident, she smiled and said, "If I were home alone, would I have this?"

Like most, Lieberman came up blank on the journal-keeping, but really perked up at Lashinsky's imaginative pen-and-paper exercise during the playing of the Hanukkah Festival Overture.

"All of you are dancers at heart," said Lashinsky. "I want you to pretend that your pen is your dance

partner and your paper is the dance floor. When the music starts, I would like you to escort your partner onto the dance floor and go wherever the music moves you."

The men and women grew great swirls and staccato lines. "Great," said Lashinsky. "Lots of energy." She held up Berlinsky's paper. "Jules danced clear off the dance floor and went into the next room and covered that with style and panache."

Mildred Bright, 85, a new resident, said, "These sessions have been more exciting for me than going to the Philharmonic." Lashinsky, she said, has "So much talent, so much enthusiasm. I've been on a high just listening to this woman. She gives so much of herself. She just exudes this joy."

#### Art Has a Way of Spanning Generations

The teaching musicians, who'd previously worked with children, had come to the project with enthusiasm tempered by misgivings. How would they connect with these people generations removed from them?

"It's scary territory," said Lashinsky. "You don't want to hurt someone, and you don't want to leave them with a lingering cloud." She commended the participants for "being willing to experience life. When we do feel such extreme emotions, it reminds us of the richness of our lives. Yes, we are not dulled," whatever age or infirmity. "We are always capable of feeling deeply and profoundly."

The teachers had to learn when to touch, when to back off. As Elliott approached one woman in the Alzheimer's group, the woman snapped, "Don't get too close!"

Both teachers left feeling enormously enriched. "Ladies and gentlemen," Lashinsky told her group, "You have been just fantastic."

The project was a prototype for what is hoped will become a nationwide multicultural effort to work with the aging. Looking back, Lashinsky recalled several moving moments. She told about a deaf man who'd been dozing off and acting generally standoffish and uncooperative--until she put the Play-Doh in his hands.

"What this guy created was unbelievable. He used the whole wad as sort of a building block, then took the container and incorporated that, and before we knew it he was sticking pens in. He made this huge collage construction. He was in his own world, but he was obviously so stimulated it was incredible. It tapped into something for him."

A man in his 80s told her that only 10 years ago, he'd learned that his mother was not his birth mother, who'd died in childbirth. Lashinsky thinks that hearing the lullabies made him confide this.

"Those memories of Mama and such really got to a lot of people on many levels."

One woman started talking about how, when she was a child, her family gathered by the fireplace and sang. "They're here with you," Elliott assured her. Another told Lashinsky of singing lullabies to her infant son, who died young. "I have not cried for many years," she said. "You made me cry today."

The experience "really changed my life, thinking about these people, hearing their stories, looking at what it is to be old," said Elliott. "We're all afraid of being old and being sick, so it's a scary thing to look at." But, she added, "These people are treated with such dignity that it's kind of inspirational."

Her most moving moment was when the former cantor started telling about his escape from the concentration camp. He'd seemed sad, and she'd asked him, "Cantor, what is it?" He didn't want to talk about it, he'd said. Then he let it out: "You know what hell is?" Three thousand boys from his town had been at the camp, he said. "Six of them lived." Alzheimer's has robbed him of much of his memory, but,

said Elliott, "this is the one thing he can't forget."

She mentioned, too, a badly disfigured woman who had no voice. "Every time I played she started to make these noises. I finally figured out it was because she was so happy. She grabbed me and kissed me and I kissed her back."

Said Elliott, "These are people just like you and me. It's just that they were born a little bit before us."