

Conductor's Loving Opus to the Jewish Experience

Symphony thrives under the direction of Noreen Green,
who hopes to help fellow Jews discover their history.

By LYNN SMITH, Times Staff Writer
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Dr. Noreen Green's life changed course over lunch in an Aspen cafeteria.

It was the summer of 1993 and Green, a Los Angeles music scholar, was listening to Murray Sidlin, her conducting teacher at the Aspen Music School in Colorado. Sidlin was impressed, he said, with a concert Green had organized that week of Jewish musicians and choral singers performing Jewish music at a local center. The place had been packed.

Nothing like that existed anywhere, he told her. Green obviously had the knowledge, the passion and the personality to make things happen, Sidlin said. So why didn't she start her own Jewish symphony orchestra in Los Angeles?

Now, ending its sixth season tonight, the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony is an established and growing ensemble that aims to fill a cultural niche by exploring new or seldom-heard music by or about Jews. Its membership is elastic, depending on the performance. Up to 65 professional, volunteer and student musicians have entertained and educated thousands of Los Angeles adults and schoolchildren with works as diverse as an oratorio about biblical women, film scores and a musical comedy about a resort in the Catskills.

"As far as the Jewish community is concerned, their impact has been tremendous," said Phil Blazer, a local radio host who has included the group in his annual production of Jewish music at the Greek Theatre the past three years. "You can't compare the symphony to a trio or a bar mitzvah celebration. It comes to the ear with such richness and power. It's a great step forward for Jewish music of today. It's all because Noreen has taken her commitment in life to this."

The woman behind the baton is an energetic and unpretentious 41-year-old mother of two 3-year-olds, and is also one of a handful of women who conduct symphony orchestras that they started.

Raised by working-class Jewish parents on a modest street in Sherman Oaks, Green said she grew up on television variety shows that featured her favorite singers: Donnie and Marie Osmond and Michael Jackson. Her mother, a choral singer who believed girls could do whatever boys do, taught her to read music before words. By junior high, Green was conducting choral groups.

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Green went on to study music and received a bachelor's degree from the University of the Pacific, a master's from Cal State Northridge, and a PhD in musical arts from USC.

As she moved out into the world beyond her Jewish circle of friends in the San Fernando Valley, she said she began to feel, for the first time, like a member of a minority. Whenever she ran into another Jew, she felt a sense of bonding and history, a feeling of mishpucha (Yiddish for "family"). It was the same feeling she had in synagogue on Friday nights, and it just felt right.

Her passion for uncovering Jewish music was ignited at USC, where Green specialized in the works of David Nowakowsky, a little-known early 20th century composer from Odessa in the Ukraine who wrote music for his synagogue. She took some of his scores, which had been buried during the Holocaust, to the Aspen Festival in 1993 and shared them with the other Jewish musicians she found there.

Sidlin, her conducting teacher, also happened to be Jewish. When he proposed that she create a Jewish symphony, Green was startled. So far, she had only conducted choral groups. "I'm not one to back away from challenges," she said. She also knew she didn't want a "boring life."

However, she had to think it over and wanted to consult her husband, physician Ian Drew. The two had met at a Jewish singles dance ("It works!" she said) and married the year before. "You have to have the support [of a spouse] to keep your passion and dreams alive," she said. "We were taking a leap. The kind of commitment it takes is much different from going out and finding a job."

Drew, a native of South Africa, had molded his life around tzedaka (a Hebrew word meaning a duty to do charity), she said, and agreed to make personal sacrifices, such as family vacations, in order for her to establish the symphony. Green donates her salary back to the symphony. Drew serves as the symphony's president.

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With a full-time, live-in nanny, Green was able to start a family while juggling her full-time, year-round symphony work with a part-time job as music director at Encino's Valley Beth Shalom. The couple have two children, Aaron, 3, and Hannah, 3. Hannah was adopted in the Ukraine.

Green's first concerts were well received, she said, but the symphony struggled for three years until she realized she needed a strong board of directors. The first three years, programs were limited to fewer musicians who were paid very little and performed in no-cost venues like synagogues. Now, with the support of a 20-

member board, she said the symphony is able to attract grants and a growing audience. Its \$300,000 budget comes from grants, private donations and ticket sales.

If Green and the symphony haven't yet reached the reviewable level of Esa-Pekka Salonen or the Los Angeles Philharmonic, they are not that far away, Blazer said. By bringing a high level of sophistication to Jewish music, old and new, they have put Los Angeles at the forefront of a renewed interest in Jewish music--a cross-cultural array of folk, liturgical and classical compositions from around the world. One reason, Green said, is that music is a way for secular Jews to discover their identity and history without having to confront religion or the differences among the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and other groups.

With grants, Green has been able to initiate an educational program that has taught Sephardic music to students at 14 Los Angeles-area Jewish day schools.

The symphony's repertoire is particularly eclectic and reflects her own personality, Green said.

"I'm an inclusive person," she said. "I believe everyone is good and has something to offer unless they prove me wrong."

So far, she has premiered more than 20 works of European, Russian, Canadian, Argentine and Israeli composers. Other themes have centered on Jewish contributions to Broadway theater, Hollywood films or Jewish liturgies. Works have also included non-Jewish composers working with Jewish themes (Dmitri Shostakovich's "From Jewish Folk Poetry" for instance), new works by aspiring Jewish composers, or those that highlight the Jewish experience through music or song. Green often provides educational commentary for her audiences.

"Grossingers . . . the Last Resort," a musical comedy about how a poor immigrant girl turned a failing Catskills' farm into the birthplace of stand-up comedy, is already sold out for the season finale tonight at the Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza.

Green is most proud of an original oratorio and concert, "Women of Valor," sponsored by Hadassah Southern California, which premiered at UCLA in April. It was composed by Andrea Clearfield, a friend from the Aspen Festival. The 60-minute work is a combination of biblical text, contemporary poetry and music describing what biblical characters such as Moses' mother and sister might have thought. "People came up to me and said they were changed because of this event," Green said.

As a female conductor, Green said she differs from many male conductors because she is less dictatorial. "Most men come in and say, 'Do it my way,'" she said. Hesitating before venturing a cosmic thought, she said she also believes female musicians are different because their monthly cycles put them more in tune with the "universal music."

Green is known for her loyalty to her musicians and treats them with respect and affection, said concert master Mark Kashper, the first musician Green recruited for the symphony. Being a musician in the symphony is almost like being "a member of a family," he said.

As the symphony grows, Green said she hopes to be able to cut down her administrative work, enlarge the seasonal repertoire from three to six works, and expand the educational program into other cities.

Whether or not her position is permanent, she said, "Only God knows what's forever. "At this point in my life, this is what I love to do."