

Outreach get kids in tune with Sephardic melodies

By Roberto Loiederman, Contributing Writer

Dozens of elementary school children, Jews and non-Jews, a great many of them Latinos, danced in the sanctuary aisles in wild abandon. Accompanied by a live symphony orchestra, a tall, balding Argentine cantor with an operatic voice and arms waving straight out at his sides like a stork about to fly, belted out the "Mexican Hat Dance" while overjoyed 10-year-olds whirled and hundreds of their classmates jumped and clapped.

This was the high-energy moment, the "money shot" of an outreach program run by the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony (LAJS). Attended by about 700 fourth- and fifth-graders from Jewish day schools and their counterparts from several largely Latino mid-Valley elementary schools, the concert on April 16 was the culminating event after a series of classroom workshops focusing on connections between Latino and Sephardic music.

Subsidized in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, LAJS members – in lively preparatory sessions held at participating schools during the run-up to the concert – had shown the students what an orchestra and its instruments do, and they had also encouraged the children to create artwork drawn from their own family experiences.

"The children drew pictures from their own culture," said Wendy Prober, LAJS member. "Every culture has folk tales from which it draws its morality and its lessons. Those folk tales are passed on to the children, whether Jewish or Mexican. And children are also exposed to family stories.... We wanted them to express their own stories, their own humanity, using different textures and fabrics and colors.... We wanted them to see that stories can be expressed through visual arts as well as by music."

When the children arrived at Adat Ari El in Valey Village for the much-anticipated concert, they passed by some of their own artwork hanging in the foyer. They were then shepherded into a hall that had been converted into an "Instrument Petting Zoo": volunteers encouraged the children to touch and play violins, trombones, tympani and other orchestral instruments.

The students got their hands (and lips) on different instruments, trying to coax noises out of them, learning how difficult it is to make sweet sounds, even with the help of professional guides.

Once the children were seated in the sanctuary, Lana Marcus, head of Adat Ari El's day school, asked: "How many are in a synagogue for the first time?" More than half of the group waved their arms. She pointed out the eternal light, the ark, the handmade tapestry and the Torah scrolls. She started to explain what the Torah is, but when she sensed that the crowd was becoming restless, she stopped: "I think you guys came to hear music, not me."

She turned the stage over to Noreen Green, artistic director of LAJS.

The students were already familiar with Green, from visits to their schools during the workshops, so they responded enthusiastically to her educational comments. She told the crowd about numerous links between Sephardic and Latino traditions.

The students were ready when Green asked, "What's the language spoken by Sephardic Jews?" "Ladino!" they shouted.

Laughing, Green pointed out that one letter separates Ladino and Latino.

Interacting easily with the large crowd, she got them to say what they had learned in the workshops: that Sepharad means Spain in Hebrew, that Ladino is a form of Spanish as it was spoken by Jews in Spain hundreds of years ago, and that it was the language those Jews took into exile.

Accompanied by the LAJS, Marcelo Gindlin, an accomplished Argentine-born cantor based at the Malibu Jewish Center and Synagogue, sang traditional Sephardic melodies. This was followed by a guitar concerto written by a Sephardic composer.

Green drew parallels between what happened to Sephardic Jews in 1492 and events of the 20th century, telling the audience that the day before the concert was Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and that among the 6 million Jews whose deaths are remembered, there were a million and a half children.

To honor those children, Green's 9-year-old daughter, Hannah Drew, sang a touching rendition of "The Last Butterfly," with lyrics by Pavel Friedman, a young man who perished at Auschwitz.

Then came the part of the concert many had been waiting for: the "Mexican Hat Dance," or "Jarabe Tapatio," as it's called in Spanish. Just as the students from the public schools had learned about Sephardic Jewish culture, so too the students from the Jewish day schools had learned about this song, a symbol of Mexican pride, a dance intended to draw together the disparate Mexican cultures into a single national identity.

And that's when Adat Ari El's sanctuary became host to a Mexican dance celebration. In short order the concert had veered from a solemn dirge commemorating unimaginably tragic events to a lively stomp celebrating national pride. What was odd about this was that it didn't feel odd at all, as if pain and pride were parts of the same collective experience shared by both Latinos and Sephardic Jews.

Once the crowd settled down, Gindlin sang "Cielito Lindo," a love song, and "Granada," a nostalgic song about an Andalusian city remembered for its beautiful women, fragrant roses and bloody bullfights. The song's brooding melancholy underlined a feeling shared by Latinos and Sephardic Jews when it comes to Spain: a sense of loss and dispossession.

As they respectfully filed out of the sanctuary, the students seemed genuinely excited at having been at a symphony concert.

Clearly the program had had several important aims besides connecting the dots between Sephardic and Latino music.

One of the project's underlying objectives was to have these students become aware of the sources of pain and pride in a group from a different background, and that may well have occurred.

But it was also clear that the students – by listening to their own folk music played by a symphony orchestra – had also gained a deeper admiration for their own backgrounds.

And not just because of the music. There was the artwork as well.

Prober said that when she looked at some of the artwork the children had made, it was "heart-wrenching. One child made a map of the family's difficult travels from India to Guyana to California. Another, of Armenian background, did a drawing of the devastating earthquake in Armenia a few years back. Some drawings showed violent acts: people being shot. There was a lot of pride in their families as well. One did a drawing about his grandfather who had fought against Hitler."

The students had been asked to depict their family story. This seems to have instilled in many the notion that their own story, however painful, was a worthwhile subject for art.

These students had understood, perhaps instinctively, one of the things that this program was clearly intended to convey: that artistic creation is a way of turning pain into pride.