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HELPING HANDS

Los Angeles Jewish Symphony still going strong after 16 years

By Kevin Modesti, Staff Writer
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Thirteen-year-old singer Hannah Drew Green, her mother and director and conductor of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, Noreen Green and musical composer and performer Yuval Ron pose for a picture at Green's residential home in Encino, Calif., last week. (Ernesto Elizarraraz/ LA Daily News)

When Noreen Green was forming the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, people kept asking her the musical question, "Why?"

"They didn't understand what I was doing," Green said last week at her Encino home. "They said, 'Why do we need a Jewish orchestra? We have the L.A. Philharmonic. They play Bernstein and Gershwin and Copland.' I'd say, 'Well, they don't play the music I play.'"

Sixteen years after its debut, the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony has left the doubts behind and is preparing for its next major concert, a performance Sunday at Ford Amphitheater in Hollywood that will celebrate Jewish composers' contributions to film music.

The orchestra's value is clear to Israel-born Yuval Ron, whose suite from the Academy Award-winning "West Bank Story" will be among the pieces performed Sunday.

"When you go to a concert in the summer at the Ford and every seat is full, you realize how important this is to the community," said Ron, a Studio City resident. "No other orchestra is going to program this music. I believe no other city in America has an organization like this."

Like many nonprofits that depend heavily on private donations, the L.A. Jewish Symphony has struggled during the recession to bring in the \$300,000 it needs each year, Green said.

But the nonprofit organization still strives to do more than entertain audiences by putting on three major concerts in a typical year and performing in various smaller settings.

In addition to doing concerts highlighting the works of Jewish composers - both well-known and not so well-known, both old and new - the symphony serves as a resource for Jewish musicians, and it educates.

And it's here for the benefit of more than the Jewish community, said Green, 51, the orchestra's founder and conductor. Green, who earned advanced degrees in music at USC and California State University, Northridge, and

serves as music director at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, likes to speak to concert audiences about what they're hearing. Orchestra members go to schools to give children some of the music education they're missing these days.

"This is an invaluable and unparalleled experience," said Mollie Wine, a Los Angeles music teacher whose fourth-grade students went to a Los Angeles Jewish Symphony concert after an oboist taught them about what they were going to hear. "I think it inspires many of the students to pursue an instrument."

Because the Jewish people have absorbed other cultures wherever they go, what is referred to as Jewish music is a "patchwork," Green said. Some of the works of George Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein and Aaron Copland are distinctively Jewish, but many are not.

Green said past concert themes have included music by conductors killed in the Holocaust and composers from Israel, but also Broadway music.

Sunday's concert will feature a 55-member orchestra and 28-voice chorus as well as guest performers Ron, playing the oud (a Middle Eastern string instrument); Israeli pianist Andy Feldbau, and percussionist Jamie Papish.

Hannah Drew, 13, one of the two children of Green and husband Dr. Ian Drew, will sing.

The "Cinema Judaica" program will include movie music by Jerry Goldsmith, Elmer Bernstein, Stephen Schwartz, Danny Pelfrey and Charles Fox.

"When you're all on stage, performing, your culture doesn't matter," Green said. "You just want to play good music."

But sometimes, Green said, a piece of music evokes Jewish culture in a particularly moving way.

"When you hear (that) music," she said, "it hits your kishkes ... your gut."