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Conductor Noreen Green brings her L.A. Jewish Symphony to the Ford Amphitheater, joined by Israeli master percussionist Chen Zimbalista. Family friendly concert is the must-see event this weekend **pg 12**

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# MUSIC

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Dr. Noreen Green and Chen Zimbalista bring their passion for music to the Ford Amphitheater

# Love at first sound

By Ayala Or-el

On Sunday, July 9, 2006, at 7:30 pm, the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony will perform at the Ford Amphitheater with a guest appearance by Chen Zimbalista. Dr. Noreen Green, the conductor, founded the Jewish Symphony in 1994. Since then, she has performed with her orchestra all over Los Angeles, as well as abroad in countries like Israel and South Africa. Dr. Green, a born musician, says that her goal in establishing the Jewish Symphony was to perform musical works created by known as well as not commonly recognizable Jewish composers, give new composers the opportunity to introduce the world to their musical works, and serve as an educational venue for Jewish Music in all of its varieties and aspects. The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony performs during the year in many popular, world-renowned locations such as the Ford Amphitheater, the Getty Museum, the Greek Theatre and many area synagogues.

On occasion, Dr. Green's daughter joins the Jewish Symphony in performance, proving that the apple does not fall far from the tree. Hannah, 8 years old, plays violin and has a powerful singing voice; people who listen to her drop their jaws in amazement. "In our next performance, she will sing the 'HaTikvah,' says Dr. Green. "She's an incredible singer when she is on stage, she's full of self-confidence and has no stage fear. However, when she is not performing, she is very shy." Aaron, Dr. Green's 9 year old, plays the piano and clarinet, and has already managed to get experience performing with his mother and sister.

Dr. Green's husband, Dr. Ian Drew, serves as President of the Symphony Board. When Dr. Green is not touring with the Jewish Symphony in L.A. and around the world, she serves as Music Director of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino.

"The Jewish Symphony performs rich Jewish music as it was played throughout the years. Our concerts have different themes. The theme for our July 9th performance is love - 'From Israel with Love.' We are bringing first class artists from Israel, such as Chen Zimbalista, the percussion artist, Alon Reuven playing the French horn, and we will be giving the North American premiere of Hadas Goldschmidt-Halfon's Marimba concerto."

The Jewish Symphony performs for free in many concerts and events for the community and schools. When they do charge for performances, they make sure that the price is low and affordable. "Our goal is not to make profit," explains Dr. Green, "but rather to make sure that people can afford to come and hear us. We don't want the price to deter people from coming to hear us. Still, we have to charge admission because each year we must raise \$250,000 to assure the survival and operation of the Symphony. We need to pay our professional musicians and our guests. We also have a crew that works behind the scenes, who must also get paid. There are many expenses in producing such shows." The organizations that fund



Green and Zimbalista, whose upcoming L.A. concert is eagerly anticipated

and sponsor the Symphony include The Righteous Person's Foundation (Steven Spielberg's education fund), The Jewish Federation, The City of Los Angeles, The Ford Amphitheater and individual donors.

What is unique about the Jewish Symphony is that it uses music as an educational and entertaining tool in order to teach a lesson in Jewish music, without the "students" realizing that they are actually sitting in a music class. For example, before the beginning of each musical piece, Dr. Green tells the audience about the work and the composer, explaining the history behind it, and how it relates to the theme. The introductory explanations make each concert much more interesting to the listeners, who in turn get a lesson in Jewish history in the form of music.

The concert is recommended for all music lovers, children and adults, Jews and non-Jews. The Symphony will play a selection of pop and classical pieces with the influence of Eastern European and Middle East folklore.

Percussion artist Chen Zimbalista does justice to his gypsy namesake. His Zimbalista ancestors, wherever they're watching him from above, are probably nodding their heads in amazement and great satisfaction. True, he didn't turn out to be a Zimbalista like them, but what's wrong with being considered the number one percussion artist in Israel? And what's wrong with a descendant who performs all over the world in front of thousands of people?

"The meaning of the name comes from the word 'cymbalist,'" explains Zimbalista. Cymbalists "played the gypsy instrument 'Chymballion' which is like a Sitar, a small musical board with strings stretched over a sound box. My family arrived from East Germany, and many generations ago, we had Gypsies in our family who played the 'Chymballion.' Since then, the name

became their family name."

So, Zimbalista is not a Gypsy, but a true Israeli. However, it seems like some of that Gypsy blood did remain in him, because in a way he lives like a Gypsy. He wanders around the world performing - from China to Taiwan, from Argentina to Chile to Colombia, from England to France, from Israel to the United States, and so on, again and again. In Israel, too, he travels a lot, along with the 40 musician Kameri Orchestra he plays and conducts with. Zimbalista made himself a name as a percussion artist, whose fame grows wherever he goes, winning the hearts of the toughest music critics.

My interview with him takes place at a very late hour in Israel, following a tiring and long day of recording. Zimbalista sounds very young on the phone; if I didn't know he was approaching 40, I would think that I was speaking to a young man in his 20's. The interview is close to his upcoming arrival in L.A., for his performance with the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony.

**"Chen, have you ever performed in L.A.?"**

"About a month ago," he says, surprising me. "In Santa Monica." He then elaborates on his busy schedule. "I visited San Francisco for a performance in front of 14,000 people that took place in one of the largest parks of the city. Prior to that, I toured, performing in Baltimore, Chicago and Vancouver."

**"You're famous for being a percussion artist, is there one instrument you prefer to play?"**

"The Marimba. It's like a large xylophone with 5 octaves."

**"How does one learn to play such an instrument? Are there teachers who can instruct you on how to play the Marimba?"**

"I had a wonderful teacher from the

Philharmonic, Alon Bor, who introduced me to the Marimba at the age of 14, and we both decided that that should be my instrument. I began playing the drums and other percussion instruments at a very young age, but once I got to the Marimba, it was love at first sound."

**"When you say 'we decided,' who do you mean?"**

"My teacher, me and my mother, who always supported me. When I was a child, I really wanted to play the drums. However, I was a good boy, I did not play between the hours of 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. so that the neighbors would not be disturbed (during their 'siesta'). Later on, my parents built me a studio where I was able to practice."

**"Are you still in touch with your teacher?"**

"Of course! His name is still on my resume. He and my other teacher from New York, Maurice Young, are very much responsible for my career today."

**"Do your parents come to your performances?"**

"Lately, they've been goofing off," he laughs, then adds seriously, "It's not easy to tour with me and attend all performances. I have 3 children and they, too, are tired of coming to my concerts."

**"Do your children play, too?"**

"Everyone asks me this question. Not all of them. My 21 year old daughter plays the piano, my 8 year old son is a tap dancer and my 14 year old daughter studies art."

**"Who are the artists you work with in Israel?"**

I mainly play classical music by Bach and Beethoven and other classic composers, but with a 'groovy touch.' Shlomo Gronich and Hadas Goldschmidt arranged a couple of works for me and I perform with them. Hadas will also join us in Los Angeles."

**"You perform all over the world. Have you ever experienced any Anti-Semitism?"**

"Actually, yes. In London, about 3 years ago. I had a performance scheduled at "Queen Elizabeth" in London, and I was anxiously looking forward to it. But at the time we had problems with the Palestinians and the members of the unions asked me not to come. I was very disappointed."

**"What about the conservative European audience?"**

"I don't give up on my audience. I push it. Sometimes it takes much longer to warm up the audience and get it to cooperate, but invariably, it happens."

**"Is there a difference between performing in front of an Israeli audience at home and an audience abroad?"**

"It's always a challenge when you perform, and it does not matter whether it is American or Israeli. I love them all, and I want to make them all happy. What I love the most is to finish the concert with the audience on its feet, play a piece by Shlomo Gronich and the whole audience then participates in clapping hands and shouting out, just having a great time." ■

For tickets, call 323-461-3673. Prices: \$25, \$35, \$12 for students and children under 12. For more information, please visit the Ford Amphitheatre.org website.