

An Unaccustomed Sound

Amado grant brings Sephardic music to day schools

By Beverly Gray, Education Editor



Today's schools tend to have only limited resources for music instruction, and Jewish day schools are no exception. And in an American Jewish community dominated by Ashkenazic-descended households, Sephardic culture remains a mystery to many Jewish children. Happily, the Maurice Amado Foundation has stepped in to address both of these problems.

The third annual Amado grant, to the tune of \$40,000, has once again brought The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony (LAJS) into day schools with a program designed to introduce fourth-graders to the lively, haunting music of the Sephardic world. (The program's initial year was funded by the Jewish Community Foundation.)

Beginning in January, teaching artists from LAJS visited classrooms at 14 day schools. Over the course of four weeks, they introduced students to the instruments of the orchestra, outlined basic concert etiquette, and discussed the role of music within Spanish and Middle Eastern Jewish culture. Students got the opportunity to sing along in Ladino. (One perplexed girl asked, "When you say Ladino, do you mean Latino?")

They also experimented with hands-on art projects that transformed Sephardic-style musical color, texture, and folkloric elements into a visual medium. Elizabeth Gilbert, LAJS educational director, explains that the goal was for the children "to create a work of art that parallels the music they're studying."

The method is heartily endorsed by Esther Alfassi, fourth-grade teacher at Harkham Hillel Academy, who notes that for youngsters chiefly accustomed to rap and rock, "it's very important to get all the senses involved, not just to listen."

On a recent Wednesday morning, teaching artist Leslie Leshinsky was leading her final session at Harkham Hillel. A professional bassoonist who once played with the Israel Philharmonic, Leshinsky also serves on the faculty of the Art Center College of Design. She frequently collaborates with visual artists

Teaching artist Leslie Leshinsky explains the instruments to a group of students.

and is adept at helping kids interpret musical ideas through art activities. In a previous session, she had explained to the students how the Sephardic-themed music played by the LAJS derives from folk tunes reflecting the daily concerns of long-ago Jews.

Under her direction, the children came up with stories and legends from their own families, then adapted these into simple songs. Some of these compositions turned out to be funny, like one boy's ditty about dancing the Macarena on a trip to Chicago. Other songs conveyed moments of pain and fear: Elianna Mellon recalled her recent dental surgery; Ori Maouda sang about his grandparents' flight from the Nazis during the Holocaust.

In the weeks that followed, the children chose the instruments that would properly convey the spirit of their songs. For the final session, on the topic of musical "texture," Leshinsky produced bags of fabric remnants. Displaying a shiny swath of silver lamé, a tightly woven upholstery fragment, and an intricate scrap of lace, she talked about the type of instrumentation each suggested. The children then had fun choosing appropriate fabric bits to illustrate their own musical compositions. The results would decorate the walls of the auditorium where the culminating LAJS concert was held.

On concert day, the Harkham Hillel kids were joined by contingents from four other area day schools. The stage was filled with nearly 30 professional musicians.

Conductor (and LAJS artistic director) Noreen Green provided kid-friendly commentary, explaining how Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco's Guitar Concerto No. 1 reflected his nostalgia for his

Continued on the following page

THE LOS ANGELES

JEWISH SYMPHONY