

Valley Life

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BORIS YARO / Los Angeles Times

Noreen Green conducts the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, which will play Sunday in Encino.

Keeping the Faith

By JOSEF WOODARD
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

The classical musician population in Los Angeles is among the strongest in the world, judging from the riches to be found not only in the L.A. Philharmonic but a host of other orchestras in the Southland.

For this we can thank Hollywood, at least in part. The studios' demand for fine players has filled our symphonic concert halls with a much higher-than-average caliber of musician.

That trickle-down (or trickle up) effect includes specialist symphonic endeavors, such as the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, which is celebrating its fifth anniversary this year and performs a concert Sunday at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino.

The show will focus on a local hero whose influence has been strong. The concert, "The Light of Helfman: Generations of Music from the Brandeis-Bardin Institute," is a tribute to the influential educator and composer Max Helfman, who founded the summer music program at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute in Simi Valley more than 50 years ago.

Helfman, who helped steer many young Jewish musicians into healthy professional careers, will be represented by his Yiddish version of Handel's seasonal classic, "Judas Maccabaeus," along with several other works by composers guided by Helfman.

The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, made up mainly of Jewish musicians, including several L.A. Philharmonic members, performs mostly music of Jewish composers and with Jewish themes. It has become one of the area's most intriguing special interest musical organizations.

The energetic founding conductor, Noreen Green, said last week that the symphony's mission is threefold: to educate, entertain and promote the growth of Jewish music. The young conductor was encouraged to pursue the idea while at the Aspen Music Festival, which had its own concentrated

Jewish music program.

In ferreting out music to play in the symphony's various concerts, Green has found no lack of material.

"In the Holocaust, we lost a lot of music, but even some of that music is resurfacing, in the light of the 'degenerate art' work," Green said, referring to the repressive cultural regime under Nazi rule. "Also, music is an expression of a people, and a lot of composers, like [Darius] Milhaud, Copland, Bernstein and Gershwin, who were popular for other things, also have Jewish works."

Sunday's performance promises to be another in an ongoing series of concerts that steer clear of the stodgy, standard repertoire of typical symphonic fare. L.A.'s film connection, for example, hasn't been lost on the organization.

"Being in L.A., how do you avoid it?" Green said.

Her orchestra has performed the music of such noted film composers as Erich Korngold, one of many Jewish composers who helped forge the standards for film scoring early in the development of the art form.

The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony presented a "Cinema Judaica" concert at the University of Judaism last year, and Green has been invited to take the program to Israel next year.

"In Israel, they don't have access to this music," Green said.

At its five-year point, the orchestra is slowly spreading its wings, following a unique yet logical course of cultural action.

"After I got into it," Green said, "I realized how much music had been written by Jewish composers or on Jewish themes for symphony that aren't played by the standard orchestras. This became a passion in my life, to bring these unperformed works to the stage."

BE THERE

Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, "The Light of Helfman: Generations of Music from the Brandeis-Bardin Institute," Sunday at 7:30 p.m. at Valley Beth Shalom, 15739 Ventura Blvd., Encino. (818) 753-6681.

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