

## Latino and Jewish students connect through music

The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony promotes respect for diversity through recognition of similarities



Many Latino children were able to try a musical instrument for the first time. (Credit: Araceli Martínez/La Opinión)

By: Araceli Martinez Ortega

For the first time in their lives, hundreds of third, fourth and fifth grade Latino children from several Los Angeles public schools attended a symphony concert. But also through music they crossed bridges with Jewish culture.

**“It is an opportunity to listen to music, live with a culture that is different from ours and see what we have in common that can unite us in these times,”** says teacher Bernie Contreras of the Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in the city from Pacoima in the San Fernando Valley who accompanied his fifth grade group to the concert offered by the **Los Angeles Jewish Symphony (LAJS).**

Hundreds of Latino children were able to dance, sing and play instruments during the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony Concert  
(Credit: Araceli Martínez/La Opinión)



It is the third year that this teacher has taken his students to the annual concert of the LAJS.

“I have noticed that when leaving, students come out more lively, many of them wanting to learn an instrument,” says Contreras.

He adds that this opportunity is very important because in public schools music classes are no longer taught.

**The Los Angeles Jewish Symphony offers two concerts a year dedicated to the students of the public schools of Los Angeles; most of the attendees are Hispanic children.**

This year's concert was held in two synagogues in the San Fernando Valley. One of them was Valley Beth Shalom school and synagogue. Around 1,100 children attended the two concerts. With the support of grant funding, they present an innovative and unique education program: **A Patchwork of Cultures: The Sephardic-Latino Connection.**



Argentine singer Marcelo Gindlin was part of the group of musicians of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony that offered a concert to 1,300 children from public schools in Los Angeles.  
(Credit: Alexander Gitman)

Marcelo Gindlin, a Latin-Jew, Argentine immigrant and guest singer of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony, performed Mexican songs such as Cielito Lindo.

"I am pleased to see how the children of many schools with different religions and faiths come together through a concert that for many is their first time," he says.

Gindlin says that before he learned to sing Jewish prayers, he knew Latin songs because his father was an opera singer. His favorite song was "Granada."

"It fills me with energy to see how the children get excited at the concert, in this world where there is so much violence, so many attacks. **It is so nice to educate the next generations in tolerance and integration, and teach them that we are all one,**" he says happily.

Latin children of different religions had the opportunity to know the different musical instruments that make up the symphony. (Credit: Araceli Martínez/La Opinión)



The concert, which lasts an hour, is a lively experience. "I make them participate," he says. And it is involving, since students sing and dance. Half of the repertoire features songs in Ladino; and the other, in Spanish.

"There are things that come from the Jews who lived in Spain and spoke Ladino (the Judeo-Spanish language

spoken by Sephardim, descendants of Jews in Spain) that have influences from Portuguese and Hebrew mixed with Spanish," he points out.

Before the concert began, the children had the opportunity to touch and play some of the instruments that are part of the 25 member Los Angeles Jewish Symphony.

Noreen Green, the founder and director of the symphony, says **the concert is a natural bridge that uses Sephardic music to connect the Latin and Jewish community.**

“I developed this program to show that we are more similar than different because we don't want to be isolated, and the best way to unify people is music,” says Noreen.



The director of the LAJS, Noreen Green, directs young singer Eden Kontesz. (Credit: Alexander Gitman)

Raised in Sherman Oaks, she says that though her children went to Jewish schools, she always took them to the parks to see that they are part of a much larger community.

According to Gindlin, the children who attend the concert are at the perfect age to connect with the music of other cultures.

“At the age of third, fourth and fifth grade they have no preconceived ideas. They are easily impressed and very open,” he says.



It is quite an adventure for many Latino children to attend a live concert. (Credit: Araceli Martínez/La Opinión)

Dr. Green believes that students are left with a great memory after attending a concert to listen to Jewish music in a synagogue. "Prejudices are limited if we share our culture," she says.

“Latinos and Jews have many things in common, such as family. Latinos have come to this country because they want a better life and education for their children. The Jews have left because they were excluded, and have come to America in search of a better world,” she says.

**LAJS was founded in 1994 by Dr. Green, and for 18 years she has offered music education programs to more than 20,000 students.**

Green believes that when students leave listening to a live concert, changes occur in their lives.

"Many return home, telling their parents that they want to learn to play an instrument."

She adds that the concert is an opportunity to share cultures with each other through music as well as to, "**combat prejudices, anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant discourse.**"