## Wandering But Not Adrift

THE LOS ANGELES JEWISH SYMPHONY MARKS
18 YEARS OF BRINGING JEWISH MUSIC TO LIFE

## by **EVAN HENERSON**

oming soon to a performance space near you: the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony (LAJS), a unique and proudly nomadic orchestra that adds and drops players as schedules permit and performs the music of largely undiscovered Jewish composers.

"We're the wandering Jewish orchestra," says Artistic Director Noreen Green, tongue somewhat in cheek. "We come to you."

Since 1994, Green and the dedicated members of LAJS have been bringing Israeli and Jewish orchestral music to performance venues large and small. These range from 1,000-seat venues like Walt Disney Concert Hall and UCLA's Royce Hall to mall food courts and local classrooms.

In August, LAJS celebrated its 18th anniversary at the Ford Amphitheatre, where it performs regularly, with a program appropriately titled "Chailights."

Green, whose founding of the orchestra developed from her studies of Jewish composer David Nowakowsky, has been LAJS' one constant. Core orchestra members, guest artists and featured soloists cycle in and out of LAJS often as other professional engagements (with such groups as the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra) permit. Concertmaster Mark Kashper and principal cellist Barry Gold are both members of the L.A. Philharmonic, meaning that Green has to clear dates with the L.A. Phil before programming anything.

The company has offices in Woodland Hills and a home base of sorts at Encino's Valley Beth Shalom (VBS), where Green serves as music director. It will be at VBS that the culmination of LAJS' annual Patchworks of Cultures concert will be held in November. Through a partnership with elementary schools within the Los Angeles Unified School District, Green and her teaching artists go into the classroom and demonstrate the cultural links between Latin and Sephardic music: the bridge between Latino and Ladino, if you will.

The concert will include Sephardic music performed in Ladino as well as non-Jewish favorites such as Quirino Mendoza y Cortés' "Cielito Lindo" and the Mexican Hat Dance. Through classroom sessions, the students help create musical pieces that tell their own stories. The students, grades four through six, use pieces of fabric as visual reference points. So a piece of lace might be a flute while a heavier instrument might be better represented by a piece of blue velvet.

"We ask them to create a piece of art work based on their family's story. We ask them to write a lyric and orchestrate it," says Green.



"We live in L.A., where so many Latinos don't know anything about Jewish culture. This is a wonderful way to connect the two populations."

A conversation with Green includes a lot of references to "discoveries." Green, who grew up in Sherman Oaks and became a bat mitzvah at Adat Ari El in Valley Village, was a classically trained musician who played her share of Beethoven and Brahms. While studying for her doctorate at USC, she came upon the works of David Nowakowsky (1848-1921), a composer considered "the Bach of Jewish music." Green felt Nowakowsky's music was as good as anything she was performing as part of the classical repertory, but he was

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passion for the music of Jewish composers grew, and with the encouragement of conductor Murry Sidlin, who was an early mentor, Green founded the LAJS in 1993.

"Here I am, 18 years later, and it's been an incredible journey," says Green, who has shared the stage with the likes of Billy Crystal, Theodore sioned a work by Michelle Green Willner about the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. In 2009, the symphony performed an evening that reconsidered the works of Ernest Bloch and Eric Zeisl 50 years after their deaths. LAJS concerts have celebrated klezmer music, the sounds of Jewish cinema and music of the Holocaust.

and none of the regular orchestras perform it," Green says. "There is no orchestra like mine, dedicated solely to the performance of Jewish and Israeli music. Even the Israel Philharmonic will play Beethoven and Brahms now and then and throw in a Jewish or Israeli composer. They champion Israel, not the composers."

Asked about the significant challenges of building and maintaining a "pickup orchestra" for 18 years, Green demurs. Earlier in the day, she met with the union that represents professional musicians, but she lights instead on fundraising. For the first three years of its existence, LAJS did not have a board of directors and put on concerts based on what its shoestring budget would allow. The organization has since grown, and future goals include creating professional recordings of some of these lesserknown works and to travel with three or four soloists to bring the music to communities outside Southern Cali-

To what does Green attribute the longevity of her brainchild? "I make my programming interesting and different. I talk to the audiences about the music. It's all new music that nobody has heard of. So there's a theme to my concerts and an educational component."

It's the very uniqueness of the musical repertoire that is enticing, says Wendi Prober-Cohen, who, over her 14-year association with LAJS, has worn many hats. She is a pianist, teaching artist with LAJS' Patchworks, former executive director of the symphony and currently a board member.

"It's a fun group of people, and, because it's a Jewish orchestra, they feed you very well," says Cohen. "Really, it's like a family. So many of the musicians have been with Noreen from the very beginning and have a connection. Also, given the repertoire that we're performing, probably 95 percent of what you'll be playing isn't going to be anything you would play anywhere else. That's very rewarding for musicians, to be able to play interesting music."



largely unrecognized, unchampioned.

Green set out to change that. She wrote her doctoral dissertation on the music of Nowakowsky and edited many of his works. For six years, she was West Coast music director of the David Nowakowsky Foundation. Her

Bikel, Randy Newman and Leonard Nimoy. The LAJS performs works by Jewish composers both well-known and undiscovered, and Green says they try to create a newly commissioned work at least every other year.

This past year, LAJS commis-

Indeed, when LAJS has ventured into Leonard Bernstein, it has been via "Halil," a lesser-known flute concerto written by Bernstein in 1981 and inspired by the death of an Israeli soldier.

"It's an amazing piece of music,