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Three Religions Share Their Musical Roots

By SUSAN HODARA

IN an age when a discussion of Judaism, Islam and Christianity often refers to strife, a concert at the Tarrytown Music Hall scheduled for next Sunday focuses instead on the values and history these religions share. The theme of the concert, "A Mediterranean Escapade: Celebrating the Shared Musical Roots of Judaism, Christianity and Islam," is the nativity story, but its program is far-reaching and diverse, with songs derived not only from Christianity, but also from Judaism and Islam.

Selections date from the Middle Ages through the 20th century, with roots throughout the coastal Mediterranean. They are played on instruments as common as the guitar and recorder, and as unusual as the riqq and darabuka (percussion), the saz and chifonie (strings) and the zurna (woodwind).

The songs are sung in Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Turkish, Arabic, Occitan (Provençal) and Ladino. Performers include the Boston Camerata, an ensemble founded in 1954 and renowned for its expertise in European music from the Renaissance and Baroque eras, and the Sharq Arabic Music Ensemble, a group of Arab-American musicians who specialize in traditional Arabic music. The aim of the event, said Joel Cohen, the director of the Boston Camerata who compiled the program, is "to tell the Christmas story from the perspective of the three Abrahamic religions."

Another goal is to further the mission of the Center for Jewish-Christian-Muslim Understanding, the Westchester-based, nonprofit group sponsoring the concert. The center was founded shortly after 9/11 by the Rev. Dr. Charles R. Colwell, rector of the Church of St. Barnabas in Irvington. With a board comprising four Jews, four Christians and four Muslims, all of whom live in Westchester, the center's goal is to expose the public to the commonalities among the three faiths. Besides this year's concert, a similar concert was held last November as part of a weeklong festival celebrating the "Spirit of Andalusia." The center also conducts seminars and presentations at houses of worship, schools and universities and private homes.

"We gather people in a safe environment to listen to one another," Dr. Colwell said. "What happens is that we recognize that we are all human beings."

One of the center's board members, Dr. Mahjabeen Hassan, is a Pakistani-born plastic surgeon with practices at Phelps Memorial Hospital Center in Sleepy Hollow and St. John's Riverside Hospital in Yonkers. "We open up a lot of hearts," she said.

As was the case in last year's concert, the source of much of the music in "A Mediterranean Escapade" is the medieval civilization of al-Andalus. Situated in southern Spain, al-Andalus, now called Andalusia, was ruled by the Moors between 711 and 1492. "It was a period of great religious tolerance and high civilization," said Joyce Needleman Stanton, also a board member. "All three faiths flourished, and each culture influenced the others." In 1492, the kingdom was conquered by Isabella and Ferdinand, the Catholic monarchs of Spain who led the Inquisition and ousted the Muslims and Jews.

Some of the pieces to be performed are sacred songs, or cantigas, collected during the 13th century when King Alfonso el Sabio ruled the region. Others are melodies from southern France, Tuscany, Morocco and the Balkans; there is a Gregorian chant and a Turkish lullaby. "One example is a Jewish song, played in an Arabic musical mode and sung in Spanish," said Mr. Cohen, who will sing and play the lute and guitar at the event. "It tells the story of a star in the East, but in this version, it is the star of Abraham." The concert opens with a Sephardic prayer translated into Spanish from Hebrew.

Mr. Cohen and the members of the center agree that they are not trying to resolve the continuing conflict in the Middle East. "Politics is off our radar," Mr. Cohen said. "We're interested in the tenderness and the mutual attraction, not the clash of cultures." As for the concert, he said: "This is a celebration. The music is fun; it's beautiful. There may be a lesson here about how people can coexist, but mainly it's a good holiday concert."

"A Mediterranean Escapade" will be presented on Dec. 10 at 3 p.m. at the Tarrytown Music Hall, 13 Main Street. Tickets (\$35 orchestra, \$30 balcony) are available at www.tarrytownmusichall.org or from TicketForce, (877) 840-0457. For information about the Center for Jewish-Christian-Muslim Understanding and coming events, including a presentation early next year at the North Castle Public Library in Armonk: (914) 591-8194 or www.cjcmu.org.