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Music of Many Lands Launches Fest

By MONTE MORIN, Special to The Times

It began at dawn with the blast of a conch shell horn and ended at night with the prayerful voices of half a dozen tongues. And many other moments throughout the day were filled with the resonant pounding of ceremonial drums.

Kicking off a nine-day spiritual and cultural smorgasbord of music, scores of people performed Saturday as part of the World Festival of Sacred Music--the Americas.

The event, organized in response to an open letter written by the Dalai Lama, features musical performances and other cultural presentations in more than 60 settings, mostly in Los Angeles. The Southland is just one of the satellite sites of the world festival, with other locations including Europe, Africa, Australia and Asia. The main event, the Global Festival, is set for April in Bangalore, India.

Organizers have scheduled the formal opening of the Southland celebration for 4 p.m. today at the Hollywood Bowl, where the Dalai Lama will deliver an address on his hopes for the new millennium.

On Saturday the festival offered a staggering sampling of music of the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Performances were given in 17 parks, museums, churches, temples and halls in Los Angeles and Long Beach. Some events were free; most require admission.

In the morning, at Long Beach's MacArthur Park, West African musicians and dancers started with libation offerings of fruit, burning sage and water. Musician Dadisi Sanyika asked members of the audience to offer their own thoughts.

Timid at first, the spectators began speaking of their hopes after Sanyika offered this observation: "We are like a soup, and each one of us is an herb. If you don't add your herb to the soup, it won't come out as tasty as it could be."

At Hollywood's Barnsdall Art Park, members of the Cuauhtemoc Azteca Dance troupe performed a ceremony meant to celebrate autumn fruit harvests and the power of the sun. Wearing elaborate headdresses of pheasant feathers and clad in shin stockings covered with rattling nutshells, the dancers performed at dawn, noon and dusk.

As dozens of bystanders sought shade among the park's redolent pines during the afternoon, the troupe's leader, Arturo Pastel Mireles, pointed to the sun. It is, he said, the source of all energy.

"Right now you think it's hot," the dancer said on an unusually warm October day, gesturing with a huehuetzin, a tambourine-like drum. "It's not too hot. Give me more, give me more."

Vera Rocha, 71, watched from her wheelchair. The first female chief of the Gabrielino-Shoshone Nation of Southern California said she had to grant the performers permission before they began dancing to ensure that the presentations were offered in the right spirit.

If one of the festival's themes is unity, its one unifying instrument Saturday was the drum.

Whether in the Aztec ceremony honoring the sun, a musical representation of a Japanese hunt or a West African libation ritual, drums were the key ingredient and were beaten with such intensity that bystanders felt the percussion in their chests and confused car alarms shrieked.

Drummer Maria Balbuena, whose Native American name is Paapoo, said drums are compelling to all cultures because, as her people believe, they symbolize the relentless beating of the human heart.

"It unifies all the different tribes so that we all dance with the drum," she said, before performing at the Senshin Buddhist Temple in the Jefferson Park area of Los Angeles. "I also think drums are very healthy, because they stop one from too much . . . thinking. They calm."

Also at the temple, musicians Danny Yamamoto and George Abe demonstrated Japanese taiko drumming and offered this explanation of drums' prevalence in sacred music worldwide. "The drum is a circle," Abe said as he swept his hand across the taut hide of a large instrument. "The circle is a symbol of the cosmos and the universe."

Saturday's events were not only musical. On Hollywood's Walk of Fame, participants celebrated the birthday of former Beatle John Lennon. At the UCLA Hammer Museum of Art in Westwood, Tibetan monks began work on an intricate sand painting, or mandala. After they painstakingly place millions of grains of sand in a pattern over five days, the completed image will be swept away--a testament to impermanence.

Judy Mitoma, festival director, said the Southland events and others like them being held around the world are intended as a welcome to a new and hopefully peaceful millennium. Their purpose is to encourage cooperation, compassion and peace through music and other activities.

The music may be sacred, Mitoma said, but it was by no means somber.

"It will be affirming," she said. "Much of the source for the spiritual and sacred is ecstatic and joyful. It's meant to bring out the best in us and in others."

The cost of the festival has been placed at \$4 million to \$5 million, and Mitoma said many performers are donating their talents.

For more information call (310) 208-2784 or see the festival Web site: <http://www.wfsm.org/americas>. The festival runs through Oct. 17.