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What Religious Diversity Sounds Like

▣ Values: Churches, other sites open their doors to music of various faiths during festival.

By MARY ROURKE, Times Staff Writer Wednesday, August 25, 1999

Spiritual path usually hidden from everyday life is about to be uncovered. Sacred music from around the world will surface in Los Angeles this fall. These are sounds most often heard at religious rituals for members of the faith. This time, things will be different.

A "religion without walls" attitude toward all the world's sacred traditions will set the mood for the nine-day **World Festival of Sacred Music** that begins Oct. 9 and uses religious sites around the city. It will be a novel type of interfaith dialogue set to music that brings together members of cultures and communities whose paths may never have crossed in their own lands.

Concerts scheduled include Hindu and Sufi devotional chants in a Jewish synagogue, African American spirituals and Indian Sikh mantras in a Buddhist temple, and, in a United Methodist church, the music of Jewish mysticism.

"We can open our doors to everyone, but we've never done it and we don't know how," was the concern Judy Mitoma and Sara Wolf, director and managing director of the festival, heard from the religious leaders they invited to be part of the event. After months of making personal phone calls and sending letters, with the powerful name of the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader, as the program's founder, Mitoma and Wolf have arranged for more than 80 concerts. Most of them will be held in churches, synagogues and temples.

"Many people have the desire to cross thresholds, but they don't know whether they are welcome," says Mitoma, a professor of world arts and cultures at UCLA who opened the school's Center for Intercultural Performance. To help get the city past that shyness, she is sending out 250,00 brochures to individual homes, and book and music stores. Tickets are priced from \$5, and some events are free. "It's not about proselytizing your message or getting your name out there, or about judging, which creates tension between religions," says Mitoma. "It's about accepting what people from all sorts of backgrounds have to offer."

The music of Asia and the South Pacific, the Middle East, Africa, South America and eastern Europe is featured. "Religion tends to play a stronger part in people's lives in other parts of the world where the spiritual grounding is more evident," says Mitoma. "There are a lot of lessons to be learned by us."

Music directors whose choirs will be part of the festival compare hymn lyrics to mini-lessons in theology, and a good melody to a doorway into heaven. "If there is a trial, a trauma or a joy, I often find one little bar and one little phrase from a hymn that comforts me," says Gwen Wyatt, the music director for the Wilshire United Methodist Church, whose choir plans an evening of African American spirituals.

Wyatt had marriage problems some years ago; now she associates that time with a line from the hymn "God Will Take Care of You." "The song would just come to me," she says. "It helped me avoid going into self-pity mode. The tune plus the words became a philosophy."

Other choir members have told her similar stories. One man was caught in a civil war in his

native Nigeria. Every night he gathered his family together and they sang "Holy, Holy, Holy," a Christian hymn from the 19th century. "They could hear bullets flying outside, their world was in turmoil, but the song got them through," Wyatt says.

Searching for religion through sacred music has become a popular route for the "quest" generation, the baby boomers and their younger siblings whom sociologists have been tracking through the '90s. Part of the music's appeal, says the Rev. Michael Beckwith, is that it does not push any fire-and-brimstone doctrine. "Sacred music is healing," Beckwith believes. He and Rickie Byars, a musician in his congregation, create the songs for his Agape International Center of Truth, a 7,000-member nondenominational church in Culver City.

His choir performs concerts around the world as well as around Los Angeles, a city Beckwith describes as religion's United Nations. "It can be a unifying force if we celebrate each other's music," says Beckwith, rather than simply defining ourselves by our religious beliefs, which tends to push us apart.

Beckwith likes to hear his congregation singing. "A lot of people are not in touch with their own voice, their inner world," he says. "I see them begin to sing sacred music and something is rekindled. They begin to remember their hopes and dreams."

A number of religious leaders see their community as a mirror of the city's ethnic diversity and the festival as an opportunity to show that peaceful coexistence is possible. The cross-cultural Buddhist chanting of the Sinshin Temple in Los Angeles melds the voices of the temple's 400 Japanese American members with sacred texts written in Chinese. "The sound becomes effective, more so than the words," says the Rev. Masao Kodani, who oversees the Sinshin community. "Oneness is achieved through the sound."

Typical of the interfaith approach to the festival, Sinai Temple in West Los Angeles has scheduled three concerts, none of them featuring Jewish music. Instead, songs and chants of the Amazon, a concert of Asian wind instruments and the music of a medieval German nun are planned.

"Other cultures have as powerful a connection to their music as we do," Cantor David Silverstein says. "This is a chance for Jews to hear other sacred music within their own walls."

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* For more information, call the festival hotline, (310) 208-2784.

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