

A Golden Age comes alive in Tarrytown

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Once upon a very real time, Jews, Muslims and Christians lived together and in harmony, each incorporating some of the others' religion into its music, art, architecture and verse.

The place was Andalusia, a region in the south of Spain that includes Cordoba, Seville and Granada. The time was the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. However harsh its history sometimes reads, it remains for some a dream of a tolerant society, beautiful in every way.

Among them are the fewer than 100 members of the Center for Jewish-Christian-Muslim Understanding, who look to the past for a secure future. The group's weeklong festival celebrating Andalusia culminated yesterday in a nearly sold-out music festival at the Tarrytown Music Hall that brought together some of the masters of the Andalusian arts. In just under three hours they proved with their singing, dancing and playing that the three cultures share music just as they share the stories of Abraham.

"I've hardly ever heard this kind of music," said Jim Oltman of Sleepy Hollow. "That was the Golden Age. If we could just get back to that."

Boston Camerata soloists began the program with a crash course in how to listen to music that is unfamiliar to most Americans. Clearly, though, whether sung in Portuguese, Arabic or Hebrew, the melodies were the same, as were the stories of love between a man and a woman or of a people for their deity. Within minutes of starting the concert, they had developed an audience singalong to a Christian ode to Mary with Arabic elements from the court of King Alfonso el Sabio in the 13th century.

Canadian singers Judith Cohen and her daughter Tamar Cohen Adams performed traditional Jewish wedding and festival music of the period, and songs the women sang when their hands were busy cooking and tending to the household.

The Sharq Arabic Music Ensemble performed Pan-Arabic music featuring instruments and musicians from different parts of the Arab world.

As the afternoon ended, the stage was dominated by passionate flamenco dance, song and music, some with jazz and Western classical overtones.

"Flamenco is the perfect blend of all three cultures," said Juanito Pascual, a guitarist and leader of a group that included Jose Maria Amador, a leader among musicians dedicated to keeping flamenco alive and growing in Spain.

But the day was as much about an idea as about the music.

"We all have to work to overcome prejudice," said Joyce Stanton, who organized the week's events with Salem D. Mikdadi. Even a small group working in Westchester can have a ripple effect, she said, and "raise people's consciousness of the other cultures."

For Mikdadi, it was a matter of bringing people of all three faiths into one room.

"I wanted people to get to know each other," he said.



Boston Camerata soloists Joel Cohen and Anne Azéma perform a Hebrew song from Morocco at the Andalusian Music Festival at the Tarrytown Music Hall Nov. 13, 2005. (Rohanna Mertens for The Journal News)



Tamar Ilana Cohen Adams, left, and her mother Judith Cohen, sing a Sephardic song at the Andalusian Music Festival at the Tarrytown Music Hall Nov. 13, 2005.
(Rohanna Mertens for The Journal News)