



Chords of Comfort

~ By DR. REBECCA EPSTEIN ~

This Saturday marks the return of the **World Festival of Sacred Music – Los Angeles**. Through Oct. 2, a thousand international artists will descend on L.A., playing various venues in what is not only our largest citywide festival but also an opportunity to experience multiple cultural traditions and truly feel the love for the earth and thy neighbor.

The idea is inspiring, and the concerts should be thrilling, but it's the manner in which this festival is run that will really send you soaring. "From the very first meeting in 1998, we said [the production process] needs to expand and contract in a way that ensures this is a project of lovingkindness, of comfort, and of joy," says WFSM-LA director Judy Mitoma. Mitoma, whose "day job" includes directing the UCLA Center for Intercultural Performance and who is also a professor of dance, has been shepherding this massive event since its inception. Her calm demeanor, therefore, is a bit surprising. "I'm grateful ... and so glad I have a project like this to work on," she says serenely.

Although interest and the number of acts have grown with each successive festival (1999 and 2002), she claims this year's has been the "easiest" to organize. She credits her insistence on a "horizontal" and grassroots approach: Each venue (the Skirball Center, Madrid Theater, Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Center, among many) holds its concerts independently; there are no corporate sponsors; and organizers were determined to make do with what they had. "We will not be a hostage to money on this project," Mitoma said at the outset. "We have to be working on faith."

Get ready to become a believer yourself, starting with the opening night concert, also a benefit for WFSM-LA. Striving for increased simplicity, Mitoma has forsaken high-end venues in favor of the Outdoor Amphitheater at UCLA's Sunset Canyon Recreation Center. Seven groups (including Siberian Tuvan throat singers Chirgilchin, Moravian folk ensemble Jiri Pavlica & Hradistan Dulcimer Band, and Cindi Alvitre and the Mankiller Drummers performing a Tongva Native American blessing) will take the stage under the harvest moon. After that, take your pick of remaining shows around town, almost 40 percent of which are free.

"We fall a little bit outside the normal pattern – probably a lot outside," Mitoma says, relaxed as ever. "And if nobody comes, we just won't do it again."

–Rebecca Epstein

2005 World Festival of Sacred Music. Opening concert Sat. 5 p.m.-9 p.m., UCLA Sunset Canyon Recreation Center, 111 De Neve Dr., Westwood, (310) 825-2101. \$15-\$35. Schedule: (310) 825-0507 or www.festivalofsacredmusic.org .