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WORLD MUSIC REVIEW

The native sounds of global cultures

The World Festival of Sacred Music begins with Native American blessings, Tuvan throat singing and much more.

By Don Heckman
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World music, in all its colorful variety, was on full display Saturday night at UCLA's Sunset Canyon Recreation Center. The opening performance of the 2005 World Festival of Sacred Music offered a succulent selection from the rich banquet scheduled over the next two weeks.

There are times when world music seems a too-expansive label, especially when applied to sounds that consist of little more than exotic instruments played over a pop-style rhythmic groove. But the artists on this program were the real deal, a collection of fascinating performers from many parts of the globe.

The concert opened with a blessing — "The Coming Home Song" — by the Ti'at Society and the Mankillers. The society consists of members from the Native American Tongva Nation, and the Mankillers are an all-women group of drummers from various tribes and nations. Together, they provided an overture filled with rhythm and spirituality.

Gonja Dreams, led by Ghanaian dancer-singer Iddi Saaka, brought together four players from various African nations and four others from Israel, Brazil and the United States. Although the music was African in orientation, it was boundary-less in style and substance, with Saaka's athletic dancing serving as a dynamic focal point.

In the next segment, "Latin America — The Spiritual and the Sacred Across the

Centuries," the traditional music ensemble Los Folkoristas and the dance troupe Danza Floricanto/U.S.A. presented a mesmerizing collection of material, much of it from Mexico. Dancers garbed in attire such as Aztec costumes and full-skirted flamenco dress explored an extraordinarily rich body of music, beginning with a colorful "Homage to the Virgin of Guadalupe" and ending with the hopeful symbolism of "La Paloma."

The music of the Korean Traditional Performing Arts Troupe presented somewhat thornier problems for Western ears, unaccustomed to the edgy sounds and microtonal intervals of Korean music. But the performance, enhanced by the lovely, stylized dance of Seong-ok Yang, was more intriguing than it sounded, although its presentation was marred by rock concert-level amplification that distorted the music's subtle dynamic layers.

The presentation by Chirgilchin, a trio of Tuvan throat singers, very nearly stole the evening. Aside from their remarkable ability to sing (and control) vocal overtones, their program was a joyous entertainment, balancing galloping rhythmic tunes with wondrous blends of moving vocal harmonies.

Jiri Pavlica and the Hradistan Dulcimer Band wound up the long but compelling evening with music from the Czech Republic, overflowing with warm vocal textures and upbeat rhythms.