



Musician's sounds survived the tomb

By Dana Bartholomew, Staff Writer

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NORTHRIDGE - When it comes to making music, there's nothing like the sound of human bone. Or a sacrificial scream.

Ask Elisabeth Waldo, a musician and composer whose grasp of pre-Columbian instruments includes owning an authentic Aztec bone rasp, or omichicahuaztli, reportedly played during human sacrifice.

"These are my human bones," the Northridge musician and composer said before beating a chuck-chuck rhythm on a femur notched for noise. "It really sounds great on a human skull.

"Wait till you hear my human-sacrifice music - with screams - with the same percussion instruments used in a sacrifice ceremony."

Widow of Northridge pioneer Carl S. Dentzel, the classically trained violinist has for a half-century pioneered the reinvention of forgotten sounds of Aztec, Inca and other ancient cultures.

By fusing musicmakers of antiquity with the classic strings of their post-Columbian conquerors, the self-taught ethnomusicologist helped usher in the New Age music movement.

Her MultiCultural Music and Art Foundation of Northridge also has become a San Fernando Valley mecca for Indo-Hispanic and Asian art, music and dance.

"It's an oasis here in the Valley. It's a treasure," said Raul Ruiz, a professor in the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies at California State University, Northridge, and producer of Latino music events at the Ford Amphitheater.

"Elisabeth is a renowned composer and arranger. She has definitely made her mark on her pre-Columbian genre of music and has captured (the music) of early colonial California.

"She's somebody who should have more recognition."

Enter Waldo's Rancho Cordillera del Norte, or "ranch of the north ridge," and you might expect to cross boots with vaqueros.

Her 8-acre estate proclaims early California, with 19th century barns, century-old walnut trees and stone walkways that meander past the New Mission Theatre built to host public fandangos and other ethnic events.

Her musical-instrument collection proclaims pre-Columbian America, with turtle-shell drums, mestizo violins, deer hoof rattles and clay wind instruments up to 2,000 years old. Waldo, a musical archaeologist, rescued their sounds from the silence of their tombs.

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"I think of myself as indigenista - the indigenous one," she said while darting about her rancho in a pink poncho, satin black pants and boots. "The first passion is my music, and the second is my rancho, and I want to share them both."

Waldo became enchanted with ethnic music while growing up on a ranch near the Yakima Indian Reservation in Washington state, where she heard singing and drums as American Indians fished for salmon on the Columbia River.

Her father encouraged her to take up the violin at age 5. At the urging of violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz, she studied at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia under Efrem Zimbalist, the famous Russian violinist and father of actor Efrem Zimbalist Jr., before touring with the All-American Youth Orchestra.

But it was her year with the Los Angeles Philharmonic that convinced her to set out as the Indiana Jones of musical Mesoamerica.

"Once I identified with the ancient civilizations," she said, "I wanted to walk in the footsteps of the conquistadores, to experience the beauty of music of the ancients through the instruments available to me."

She toured as a soloist through South America, eventually settling in Mexico City, where she played with pianist-composer Augustin Lara.

She also befriended artist Diego Rivera, who encouraged her to research pre-Columbian civilizations and delve into ancient instruments.

She'll never forget playing her first ocarina, a 2,000-year-old clay flute.

"I blew it," she recalled, cradling a similar instrument crowned with the head of a jaguar. "The sound was of a bird, an owl, a wild animal, of an eagle. I was excited. I had never heard anything like it."

She also learned to play later instruments of native Indians based on guitars and violins of Old World Spain.

Eventually, she met Dentzel, a Valley developer and civic leader who helped give Northridge its name. Her neighbors, living among stately horse ranches, included Jack Oakie and Zeppo Marx.

"Everybody said, 'Why are you marrying that guy and living in the sticks?'" she said.

Dentzel, director of the Southwest Museum for 25 years, died in 1980. Soon afterward, Waldo delved into ancient Chinese music and introduced it to Los Angeles schoolchildren.

In 1989, she established her multicultural foundation at her ranch to promote music and dance from around the world through concerts and educational workshops.

Each month, she hosts performances at her New Mission Theatre, topped with bells from 18th century Peru. And each Christmas, luminarias are lit for a rancho celebration at Wilbur Avenue and Nordhoff Boulevard.

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She also has recorded a half-dozen albums through her production company Southwinds Music, has been telecast on PBS and has lectured at the University of Southern California, CSUN, Occidental College and the University of California, Los Angeles.

Ever since they retired, foundation volunteers Carolyne and Billy Edwards have found a cultural haven at Waldo's sprawling Northridge estate.

"It's great, and it's becoming even greater," Carolyne Edwards said. "It's like being in another world. We're just proud of the fact she's bringing culture to the San Fernando Valley.

"Elisabeth is a fixture in the North Valley whose passion is strong, whose connection to the past is a resource that is invaluable," added Wayne Adelstein, publisher of North Valley Community News and past president of the North Valley Regional Chamber of Commerce.

"And she's a hoot to be with."

Waldo's plans include a series of music festivals, fiestas, fandangos and American Indian powwows. She wants her rancho to be the heart of the Valley for performing arts.

Her "Realm of the Incas" CD, an orchestral suite that stars authentic pre-Columbian instruments, has just been released in Japan.

"You see my love of this, how many years it'

s taken to do this," she said, popping in a "Rites of the Pagan" CD in which the flutes and drums beat faster and faster, anticipating a human scream.

"Turn it up, turn it up," she urged an assistant. "Here we come to the sacrifice."