

Elaine Serling

A tapestry of musical wealth.



All you have to do is say, "glida" or "marojnoya" or "hieie crema," and you've learned a little something," says singer-songwriter Elaine Serling.

"Even if all you know is how to say 'ice cream' in three languages" (like Hebrew, Russian and Spanish), "it gives you a hint about how other people live. It gives you a different flavor of life."

Serling is a Detroit native whose heart belongs to yet another language: Yiddish. She learned Yiddish at the Sholom Aleichem Institute when she was a little girl and will perform *A Bissel Yiddish* at MusicFest.

Her singing also began when Serling was young. She was 10 when her parents suggested she take lessons - singing, dancing or piano. By the time she was 15, she was performing professionally.

Serling's Yiddish concert is about "having some fun with Jewish music and looking at what Jewish music really is." She performs in Yiddish, Hebrew and English, singing original material "and some traditional tunes that everybody will know." "So what, exactly, makes music "Jewish"?"

"If it's written in Yiddish, it's clearly Jewish," she says. "But music in other languages, if the composer is Jewish, also constitutes Jewish music.

"Jewish music is more than music written in Yiddish or having a Jewish theme.

The influence on music from Jewish composers and songwriters is heard with hints of rhythms, motifs and sounds captured from our experiences of being wandering Jews. On the positive side, the wandering enabled us [songwriters] the opportunity to create from that reservoir and tapestry of musical wealth not as strangers, but as natives. They are our sounds and rhythms, too."

Perhaps this piercing history is what makes Jewish music so much more than just a collection of pretty notes.

Serling says of her favorite Yiddish song, "Oyfn Pripechek," for example: "The words are so simple, the melody so lovely and yet the message is so deep." It's a song about students and their rabbi, the Hebrew words they love, which "as a people we've passed on from generation to generation."

Serling has been involved in Jewish music education for more than four decades, and she still loves the Yiddish songs she has been performing all these years. Just a single Yiddish word - "bubbie" for instance - "forms such a wonderful image," she says. "Yiddish is a gem."

- Elizabeth Applebaum