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PERFORMING ARTS

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Zemer Chai and Coral Cantigas

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Thirty voices strong, Zemer Chai celebrated its 31st season Thursday night by inviting the Coral Cantigas to join forces in "Shalom y Esperanza," a festive concert focusing on Jewish themes. Both choruses sang separately and together. A capacity audience filled Temple Shalom in Chevy Chase for the event, focusing on Jewish-Sephardic traditional music and the many cultures it absorbed over the past millennium and a half. Cantor Ramon Tasat also sang some moving, even gripping, Sephardic melodies with his own guitar accompaniment.

Zemer Chai, conducted by its founder Eleanor Epstein, began with songs from medieval and Renaissance Spain, where Jewish, Moorish and Christian styles closely intertwined. Paying homage to Moses, "Mi Al Har Chorev" fused medieval chant (rooted in ancient Hebrew sacred music) and early Christian choral style. Singing passionately with utter precision, the choir continued through Passover and Sabbath settings brought by immigrants expelled from Spain as the Jewish diaspora spread through Latin America.

Led by Diana Saez, the Coral Cantigas journeyed through additional Sephardic samplings showing the group's customary gusto and finesse, buoyed by Steve Bloom's tambourine, drums and cymbals. Dance rhythms dominated in Jorge Drexler's "Milonga of the Moorish Jew," a bracing Argentine and Uruguayan tango ancestor; a full-blown tango came in the choir's infectious "Verano Porteño" by the contemporary Argentine Astor Piazzolla. And a setting of Psalm 150 had all the zest called for by its exuberant message of praise.

-- Cecelia Porter