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Luna Negra will add a few holiday songs to flamenco concert

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Flamenco is one of the most recognizable of global folk styles.

Yet guitarist Ottmar Liebert took the expressive Spanish music in an innovative direction when he formed Luna Negra in 1988, modernizing the sound with synthesizer backdrops, elements of other Latin styles and slowing flamenco's fiery tempos down to a simmer.

The new-sounding group made its recording debut two years later with "Nouveau Flamenco," selling 2 million copies worldwide and crossing over to general audiences in the U.S.

"I'm not Spanish, I'm not a Gypsy, so I never really had an interest in following the traditional ways of the music," says the 46-year-old guitarist. "Flamenco is made out of different styles, and if I throw it in a stew with other styles, it will only be interesting. If me messing with flamenco destroys flamenco, then flamenco was not very strong to begin with."

Raised in Cologne, Germany, by parents of Chinese-German and Hungarian heritage, Liebert picked up the guitar at age 12. A guitar instructor hired through his school saw some talent in the boy and encouraged it. Grateful for having a teacher who took an interest in him in his formative years, Liebert and Luna Negra will perform Saturday at a benefit for Union City's Board of Education and Jose Marti Cultural Center.

"Music is important in the schools because it allows us to see another side," Liebert says. "I've actually talked to drummers who say they would have been in jail if they hadn't found the drums. In trying to save a buck and leaving art and music out of the schools, we're leaving a lot of children with no way of expressing themselves."

Liebert played in a string of jazz-funk bands while living in Boston in the mid-'80s, while working as a bicycle messenger and as a bank teller. But a move to Santa Fe opened up a new world for the guitarist, who channeled the laid-back environs and open spaces into his love of flamenco and modern ambient music.

Since "Nouveau Flamenco," Liebert and Luna Negra have released a series of albums that are a stark contrast to the music's roots.

While he's toured for years with a quartet, Liebert re-formed the trio he had toured and recorded with in the early '90s. This version of Luna Negra will also be joined by a string quartet, featuring two violins, viola and cello. This one-time-only lineup will bring a distinct classical backdrop to old and new music.

Out on tour in support of a new Christmas album entitled "Winter Rose," Liebert and company will play a few Christmas songs. But the concert (like the album) will be an all-too-rare subtle take on holiday music.

"I like Christmas, but I don't like to be hit over the head with it, so I took a few traditionals and found some nice classical music," says Liebert, who rounded out the album with six originals. "It's Christmas, but it's not a flashing lights Las Vegas Christmas."

A contemplative album filled with rich textures and harmonies, listeners can still feel the pulse of flamenco in the music, which is something the guitarist has no plans of changing.

"Flamenco is sort of the blues of the Gypsies," says Liebert. "There is something about that expression and the rawness that is really the continuation of me looking for something expressive -- which is actually the reason I picked up the guitar in the first place."