

'Silent Night' prompts complaint

■ Religious-themed music doesn't belong in public schools, San Leandro school board president's wife says

By Karen Holzmeister

STAFF WRITER

SAN LEANDRO — "Silent Night," the traditional Christmas carol about the birth of Jesus Christ, doesn't inspire heavenly peace in Margarita Lacabe, wife of school board president Mike Katz-Lacabe.

And the mother of two isn't remaining mum about the hymn, which has been a staple of some schools' holiday programs. Lacabe, 40, has asked the San Leandro school district to ban such songs

350 from the music curriculum and school concerts.

Religious-themed songs shouldn't be performed or taught in public schools, says the self-professed atheist and human rights activist.

"Our children should not be indoctrinated into Christian beliefs," said the Argentinian-born Lacabe, who described herself as a Christian until she started college. "We don't want our daughter to miss her music education, (and) we don't believe school is a place to bring religion."

Lacabe filed her complaint about spiritual music just before Easter. Four months ago, "Silent Night" was among the songs taught and

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performed in December at McKinley Elementary School, where the couple's eldest daughter, 7-year-old Michaela, is a first-grader.

Neither Principal Cher Mott nor music teacher Kathy Maier responded to Lacabe's request that the canticle be removed from the curriculum, Lacabe said.

Neither Mott, Maier nor the district office responded to requests for comment.

Katz-Lacabe acknowledged that his wife's request has been "awkward" for him.

He said his wife is proceeding properly on an issue that concerns her and that he will recuse himself from any possible discussions or

action.

If district administrators won't drop hymns such as "Silent Night," first performed in 1818 in Austria, Lacabe said she is prepared to take her request to the school board trustees, the Alameda County Board of Education and, if necessary, will request a legal injunction.

Lacabe acknowledged that middle or high school students could possibly study religious songs as part of classes on music history or popular culture. But she contended that's not the context in which Christian songs are taught to impressionable elementary students, including children of other religious beliefs or no religious commitment at all.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that religion may be taught as instruction, not

indoctrination, but has issued no opinion about the propriety of religious music in public schools.

Lower courts are divided on everything from the use of religious music in school concerts to students' recitation of the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance. (A federal law signed by President Dwight Eisenhower added the phrase to the pledge in 1954. Before that, the pledge — which had existed in various forms since 1892 — made no mention of God.)

In the future, Lacabe said she plans to challenge the recitation of the pledge in schools.

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