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Latin American Sounds Inspire Musical Mission

Cantare Shares Heritage With Children of All Nationalities

By Nadya Sagner
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Cecilia Esquivel coaxes a melody from a guitar-like instrument made from an armadillo shell. In her hands, a donkey's jawbone raps out a lively beat.

As part of the duo Cantare, Esquivel creates Latin American children's music that incorporates traditional styles, such as merengue, swing, *baiao* and *candombe*, from all over the Spanish-speaking world.

At 10:30 a.m. Wednesday, Cantare, which features Esquivel and Patricia Vergara, who is originally from Brazil, brings its spirited sound to Kids' Day Out, a monthly cultural series at Fort Washington's Arts/Harmony Hall Regional Center.

Kids get wide exposure to Latino music these days. Dan Zanes borrows from Latino tunes and collaborates with Latino musicians on his popular children's albums. A PBS cartoon show features Latino twins Maya and Miguel, and "Sesame Street" has been bilingual for years. With its catchy rhythms and emotional themes, Latin American music holds natural appeal for kids, especially in the D.C. area, with its large, varied Latino population.

Cantare performs traditional folk songs and some original compositions, and gives audience members the chance to sing, dance and make music themselves. Though the armadillo guitar, called a *charango*, and donkey jawbone are off-limits because they're fragile, goats' hooves are "a big hit with children," Esquivel said.

Interactivity is an important part of the Kids' Day Out program. According to Lawrence Knowles, director of arts at Harmony Hall, the point is to make music fun, vivid and immediate. "It's tough to entertain kids and teach them at the same time," he said. So performers make sure they involve the audience.

Kids' Day Out has been a regular program at Harmony Hall since the facility opened in 1989. The monthly performances bring artistic and cultural groups to schoolchildren from Prince George's County schools and nearby private and parochial schools. Targeted at preschoolers through fourth-graders, the events are also open to the public. Knowles advises parents to make reservations. Some walk-up tickets are available, he said, but "performances are popular. . . . It'd be a shame to disappoint children at the last minute."

Cantare, with its child-targeted music and inclusive style, is typical of the Kids' Day Out offerings. "Our goal is teaching American kids about Latin America, and teaching Latino kids about parts of the culture they might not know about," Esquivel said. "We show American kids there's more to Latin culture than Mexican food, and we give Latino kids pride in their heritage."

At Harmony Hall, Cantare will perform what she called "a musical journey through Latin America." Between songs, she and Vergara will demonstrate and explain their unusual instruments -- there are a total of 20 -- including maracas, panpipes, drums and an accordion. Then they'll invite children to sing and dance -- and play along with the goat hooves.

Esquivel, who was born in Argentina, studied at the National Conservatory of Music in Buenos Aires and received a music degree from the University of Maryland. She won a Wammie award last year from the Washington Area Music Association as best Latino vocalist. She's also a clinical social worker, specializing in the needs of the Latino community. "I use a lot of my social work skills in my music," she said. "It's a nice way to combine both careers."

Founded about 10 years ago by different members, Cantare has featured Esquivel and Vergara, a full-time professional musician, since 2002.

"We should be familiar to a lot of the kids in the audience" because of frequent appearances at libraries and schools, Esquivel said.

Cantare, which appears with the Washington Performing Arts Society and the Cathedral Choral Society, also performs music not specifically geared toward children.

Esquivel said many D.C.-area Latinos might be familiar only with popular standards or trendier pop songs that get radio play. Her own interests focus on folk traditions and music passed on orally through the generations.

Upcoming Kids' Day Out events include the Unified Jazz Ensemble on Oct. 19, a group that explores, through children's eyes, the birth and development of jazz music, which Knowles said "will help teach kids about rhythm, music -- and math." On Nov. 16, the Native Nature Dance Troupe presents American Indian dance. And on Dec. 7, a Russian group, Carelian, will present a holiday performance of folk music on instruments such as the Finnish harp, mandolin and bagpipes.

Esquivel said she finds performing for children and introducing them to her musical heritage "rewarding and gratifying." And the best validation comes from her audiences' enthusiastic reactions. As one teacher wrote her, Esquivel said, " 'Thank you for making Spanish cool again at our school.' "

Washington Post

POP MUSIC

Tuesday, October 26, 2004; Page C08

Cantare & Friends

The Latinization of Washington seems to be advancing as rapidly as gentrification, and musically the results are a notable increase in variety, color and vitality. The chief evidence of this trend is supplied by the "In" Series, an eclectic undertaking whose offerings range from Mozart to cabaret, with particular attention to the area's Hispanic population.

Sunday at the Mexican Cultural Institute, the series presented "Looking South -- Mirando al Sur," a brilliant tribute to Latin American music. It was sung, played and narrated by Cantare & Friends, five highly talented women who sing and collectively play piano, accordion, guitar and a dazzling variety of wind and percussion instruments. The music had a capacity audience springing to its feet, shouting "*Otra!*" ("Encore!"), clapping in unison and vigorously dancing not in the aisle (not enough room) but in the adjacent lobby under a panoply of Diego Rivera-style murals. It was a concert worthy of one of Washington's most distinctive and beautiful buildings.

The program included folk and popular music from Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, Cuba and Brazil, an index of the sheer variety of the cultures that we lump together under the collective term "Latin American." But within that diversity, amid the musical assertions of ethnic identity and pride, there was a strong sense of unity, more than one feels in the United States in this election season. In these countries, a culture that originated in the Iberian Peninsula has interacted creatively with an indigenous culture and African influences, producing strong and distinctive results.

Two things can be said of the nearly 20 composers who were featured on the program: They have not lost touch with their folk traditions, and their music never wanders far from dance forms and spirit. These facts give the music a special quality seldom available from our own music industry.

There will be a repeat performance tonight. It would be worth a considerable effort to be there.

-- Joseph McLellan

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