

Chile's Inti-Illimani Plays for the world

WORLD MUSIC REVIEW

INTI-ILLIMANI

At Harbourfront Centre
In Toronto on Friday

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When people of all ages vigorously defend their tiny bit of space on a concrete bench an hour before a free folk concert, you know something's up. The Chilean band Inti-Illimani inspired this devotion, and their performance at Harbourfront Centre's Ritmo y Color Festival on Friday night warranted the audience's determination.

Indeed, determination is a kind of touchstone for the band itself. For 30 years they've been playing music that's made them a symbol of the struggle for human rights and peace in Latin America, a symbol that was acknowledged as soon as the group walked on stage. The entire audience gave Inti-Illimani a standing ovation before they even played a single note.

From the first strums on the charango (an Andean mandolin), Inti-Illimani proceeded to keep the audience spellbound for the next 90 minutes. They drew from 30 years worth of material, a trademark mix of traditional Latin American melodies cross-pollinated with European-style chamber music and occasional nods to jazz. Inti-Illimani is proof that the sax and the *sikus* (pan pipes) need not be strangers.

On songs like *Salake*, the band bumped the concept up a notch, with clarinet and soprano sax emerging in the middle of a traditional Bolivian melody to engage in something like freewheeling New Orleans-style jazz improvisation. All the while the guitars, charango and various traditional flutes and percussion instruments continued to gracefully lope along.

One of the concert's most charming moments came during a piece that began with a Sardinian rhythm, no doubt a legacy of the band's 15-year exile in Italy. (Their exile began during a European tour that coincided with the 1973 coup in Chile led by military strongman Augusto Pinochet. The band jokingly refers to its time abroad as the "longest tour in history.") Always inventive, in Inti-Illimani's hands the Sardinian dance mutated into music from southern Chile and then back again, much to the crowd's delight.

In fact, wherever Inti-Illimani led, the core of the audience attentively followed — even to an extended instrumental jam that began with the sounds of an African thumb piano, and entered into something dangerously close to self-indulgent jazz noodling played over constantly shifting layers of strings and flutes.

The most electrifying performance of the night, though, was not turned in by the full band. Instead it was a cuatro-guitar duet. It began in a melancholic hush, but gradually transformed into an exuberant display of virtuoso — but never slick — technique.