

Music

Latin American Sounds That Transcend Borders

Wednesday, March 14, 2007; Page C08

After four decades of touring, the members of the Chilean octet Inti-Illimani could be excused if they rested on their considerable laurels.

Since the 1973 overthrow of Salvador Allende forced the group into political exile, the "Intis" have become Latin America's most prominent folkloristas and an outspoken voice for the continent's oppressed.

But as founding member Jorge Coulon told a wildly enthusiastic crowd at Lisner Auditorium on Sunday night, "We must not become prisoners of memory. We don't want to become a museum of ourselves."

The group has taken on five new members over the past decade, and the impact -- musically, at least -- has been dramatic. While still steeped in traditional culture, Inti-Illimani is striking out in new directions, working edgy harmonies and jazzier rhythms into its music -- reinventing itself, more or less, for the 21st century.

But there was still plenty to please purists. An Inti-Illimani concert is a wild ride through Latin music, a whirlwind of Andean folk tunes, tangos from Argentina, Brazilian sambas, and throbbing, sobbing love songs from Mexico. Shifting among 30 different instruments, the players wove an intricate and always-changing tapestry of sound, shifting effortlessly from whispery ballads to intoxicating explosions of flutes and drums, always to mesmerizing effect.

And while there's a definite political flavor to much of the music, it's done with a light touch -- steering clear of diatribe or anything too controversial.

The band mixed up old favorites like "Sambo Lando" with material from the forthcoming album "Pequeno Mundo," including the jazzy, percussive "Rondombe" and a compelling new version of the 1960s song "La Guitarrera Que Toca."

Some of the most moving singing of the evening came from multi-instrumentalist Juan Flores on "La Tarde Se Ha Puesto Triste" -- but all the players displayed relentless virtuosity in a concert that was pure exhilaration to the very end.

-- Stephen Brookes