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Inti-Illimani brings a global connection to Opera House

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The list of band members and the instruments they play was the first hint of the rich and amazing diversity in store for the audience who came Friday to the performance of Inti-Illimani at the Opera House.

Inti-Illimani's eight members each play at least as many instruments, ranging from violin and clarinet to ones with exotic names like zampona, charango and sikus.

This remarkable Chilean group was founded in the 1960s by engineering students at Santiago Technical University, who decided to explore the music of the indigenous cultures of Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador and Argentina. The musicians were in Italy in 1973 when Chilean president Salvador Allende was deposed. Finding themselves stranded, Italy became their home base until they returned home permanently to Chile in 1990.

Forty years later, new members have replaced most of the original ones, but they've attracted a worldwide following for their captivating music, the repertoire continuing to expand as they explore their Latin American roots.

Jorge Coulon, the group's remaining founding member, greeted the Napa audience, noting it was their wine country debut. "We are brothers in wine," he said, making reference to Chile's growing wine industry. "That's the best way to be brothers."

Coulon, speaking in Spanish and English, reiterated what he has often said, that the group uses its music as a means of making connections, and possibly a better world.

Connect they did Friday night with an impressive, two-hour program that was lively, passionate and lyrical, comprising a dazzling range of music from Cuba to the Andes.

The band moved from one song to another with minimal introductions -- but the music spoke for itself quite wondrously. The enthusiastic audience noisily did not permit them to leave without an encore.

"We are not a political group ¶ but we have always been politically engaged," Coulon has said. "We have a concept of society and about the relationships, and we try to translate our ideas into our sound, not to be part of one political party or another but in the sense to bring about a better world."

Their joyful, soulful music opens new worlds for listeners and makes great strides toward their goal.