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HISPANIC HARPS

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"Para entender la harpa, hay muchas cosas que se requieren saber....." (In order to understand the harp, it is necessary to know many things...) Juan Bermudo, 1555.

On August 27, 1989, fifteen Chicago harpists gave up their Sunday afternoon to sit at the feet of a master Paraguayan harpist, Alfredo Ortiz. Some of those fifteen, all Anglos, were well-known professional harpists. The others, who loved the harp no less, were from all walks of life. What they had in common was the desire to learn more about playing the Hispanic harp,

so foreign to all of their training and experience with the classical pedal harp.

Hispanics may not realize that North American and European harpists are sometimes completely awestruck by the technical proficiency and virtuosity displayed by an Hispanic harpist.

According to the book "The Irish Harp" by Joan Rimmer, "Nothing comparable with the vigorous technique and vivacious repertoire of the Latin American harpists....has yet developed (in playing the Irish harp).

Harps are hot in the United States today. Who is it who doesn't love a harp? Economic expansion continues. Families dare to dream of buying an instrument that may cost from \$1,500 to \$25,000 for their children. Only the truly rich had such luxuries in previous generations.

Kids study the harp in public school just like they used to study the drums or the flute. Concert harpists, restaurant harpists, style show harpists, wedding harpists, jazz harpists, New Age harpists, Latin American harpists - they are all out there - playing the instrument of the angels.

Surprisingly, the harp is the oldest known musical instrument and traces of its use have been found in all ancient

civilizations. The oldest pictorial representation of a harpist was found in Iran from 3,400 B. C. Harps have been found in Egyptian tombs dated from 3,000 B. C.. The most famous Biblical harpist was the Hebrew King David (1,900 B. C.) who learned to play the harp when he was a shepherd boy. The Phoenicians, seafaring neighbors of Israel, took the harp to Ireland in 1,260 B. C. The harp became Ireland's national instrument. The Celts from Ireland and Wales introduced the harp to Spain.

European kings and queens played the harp. Facility with the harp was considered a mark of royal breeding.

Curiously, there is no record of the harp in the New World until the Spanish explorers introduced it after Columbus. The first mention of a Latin American harpist was in 1526 when Martin Nino arrived in what is now Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina. Catholic priests brought Spanish harps to their many mission sites in the New World and taught the Indians to make and play them. Colonial paintings and sculptures further document the presence of the harp throughout Latin America.

If you could put one of each of the different Latin American harps side by side, you would see thousands of variations in construction details, shapes, sound quality, and size. Each country has developed its own regional harp styles and harp

music.

Yet all Latin American harps have some features in common.

The frame is wood, most often cedar. The 32 or 36 strings are nylon, although they used to be gut. The tension of the strings is less than on the pedal harp so the sound is light and strong.

The tuning is diatonic, corresponding to the white notes of an octave on the piano. Thus the harpist can play in a major scale as well as its natural minor scale. The harpist plucks or strikes the strings with long fingernails instead of using the fingertips exclusively as does the classical harpist. The right hand usually plays the melody while the left plays the bass.

Latin American harpists learn by ear and not by musical scripts. Each harpist is expected to make his own arrangements and not copy another harpist. The syncopated rhythms of 6/8 time, pitting two or four notes against three, add the real flavor of Latin American music.

Sometimes playing with incredible speed, but always with clarity and precision, the Latin American harpist inserts between the melodic line the very specialized embellishments associated with Latin American harp music: tremelos, pizzicatos, octaves, muffling, arpeggios, and glissandi.

Does the harpist find the harp, or the harp find the harpist? Great musicians are almost possessed by their music.

Beto Laguna, self-taught Chicago harpist originally from Vera Cruz, has always supported himself and his family with his harp playing. "No one in my family played the harp. I can remember when I was seven and noticed my first harpist: a blind man, a street player. (I am still not that good a harpist). From that time on, I had to play the harp. I talked someone out of an old harp and fixed it up. I locked myself in my room, playing the harp, six or seven hours at a time. My father didn't want me to play the harp, but my mother believed in me. In Mexico there are so many musicians, so many bums! No one wants his child to be a bum."

Laguna patronizes his favorite harp maker in Mexico City. His students must plan on spending \$1,500 for a decent harp today. But young Chicago Latinos are not interested in their heritage of the harp. "All they want is noise," laments Laguno. "Almost all of the people who want to hear me play are Anglo."

Members of the Chicago Folk Harp Society have made him an honorary member. Some call his playing incredible. And after forty years, he still loves to play the harp. "You can relax your soul. When I play, I transport myself to another world."

Alfredo Rolando Ortiz was born in Cuba and moved to Venezuela when he was 12. He learned to play the Venezuelan arpa llanera (Harp of the Plains) and the Arpa Paraguaya (Paraguayan Harp). He attended and graduated from medical school in Columbia even while performing professionally and recording his harp music. Music won out over medicine. (The United States has 700,000 doctors, but only a few Latin American harpists of the stature of Dr. Ortiz). He has lectured or performed for the National Conference of the American Harp Society, the Summer Festival of Jazz and Pop Harp, the National Conference of the National Association of Music Therapy, the International Harp Week in Holland, the First World Harp Congress, the First International Harp Conference, and the Second World Harp Congress. Yet he says, "My most important concert was playing in the delivery room during my daughter's birth."

His books and video on Latin American harp music and techniques are helpful to American harpists who want to learn the styles of the Hispanic harp.

The harp is officially the national instrument of Paraguay. According to a writer in the Folk Harp Journal, there may be more Paraguayan harps in use in the world today than all of the other

harps combined. Those who fall in love with the harp will join
all the peasants and kings since 3,400 B. C., as well as the
angels in heaven, who find the harp irresistible.

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