

From Chorale Arts Society, a Tangy 'Creole Mass'

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Argentine composer Ariel Ramírez wrote his "Misa Criolla" (Creole Mass) in 1963, just as the Second Vatican Council permitted the celebration of the Catholic Mass in the vernacular. The new Mass, a stunning achievement, combined Spanish text with indigenous instruments and rhythms. Its effect is that of a reverent carnival.

The Choral Arts Society of Washington gave "Misa Criolla" an invigorating revival Thursday at the National Museum of Natural History's Baird Auditorium. The Ramírez piece was the finale of a consistently engaging concert of folklore music from Central and South America rendered by a dozen performers who ranged in origin from Canada to Chile.

The Smithsonian Latino Center-sponsored event was elegantly structured and majestically performed. As the musicians performed a series of folk songs from Cuba, Chile, Mexico and Peru, they featured every rhythm and instrument that was showcased in the Mass: the guitar-like charango (with Carlos Boltes's dynamic precision playing); the passionate guitar work of Michael Bard, Richard Marlow and Scott Hill (Boltes's partner in the group Duo Alturas); the polyrhythmic drumming of Luis Garay; and the emotive singing of operatic tenors Manuel Meléndez, José Sacin and Pablo Talamante.

The only musician absent from the Mass was Carmen de Vicente, a concert castanet player whose earlier duet with Bard on Ernesto Lecuona's classic "Malagueña" was as fleet and delightful as the tapping feet of Fred Astaire.

While they lost themselves in the music, between songs the musicians were gregarious and informal. Gonzalo Cortés and Roberto Clavijo of the group Amigos related earthy anecdotes about the dangers of playing in high altitudes on instruments that demand great breath control. Joseph Holt, the program's host and conductor of "Misa Criolla," became noticeably teary as he read the lyrics of Lecuona's "Por eso te quiero."