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STUDY GUIDE: LOS FOLKLORISTAS

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I. What is folk music?

Folk music tells a story about common people and their lives. It expresses feelings about many topics: work songs, love songs, cradle songs, war songs, play songs, story songs, songs of mourning and so on.

Many folk songs have been with us for centuries; however, we will never know for sure what they were like when first sung. In most cases, The creator of the song was soon forgotten, but the song was remembered and passed on from person to person and generation to generation. The song was not written down. Because of this, singers felt free to change the music and words to make the song more personal. This is very a very important fact to remember.

Folk songs are very popular because they are about the people in their everyday lives. They are actually a way of studying the history of mankind through the songs they sing.

II. Los Folkloristas

The liberal translation of “Los Folkloristas” is the “folklore people”. The term relates to this group, not simply as singers or instrumentalists, but as people who communicate their heritage and folklore, their culture, through music.

The group was started in 1966, in Mexico City, where about 20 friends met regularly to play and sing regional folk music. Gradually, as they became more serious about the music and began acquiring more songs, the group dwindled to seven serious musicians. Only two of them have received formal musical training.

Since its beginning, the group has become recognized as the foremost proponent of Latin music, as well as of *nueva cancion*, the contemporary music of modern-day Latin Americans. Creators of the soundtrack for the motion picture, *El Norte*, “Los Folkloristas” have released more than 30 albums and have presented more than 2000 concerts worldwide. Their music has been heard on radio, television and theater programs on three continents.

“Los Folkloristas” have collected over 100 musical instruments, from all over a dozen different countries. They have been gathering, along with the folk music itself, through first-hand studies throughout Latin America. “Los Folkloristas” spend hours with village elders and regional masters of the local styles. Often, a piece is captured from extinction, through the group’s efforts to locate that “last old campesino” (peasant) who still sings the music his grandfather taught him.

“Los Folkloristas” have a very poetic way of explaining their philosophy and mission:

With what do we play?

Each sound that comes forth from an instrument is as unique as the person who gave it form.

Each musical instrument, however humble it may seem, contains and expresses the long history of the people who form a settlement, a small village, a region, a country.

An instrument sings or cries of the feeling of a man or his people; it teaches us how they live and of their struggle-how they love and work.

This is why the nearly 100 instruments that we have lovingly collected are our most valuable cultural heritage, the most cherished tool with which we work.

We have obtained them from the hands of the people that use them or did use them; we have heard them played by those people and we have tried to learn their truth.

From the sonorous breath of the flutes and ocarinas of pre-Columbian Mexico, 1,500 years old, to the beat of the huehuetl or the rhythm of the teponaztle of our ancestors, to the song of the quenás, sikus, tarkas and charangos, the strumming of the jaranas, cuatros and tiples, the sound of the harps and violins, the pulsation of the Caribbean drums, the maracas and the raspadores, we receive the universal and human language of this continental music.

OUR MUSIC

Why do we sing?

Because to learn from an indigenous musician or from a campesino singer has been our norm.

Because from their hands, we have also received the instruments that we play.

Because we have traveled over the roads and the paths that take us to the music and to the people.

Because we approach their expression and their culture with respect.

Because we not only learn to play and sing their melodies, but also to be solidary with their lives and their struggles.

Because with these songs and this music, which becomes ours too, we recover the memory and the history of our people.

Because with the same clay out of which our grandfathers shaped their sorrows, we shape the throat of a New Song.

Because with it, we question the present and dream the future.

Because we sing along with others, and never alone and our song gathers and adds your voices and ours.

For the dignity which is essential to all.

FOR THIS WE SING”

III. Tools of a Culture

“Los Folkloristas” have assembled a huge array of instruments from throughout Latin America. Among them are standard examples, such as guitars, violins and many different flutes, drums, rasps, rattles and reeds. You are probably familiar with the names of many of them. However, the more unusual items are those which tend to catch the attention of the audience most.

One of these is the tambor de agua, - water drum, from the Yaqui Indians of Northern Mexico. It is a large gourd, hollowed out and floating in a tub of water. When struck with a rubber-wrapped stick, it produces a very deep bass sound. Another non-traditional bass is created from a large clay water jug, which is struck with a handkerchief. The tone can be altered, by placing a hand over the mouth of the jug.

Other unusual instruments include: the charango- a tiny toy-like guitar, fashioned from an armadillo shell (complete with hair!); the palo de agua- water stick; the sikus or zamponas –which we recognize as pan pipes (found in many cultures).

Ocarinas, which are clay flutes shaped like various animals that date back to pre-Columbian times, are used in the piece called *Raiz Viva* (meaning “living roots”), which was an important part of the sound track to the award-winning film, *El Norte*.

Jose Avila, the musical director, recalls that he spent many long hours in his living room, simply listening to the different sounds that the individual flutes could make. Finally, after nearly six months, he was able to create the charts for *Raiz Viva*, adding percussion instruments from the pre-Columbian times. This piece is perhaps the one the group plays most often.

IV. Terms for Better Understanding

1992 marked the Quincentennial of Columbus's discovery of America. Los Folkloristas are helping us to celebrate the "Meeting of Two World" here are some terms that may be useful to you:

Social Studies terms:

<i>Columbus-</i>	Landed in the West Indies in October 1492; landed in the Spanish Main (Northern coastline of South America) in 1498.
<i>Ponce de Leon-</i>	Landed on the Yucatan coast in 1512 and 1513.
<i>Cordoba-</i>	The first to report on Mayan cities, in 1516.
<i>Mayan-</i>	Indian agricultural race; superior architecture and textiles for their time. The meaning of "Mayan" is "mother of the waters. Located in southern Mexico and part of Central America.
<i>Aztec-</i>	Native culture found mainly in Mexico. The meaning of "Aztec" is "sun worshipper.
<i>Inca-</i>	Native culture found mainly in the western areas of South America (present-day Peru, Chile). The meaning of "Inca" is "king or royal prince."
<i>pre-Columbian</i>	Before the time of Columbus' discovery of the new world.
<i>Latin America</i>	Mexico, Central America, South America and Caribbean Islands.

Spanish Terms:

<i>Mestizo-</i>	"Mixed breed"- in reference to people from Latin America, this means of Indian and Spanish heritage.
<i>tierra-</i>	land or earth.
<i>cancion-</i>	song
<i>nueva-</i>	new
<i>flauta-</i>	flute
<i>concha-</i>	shell (conch)
<i>arpa-</i>	harp
<i>trompeta-</i>	trumpet
<i>tambor de agua-</i>	water drum
<i>guitarra-</i>	guitar
<i>caja-</i>	box
<i>violines-</i>	violins
<i>instrumento-</i>	instrument

V. Mexico
(inserted map graphic)

VI. Central America
(inserted map graphic)

VII. South America
(inserted map graphic)

VIII. **Two Los Folkloristas Songs**

Two of Los Folkloristas' most popular pieces are described in detail below. While we can't be sure they will be performed for your students' assembly program, you may wish to play excerpts from them in class and discuss instrumentation, "mood" and meaning

Raiz Viva (Living Root)

This is a purely instrumental piece, composed by the musical director, Jose Avila, in 1977. The idea for this piece was formed when the group was allowed to play authentic instruments they found in a museum in Veracruz. Jose was so taken with these instruments, which he was determined to recreate the pre-Columbian aura in his composition. This music is reminiscent of rituals, ceremonies and celebrations.

The piece uses more than 20 instruments, such as the water jug (tamor de agua); huehuetl (drum); ocarinas, and several varieties of flutes. This piece is an integral part of the background music in *El Norte*.

Konex-Konex (or Conex-Conex)

This is a Mayan lullaby. (One critic mentioned that when Los Folkloristas played this piece in a public concert, restless young children actually settled down!)

The Mayan words are:

"Konex Konex pa lexen xi cubin xi cubin yo kol kin" (and repeated over and over, toward the end of the piece).

The Spanish translation is:

"Vamos, Vamos muchachos, porque va a ponerse el Sol."

The English translation is:

"Let's go, let's go boys and girls, because the sun is going to set."

"Konex-Konex" has the tender touches of a mother's song, surrounded by the sounds of a tropical rain forest- the wailing of the conch shell, the rain-like patter of a water stick, and bird calls, evoked on a variety of flutes.

IX. Pre-Concert Activities

The following sources and activities are merely suggestions for teachers to employ, in order to help students to fully appreciate and enjoy the Los Folkloristas performance. In developing this teacher's guide, it was impossible to individually address each grade level or subject area. We hope that, at the very least, you will encourage your students to read the student booklet, and have some type of discussion on its contents. Beyond that, please feel free to use your own judgement and creative abilities to guide *your* students.

- Read appropriate works about Columbus and other explorers who were instrumental in the colonization of Latin America. Your school librarian will be able to assist you.
- In appropriate social studies or geography classes, use the maps provided in the student booklets to find countries, capitals and cities and identify the regions where the Latin American Indian nations were located. Discuss the differences between the Spanish and American cultures.
- In Spanish classes, preview a song or two, trying to identify words and phrases that your students may know. Help students to be prepared for listening to Spanish as it is sung, as well as spoken. (A Spanish version of Los Folkloristas philosophy and mission is available for Spanish Classes.)
- In music classes, listen to music of Latin American composers. Discuss Latin American rhythms and percussion instruments. In particular, compare the pre-Columbian instruments with those of today.
- Show the videotape *Discovering the Music of Latin America*. This 20-minute video traces the history of Latin American music, pointing out the incorporation of many traditions, particularly Indian and Spanish. It presents some of the modern derivatives, such as dance rhythms of the tango and rumba, and includes examples of pre-Columbian and modern instruments. Copies of this video are available in the schools.
- Where age-appropriate and when time permits, students may enjoy working on the puzzles or coloring some of the drawings in the student booklets.

X. Post-Concert Activities

The activities listed below (and partially listed in the student booklet) should be presented in a manner that is non-threatening and fun. Once again, please select and adapt activities suitable for your own class and add any of your own that you feel are appropriate.

- Play examples of folk music from various cultures. See if your students can identify Latin American music when they hear it. Can they identify other folk music-Irish, Russian, American?
- Discuss the connection between folk music and culture-that folk music is a way to express the culture of the people. Also, discuss Latin American influences our students may recognize in our own culture; famous people of Latin American extraction; dance styles, musical instruments, etc.
- Spanish classes may discuss translations of some of the songs they have heard.
- Discuss the concept of live performance and the role of the audience in the total experience.
- In music classes, create a folk song (or songs) –could be happy, sad, funny- using appropriate tempo, rhythm, harmony, and instrumental accompaniment. See if you can capture The Latin American style in the song.
- Have students make their own musical instruments from “found objects”.
- Younger students may write letters to the artists, telling what they liked best about the performance and why. The letters may include drawings of favorite performers, costumes or instruments. (Letters may be sent to the Curriculum Office, for forwarding to the Artists. Older students may write letters and/or a “review” of the performance, as if they were a critic for a newspaper.
- Discuss the concept of oral history, the passing down of family or cultural traditions from generation to generation, just as folk music is passed on.

XI. Ideas to Consider: Before the Concert

- How do musicians communicate with people from different cultures who speak different languages?
- Los Folkloristas are attempting to preserve their heritage by learning and performing folk music and songs. Do you know any American folk songs or folk tales? How about folk songs or tales from another country?
- Last year, your school has hosted other folk performers. What do you remember about them? Based on what you saw last year, what are your expectations for the performance of Los Folkloristas?
- Only two of Los Folkloristas have had formal music lessons. How is it possible that they are professional musicians?
- What is the difference between Latin American and Spanish people, aside from their geographical locations?
- Can you locate the Mayan, Aztec and Inca civilizations on the map or globe? In what countries of the present-day are they?
- Besides the musical instruments, what other elements do you think will be utilized in the concert?

Enjoy the performance!

XII. Ideas to Consider: After the Concert

- Reconsider your answers and opinions to the questions listed above. Have any of them changed? If so, how?
- What about this concert surprised you the most-or grabbed you?
- What are the advantages or disadvantages of live performance vs. recorded performance (audio or video)? Which would you really prefer?
- Do you see any connections between folk music and contemporary music? What are they? Can you think of examples of these connections in American music?
- Performers always like to receive feedback on their performances. Write a letter to Los Folkloristas, telling them how you liked their concert.
- Imagine that you are the entertainment editor for a newspaper. Write a review of the concert. How would your review differ from your letter to the performers?