

# in the Spotlight

# Juan Monroy

## *The Mastermind of Latin-American Music chatted with Hazel Davis*

Flick through the pages of any London music venue brochure these days and it's very hard to ignore the geographical diversity on offer. Composers from all over the world are premiered, performers of minority instruments are the order of the day and if you aren't playing an obscure work then you simply aren't trying.

However, back in 1984, things weren't like this at all and it took the determination and persistence of a very dedicated group of Latin American immigrants and culture aficionados to pave the way for the city to embrace world music in the way it has.

The first International Festival of Latin American and Caribbean Culture took place in September 1984. With a heady lineup including art from Mexican painter Fernando del Paso, appearances by poet Ted Hughes and Brazilian Guitar virtuoso Celso Machado as well as music premieres galore, it really was a breakthrough event.

If organiser Juan Monroy's energy and enthusiasm was even half in 1984 what it is as he sits across from me, I can imagine it being very hard for the Greater London Council to say no to backing this audacious project. Monroy had moved to London in the 1970s from Chile with his wife. Finding, along with his peers, that there was little or no awareness of his native culture in English capital he decided to do something about it.

The way he tells it, the process was simple. You just ask the Greater London Council to give you backing, you convince the most influential music performers to take part and you talk the South Bank Centre into hosting a week-long festival. Easy!

Of course, these days, world music and ethnic culture festivals are ten-a-penny. The Government can't get enough of events which tick the minority boxes and if it hasn't got a foreign slant it's simply not interesting. But in 1984 an event of this kind had never really been attempted and it paved the way for similar festivals.

That first LACCS Festival featured



everything the average Londoner needed to know about Latin American culture. The poetry of Pablo Neruda, the films of Antonio Skarmeta and the music of the Indians in Bolivia were all covered, amongst appearances from musicians, writers and artists living in London at the time.

Despite Monroy's modest denials that the Festival pretty much rocked the face of London's cultural scene, it must be acknowledged that since then several long-lasting changes have taken place. One which stands out is the Escola de Samba, London School of Samba, which at the time was a group of 20 to 30 Brazilian street performers with no funding and no way to pay its members. Nowadays, of course, the world-renowned LSS regularly launches the Notting Hill Carnival and has spawned more than 300 Samba groups throughout the UK.

With Juan Monroy at its head LACCS is still contributing massively to the British musical establishment, without official recognition and without bags and bags of government money. "We raise money by projects" explains Monroy. "We don't do concerts for charity, we are about the music and the music alone."

However, it is for its promotion of the

classical guitar that LACCS should be most proud. Monroy, a classical guitarist himself, has been one of the instrument's most passionate advocates. He is also very keen to point out the various guitar prodigies who have passed through the LACCS ranks over the years. He mentions Alirio Diaz, Maria Isabel Siewers and Fabio Zanon. "LACCS was the first organisation to include in its concert programmes a new repertoire and not just that of Segovia", he says. "In 1987, for the first time, Carlos Barbosa-Lima performed a full concert of Brazilian classical music at the Wigmore Hall and later at St John's, Smith Square."

Moreover, in the 1980's LACCS introduced unheard Mexican symphonic music in the UK for the first time, with the Wren Orchestra at St John's, Smith Square and later with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra at the Barbican. Monroy continues, "More than 300 musicians have been introduced to the British public in almost all the public venues in London. Certainly, today Latin American music is better known thanks to LACCS' enthusiasm in promoting many parts of the rich Latin music heritage."

When I speak with Juan Monroy he is already planning his next excursion to the Americas and for a man in his seventies the timetable sounds gruelling. "North and South in mid-November, starting with Washington DC, then Puerto Rico, Caracas, Venezuela, Sao Paolo, and then Brasilia, Argentina and Chile." It is Monroy's unwavering devotion to the cause and constant desire to research new music and musicians that has made LACCS such a success over the years.

The emphasis is very much on premieres and the 2005/2006 Season sees first UK performances of guitar music by composers from New Zealand, Puerto Rico and Mexico, not to mention the inevitable discovery of new talent and building of new audiences. If the last 22 years are anything to go by, the next couple of decades look bright for Latin American music and the classical guitar.

Photo: Juan Monroy