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A Dance of Discovery

As they absorb Latin America's musical traditions, students move to the rhythms of a universal language.

Story by Amelia Benner
Photos by Marc Featherly



A month of singing and dancing, research and writing, presentations and demonstrations, has come down to this.

It's the last day of Cecilia Sanchez's May Term course, "Song and Dance in Latin America," and her students are showing off what they've learned.

First, they sing.

Sanchez (above, in red skirt) challenges her students to "show the passion" that colors the traditional dances of Latin America.

A group of students, accompanied by Sanchez

on guitar, perform "Mi Caballo Blanco," an ode to a beloved white horse. The simple tune is infectious, guaranteed to lodge itself in the brain for hours to come, and the class gallops into the chorus with enthusiasm.

"Mi caballo, mi caballo, galopando va ..."

They sing in a smooth treble, with deeper undertones provided by Nick Smith '10, the lone male in the class. The song ends with a trilling refrain of *li-li-li-li-li* and the rest of the students applaud.

Sanchez then picks up a charango, a stringed Andean instrument, and is joined by Erin Donegan '11 on violin, to perform the traditional Bolivian tune "Ojos Azules." When the song is over, the teacher smiles at her students.

"You thought it was going to be so difficult to sing in front of everyone, but it goes like that," Sanchez says, snapping her fingers. Then she pauses, tilting her head to one side. "It goes," she says, "but it stays with us."

Next, they dance.

They twirl in pairs, one student leading as the male partner, the other in step as the female. Sanchez has brought silk flowers for the “women” to tuck behind their ears, in jewel tones that match their sweeping skirts. The “men” wear straw hats and street clothes.

They dance *la cueca* and *la refalosa* from Chile, *el sanjuanero* from Colombia, and the sinuous *el merengue*, from the Dominican Republic. Later, they link hands and dance *el huayño*, native to Bolivia and Peru.

Half of the dancers wear hard-heeled shoes that patter rhythmically on the floor of the basement dance studio in the Center for Natural Sciences. The others are fleetly barefoot. The mirrors on the far wall reflect and refract the swirling couples into a kaleidoscope of color and movement. Sanchez presides over it all, hands folded, smiling.

The students’ confidence is striking, since most had no experience with Latin dance before the term began.

“I’d never actually danced in my life,” Smith says. “I was pretty awful at it, but it was fun.”

Asked how he feels about being the lone male in the class, Smith shrugs and smiles. “Eh, it’s fine being the only guy.”

Carol Ambrose ’08 graduated in April 2008, but stayed on campus for May Term in order to be with friends and take Sanchez’s course, which has been offered during May Term since 2001.

“I hadn’t done any Latin dancing before, but I thought it would be fun,” Ambrose says.

Rewind a few weeks, to the first time the students rehearsed the *cueca*, Chile’s national dance. After having learned of its history and meaning in the classroom, they began their first experience in the dance studio. They have been paired off into “couples,” with the “men” in blue jeans and the “women” in ample skirts.

They watch doubtfully as Sanchez demonstrates the steps, without the music this time, clicking her tongue and clapping her hands in imitation of the steady beat of the guitars and harp, typical accompaniments of the *cueca chilena*.

“Now, it is your turn,” she says, pressing “play”



Erin Wondrak ‘09 waves a white handkerchief at partner Sarah Parod ‘09 (right) as they perform a Latin American courtship dance.

on the cassette tape deck. As music fills the studio, the students tentatively copy Sanchez's steps, dissolving into nervous giggles as they try to recall the intricate movements.

"This is a courtship dance," Sanchez tells them as she flutters between the couples, her scarlet skirt swishing. "Some of you are too distant from one another."

As the music goes on, the students gain confidence. They no longer resemble seventh-graders at their first school dance; the beat is infectious, and their steps are sure. The "couples" smile at each other.

"Don't be shy, show the passion!" Sanchez urges, clapping her hands.

Sanchez's passion for the music and dance of her native country is central to her life. Born and raised in Santiago, Chile, Sanchez says, "My house was full of music." While her father enjoyed the classics ("He liked the peace and reflection," she says), her mother embraced the country's traditional music and dance, and made sure her children knew them, too.

"Mother bought us guitars that had been made by prison inmates, since we couldn't afford others," she says. "We were not asked, we were told: 'You are going to learn the guitar.'" Sanchez, her two sisters and their brother were soon performing at family feasts. At age 8, she also began taking Spanish dance lessons, and later became interested in Chilean dances. "On Saturdays we would roll up the carpets and I'd dance on the wood floors," following the expert instructions of a private Spanish dance teacher.

When she married and moved to England, she took her music with her while raising three children. The family moved to central Illinois in the 1980s when her husband joined the faculty at Illinois State University, where Sanchez later earned her master's degree. With the help of a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, she began performing Chilean music and dance in area elementary schools. She also gave workshops in flamenco with the McLean County Dance Association.

"When I first arrived here I wanted to search for what I could do," Sanchez says. She based that search on a gut feeling that "I could not live without music."

And in 1988, when she suffered a great loss, the music was still there.

Halfway through May, the class learns *el sanjuanero*. It's another courtship dance, this one from Colombia. The "men" wear straw hats and red kerchiefs tied around their shoulders, and their partners sport the ubiquitous flowing skirts.

Sanchez asks Smith to demonstrate the steps with her. The two circle each other. “At this point,” she says, “I take the hat.” She plucks it from Smith’s head and lets it fall gently to the ground. The class watches, eyebrows crooked.

“As soon as I put it on the floor,” she tells Smith, “you try to lift it. But I do this.” She coyly nudges it away from him with the toe of her shoe. “We play with each other a little bit.”

He lunges for the hat, but again she slides it away. Finally she relents, he dons his hat, and the dance goes on. It is a precisely choreographed depiction of the give-and-take of romance that speaks a timeless language. This is what Sanchez means when she says that the themes of her class extend beyond Latin America: music and dance are universal expressions.



In 1988, Sanchez’s husband died in a plane crash. Left grieving, with three children, she says she was “desolate — at the bottom.”

“I realized, ‘I think I need to go back to what I love,’” she says.

She formed a Latin American music group with a Colombian couple and found that the rhythms of her childhood could sustain her even far from home.

Sanchez says, “This May Term, in a way, condenses my life. It combines all that I have been given and continue to be given.”

this music, and I had moments of comfort.”

“I felt I was uplifted,” she says. “The songs and dance that I had learned so long ago were back in my life. I thought of my mother teaching us

Now her children are grown, she is a faculty member at Illinois Wesleyan and happily married to IWU Professor of Education Irv Epstein. She reflects on her music and the places it has taken her, and she shares this knowledge with her students. Her current band, Frontera, performs the rich and beautiful Latin rhythms here in Central Illinois.

“This May Term, in a way, condenses my life,” she says. “It combines all that I have been given and continue to be given.”

If music is a universal language, then it has spoken of the same things throughout history. Love and loss, pride and pain. The songs that Sanchez teaches her class are no exception.

“This class is so fascinating because it allows you to connect — not only with Latin American cultures, but with all other cultures,” she tells the students.

Today they are singing the ballad “Si vas para Chile,” a song that spins the singer’s longing for his native country, and for the woman he left behind, into a single thread of loneliness. Sanchez puts the lyrics up on the overhead projector, reading them in both Spanish and English. Then, bent over her guitar, she performs the song for the class.

Next she sings a protest song written by Chilean singer-songwriter Isabel Parra in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

“The main theme of protest is not just that the protester gives an opinion,” Sanchez says. “She is outraged by the event.”

“Can you sing with me?” she adds, glancing up at the class, and a few tentative voices chime in for the chorus.

Some of the students have taken Spanish classes. Others are new to the language. Sarah Parod ’09 learned Spanish in high school, and she helps her friend Erin Wondrak ’09 with the words.

“Hearing the songs really helps give a perspective on what was happening to the people of Latin America and how they dealt with it through their music,” Wondrak says.

“It definitely creates more awareness and helps us understand what was going on in that time and place,” Parod agrees.

And so, they dance for the last time as a class. Perhaps they will remember the steps and try them out quietly on their own, years later, or on a crowded dance floor. But for now they link hands for el huayno. One by one couples break away to dance in the middle of the circle, within their classmates’ encircling arms. Emboldened, they improvise a few steps, their ponytails bouncing.

It’s what Sanchez has hoped they would do all along. “Once you get the steps, put the spirit into it,” she has always told them. “Make it your own.”