

Mountain Music

By Luz Lazo | Wednesday, March 21, 2007

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The charango was a big hit at the National Museum of Natural History last month.

As kids moved in for a closer look at the unfamiliar musical instrument, a musician encouraged them: "Don't be afraid. Touch it."

The charango, a 10-stringed mandolin traditionally made with the shell from an armadillo, was one instrument featured at the recent Smithsonian Institution workshop on South American music.

Some of the 500 kids who attended were fascinated by the four-foot-high zampoña, an ancient instrument made of wooden or bamboo pipes cut to different lengths. Other kids moved their fingers in rhythm as Carmen de Vicente played castanets, a small percussion instrument made of wooden shells. And the kids slapped their palms to the Afro-Latino beat of conga and bongo drums.

These instruments are familiar in the Andean countries of South America. The Andes are the world's longest mountain range. They stretch for more than 4,000 miles along the western side of the continent and extend to seven countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela.

The large area is very diverse, with influences from several cultures. As a result, "Andean music is a mix of the indigenous [native], African and Spanish music," said Emily Key, education program manager at the Smithsonian.

Spanish explorers brought their music with them to the Americas, Key said. They also brought African slaves, who had their own music. The descendants of these people combined the rhythms and made a new type of music.

Eleven-year-old Faith Walker of Alexandria said it was interesting to learn that wind and string instruments are common in music from the Andean highlands; and that some of the instruments, although made in the Americas, were inspired by European instruments.

"The rhythms are all mixed," said Faith, who plays drums at Browne Academy. "I really like the beat."

For José Cruz, a sixth-grader at Harriet Tubman Elementary School in Washington, the workshop had a personal side. José is Latino but had never heard of these instruments. He particularly liked the charango. "It is cool how the guitar is made of armadillo," he said.