

Maestro Modesto Nieves y Herencia Musical

Puerto Rican *cuatro* master

Naranjito, Puerto Rico

The term maestro is well-suited for Modesto Nieves. A master and innovator on the *cuatro*, a small, double-coursed string instrument in the guitar family, Nieves effortlessly picks intricate and beautiful melodies that have charmed audiences for decades. Modesto and his band are keepers of the strong legacy of Puerto Rican traditional music, highlighting the country's national instrument and passing it on to a new generation of musicians and audiences.

Spanish settlers of 16th century Puerto Rican highlands, known as jíbaros, made their livelihood through the cultivation of small plantations. Their music, *música jíbara*, is played by small ensembles consisting of *cuatros*, *güiro* (a gourd rasp of Caribbean Indian origins), *maracas* and voice. During the last century, jíbaros in small farms and towns along the mountainous spine of the island known as Boriquén flocked to the capital city of San Juan and the U.S. in search of opportunity. In their rush to a new future, they abandoned the home-grown stringed music at the core of their heritage. By the 1950s, few people thought that these centuries-old traditions had any future.

Though born in Naranjito, Puerto Rico, Modesto Nieves Fuentes and his family moved to New Jersey when he was a boy. There, his uncle Juan taught him to play the *cuatro*. Modesto quickly adapted his own playing style in which he played the instrument with the strings upside down to account for his being left-handed. Ten years later Modesto's family moved to Pennsylvania, where he continued this practice as a teenager, stunning his peers by playing his electric guitar in the same manner. In 1968, his family moved back to Puerto Rico and Modesto began his career as a *cuatrista*, this time, with the strings of his instrument adjusted for a left-handed player.

Modesto was a young musician during a time when the future of Puerto Rican traditional music was evolving and Puerto Ricans had a renewed interest in their cultural and musical roots. Integral to this movement was Estanislao Martínez or "Maestro Ladí," an accomplished performer of the *cuatro* who, beginning in the 1930s, expanded the repertoire to *danzas*, *pasodobles*, waltzes, mazurkas, and set the standard for the modern *conjunto jíbaro* (jíbaro ensemble), creating the sound of two *cuatros* playing in harmony, six-stringed guitar, *güiro*, and bongos. Ladí's updated and upscale jíbaro sound played well to Puerto Ricans of all social classes both in the United States and at home on the island. The sixties and seventies ushered in another resurgence of cultural pride in Puerto Rico, and today, *música jíbara* is in demand year round at many events.

Nieves is part of this revival and echoes the work of Maestro Ladí and others. For 32 years, Modesto traveled the world with the renowned folkloric group Areyto. More recently, he toured the Eastern US on the National Council for the Traditional Arts' Masters of Caribbean Music tour in 2005. Modesto's passion was picked up by his children. His daughter is a fine singer and *güiro* player, and his son is a *cuatro* innovator in his own right, now touring with major pop acts such as Ricky Martin. Herencia Musical (meaning "musical heritage") consists of Monika on vocals and *güiro*. Felix Lozada on guitar, and Edgardo Serrano on bongos.