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Noel S. Milan
University of North Florida

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The Musical, Technical, and Compositional Qualities of Latin American Music as Applied to the Marimba

Noel S. Milan

Faculty Sponsor: Charlotte Mabrey, M.M.,
Professor of Music

I am extremely fortunate to have been selected to receive a grant through the Undergraduate Research Award Program. The research, study, practice, and performance it has enabled me to do in the field of Latin American music has changed and enriched my life. My project, entitled "The Musical, Technical, and Compositional Qualities of Latin American Music as Applied to the Marimba," has opened a new area of research to me.

After spending the last year and a half immersing myself in this project, I realize there are several lifetimes worth of research available in Latin American music. This project has challenged me to the limits of my ability as a student, a percussionist, and a musician, but it has also improved and motivated me. This music has become a part of me and I want to share what I have learned. The Undergraduate Research Award has enabled me to do this.

I traveled to Baltimore in July of 1999 to study with Orlando Cotto, a native of Puerto Rico who presently lives in Baltimore. He is a specialist in Latin American percussion and the marimba. He is also the most influential person in my project since he fostered the idea of my research and facilitated it by accepting me as his student.

I met with Orlando for two-hour lessons twice a week over the course of four weeks. We planned a few days off in between lessons to provide personal practice time. Through the course of these lessons he helped me with the technical difficulties of playing Latin American guitar music on the

marimba, and guided my research into the classical composers of Latin America.

The first composition I learned was "Natalia" by Venezuelan composer Antonio Lauro. The technical difficulties of this piece took several months to master before I felt confident enough to perform it on stage. Since then I have studied compositions by Astor Piazzolla of Argentina, Heitor Villa-Lobos of Brazil, Agustin Barrios Mangore of Paraguay, and Manuel Ponce of Mexico. This group of composers is a small but representative sample of the diverse group of Latin American composers.

Orlando also introduced me to some of the popular dance forms of Latin American music. For these styles we concentrated on the rhythmic aspect of the music, an aspect which cannot be separated from the instrument. We worked on the congas, the cajon, the guiro, and others.

Four weeks is certainly not enough time to address Latin American music and all the possibilities it has for the marimba. But with the support and guidance of my professor, Charlotte Mabrey, I have continued my study of Latin American music. The marimba is my chosen instrument and Latin American music speaks through it in a most beautiful way. I am very appreciative to the Undergraduate Research Program for affording me this opportunity. Thank you.