

MUSIC

Program celebrates Latin American traditions

By COLIN EATOCK

WITH *The Nutcracker*, *Messiah* and Ebenezer Scrooge dominating the holiday season, is there room for yet another annual Christmas tradition?

Raúl Edwards, artistic director of Houston's Foundation for Modern Music thinks there is. And so, on Sunday at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, he's launching *Navidad Latina* — a music and dance performance he hopes will become a yearly celebration of Christmas in the Hispanic world. (The show is free with museum admission.)

"I was looking at the holiday calendar," said Edwards, a Panamanian who came to the U.S. in 1995 to study music at the University of Houston. "And I thought, 'What happened to the Latin-American traditions?' My goal is to establish a new holiday tradition in Houston, so people can see how Christmas is done in Latin-American countries."

It helped that Edwards was already the artistic director of Houston's Foundation for Modern Music. And he also runs *Flamart*, a society dedicated to the presentation of Latin American arts. So *Navidad Latina* will be presented as co-production of these two organizations.

Rather than focusing on any particular country, Edwards is drawing on many regions. Mexico's *pastorelas* (shepherds' plays) may be the best-known Latin celebrations of Christmas to Houstonians — but the show will also contain music and musicians from Venezuela, Cuba, Honduras, Panama and Spain.

"The *pastorelas*," he points out, "are very popular in Mexico — and that's fine — but they don't reflect the rest of Latin America. Many people from Mexico may not know much about the music from other countries. And many Latinos who are born in the USA are ignorant of the Christmas traditions of different parts of Latin America. So we want to educate people."

However, Edwards also acknowledges that, for all their differences, some common elements unite Christmas celebrations from the Rio Grande to the tip of South America.

"In many Latin countries, Christmas is an outdoor activity — you go from one street to another, with your neighbors. And people

make music with what's around the house. Someone might have a *cuatro* — a four-stringed guitar — and begin to play. Another person may start clapping or banging on the table, and another may tap on a bottle with a spoon. And you have all these different layers of sound."

It's this informal, improvised atmosphere that *Navidad Latina* aims to re-create. Edwards says the result will be livelier than *Silent Night*, *Away in a Manger* and other carols most Americans know.

"In Latin America," he says, "Christmas is very festive. And a lot of Christmas music is dance music — you sing and dance at the same time. But there's also some music that is quiet and somber."

Edwards himself will be one of the performers, singing *villancios* (Christmas songs). Another performer will be Irma La Paloma, a Houston-based flamenco singer from Cuba, who has also lived in Spain.

"This program is representative of the city of Houston," she says, "because here we have Latinos from all over the world: from Spain, Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela — from all over. The songs we'll be singing reflect the diversity of the Hispanic celebration of Christmas. In the Latin world, Christmas is still the most intimate family celebration of the year."

Even as Edwards prepares for Sunday's performance, he's already working on next year's *Navidad Latina* show.

"In other years we could do music from Puerto Rico, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, or specific areas of Spain. We're already working on the content for next year. We want this to become a Houston tradition."

Colin Eatock is a writer who covers classical music. He lives in Toronto.

NAVIDAD LATINA

Foundation for Modern Music and *Flamart* present an afternoon of Latin carols.

■ **When:** 2 p.m. Sunday

■ **Where:** Second floor of Beck Building, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 5601 Main

■ **Tickets:** Free with museum admission; modernmusic.org or mfah.org.