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MUSIC: MILTON NASCIMENTO OF BRAZIL

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MILTON NASCIMENTO, the celebrated Brazilian pop singer, gave his first concert performance in the United States Saturday at midnight in Carnegie Hall. Many of the listeners in the sold-out hall had been waiting more than 10 years to see the man whose albums have long been among Brazil's most prized exports, and they seemed almost deliriously elated. For Mr. Nascimento is more than a pop singer. He is a remarkable vocal improviser and stylist, with a range of several octaves, and an innovative musical craftsman.

Mr. Nascimento sang in Portuguese, and he did not speak a single word to the audience until his two-hour performance, a retrospective of his career, was almost over. Perched atop a stool with his guitar in hand, he communicated with sunny smiles, casual gestures, and richly textured singing that seemed to sketch exceptionally fine shadings of emotional nuance. He demolished the language barrier by simply ignoring it.

The intent of most of Mr. Nascimento's songs - longing, desire, evocations of childhood and the Brazilian countryside, hopes for a Latin America freed from racial, social and economic inequality - came through strongly. And the concert's most affecting moments were his wordless excursions into a high falsetto as mellow and full bodied as the upper register of a fine cello.

The quartet backing Mr. Nascimento was attentive and, when summoning up the orchestral textures some of his songs require, quite ingenious. The pianist Wagner Tiso and the drummer Robertinho Silva have been associated with the singer since the mid-1960's. Mr. Tiso has humanized the sound of the synthesizer, making it as responsive as a reed or stringed instrument, and Mr. Silva's drumming was deft and buoyant, even when the songs were in odd meters. At times, one missed the harmonic astringency of Mr. Nascimento's former guitarist, Toninho Horta. But his present guitarist, Ricardo Silvera, and bassist, Nico Assumpcao, were capable soloists and dedicated team players. For decades, the flow of information in the world of pop music has been mostly one way. The United States exports its rock and jazz, which compete in other countries with local performers who have little hope of reaching the potentially lucrative American market. When a new sound is created in Latin America, Africa or Asia, it reaches the United States second-hand, brought back by traveling American musicians who have stumbled upon it, and who usually proceed to dilute it for domestic consumption.

This situation has been changing during the last few years; pop artists such as Nigeria's King Sunny Ade and Brazil's Caetano Veloso have come here to perform their own music on their own terms. One can only hope this trend will continue. In the mid- 1980's, this world is too small for artists of great worth and quality to remain hidden beyond America's borders. With American and British pop heavily commercialized and trendy, we need artists of the caliber of Milton Nascimento, if for no other reason than to remind us that popular music can still be a real force for change, for hope, for humanity, but at its best it can provide essential nourishment for both our heads and our hearts.