

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# LATIN AMERICAN MUSIC

*Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.*

**Overview** Tied to dance in many cases, Prehispanic music was a sacred art for the Incas and used to communicate with the divine world. It was also used in conjunction with dances that represented shamanistic rituals to transmit the energy of animal spirits. After the arrival of Europeans, musical forms explored different types of fusions between European, indigenous, and African music. Many musical forms are associated with dance, and others embrace cultural heritage. Composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century often incorporated folkloric elements, including rhythms, chord progressions, and melodies.

### ANCIENT PERIOD

**Mesoamerica** Music was an important part of the religious ceremonies and social life. The musical instruments were often shaped from materials found almost intact in nature: conch shells, three-hole flutes, drums created from skins stretched on frames, or created from hollow nuts. Rattles created from nuts and seedpods were also used.

**Andean music** Prehispanic music in the Andes consisted of chants blended with different types of instruments, many of which were flutes. The flutes include panpipes (can be very large, with many pipes), and also quenenas, which are smaller and have notched ends. Both are made of aquatic hollow cane plants. Drums are also prevalent.

### EARLY MODERN PERIOD (COLONIAL)

#### Central America and Caribbean Folkloric Music

**Ranchera** Traditional Mexican music often performed by mariachis or norteros, which often has a theme of love, patriotism, or nature. They have been influenced by polkas, the waltz, and also the bolero. They include the “grito mexicano” (Mexican shout).

**Punta** Music from the Garifuna people of the Caribbean who arrived in Central America in the 1790s. Their music is a blend of Spanish and African rhythms and forms.

**Corrido** A ballad, or narrative song. The themes are often about legends, the stories of criminals, doomed love, and revenge. A popular example is *La Cucaracha*.

**Conjunto jarrocho** This is a kind of “son” (which is a mixture of Spanish and indigenous music).

**Banda** Loud, polka-like music played by brass bands (tuba, trumpet, trombone) that derive from the military bands in the 1860s in Mexico, during the Second Mexican Empire. The origins are from Polish emigrants who settled in Sinaloa. For what it’s worth, they often seem very out of tune.

**Mariachi** A characteristically Mexican musical form, the Mariachi emerged near Guadalajara (Coquila) and has influences from Spain, Portugal, and France. The mariachi ensemble consists of a guitar, violin, large bass guitar (guitarón), a vihuela (a small guitar-like instrument) and a trumpet. Mariachis perform at weddings, anniversaries, and events.

**Nortero** Popular music that is often found in northern Mexico and southern Texas, which includes accordion. The polka elements reflect the influence of German and Polish miners who arrived in the early 1800s.

#### South America and Caribbean Folkloric Music

**Milonga** (Argentina) Originating in the Rio de la Plata area of Argentina in the 1870s, milonga music often deals with love and dreams. It is characterized by punctuated rhythms and the use of small hand-held accordions (bandoneons).

**Zamba** (Argentina) A form of music that originated in the Salta area of Peru, but then was further developed in Argentina. It is a slow dance in three-quarter time, and is often danced in the streets of Argentina and in folklore festivals.

**Diablada** (Bolivia) The “Dance of the Devils” originated in Bolivia and is performed during Easter (Semana Santa). The dancers wear elaborate costumes and there is traditionally a dance representing the war between good and evil, luz entre tinieblas (light and dark).

**Cumbia** (Colombia) A musical form that began as a courtship dance in the Caribbean areas of Colombia and Panama. Similar to salsa, the cumbia blends Amerindian and European instruments. It has spread throughout Latin America.

**Reggae** (Jamaica) Originating in Jamaica, reggae has come to be associated with island culture as well as Rastafarian philosophy. Reggae was popularized by Bob Marley and it blends ska, calypso and rhythm and blues.

**Guaranías** (Paraguay) Developed in the 1920s in Paraguay by José Asunción, Guaranías are a music form that are sentimental and express nostalgia for times past and lost loves. They feature the harp, guitar, bandoneon, and a singer.

**Sanjuan** (Ecuador) Incorporating Quechua musical instruments and forms, the Sanjuan is a music form found in Ecuador primarily in Quechua communities. It is played on traditional instruments.

**Samba** (Brazil) Associated with Brazil and Carnival, the Brazilian samba has its roots in West Africa and in the religious practices. The samba has a “batucada” rhythm, with an emphasis on percussion and a distinct rhythm and meter. The samba is now considered the defining musical genre of Brazil.

**Cueca** (Chile) The national dance of Chile, the Cueca blends together Spanish and indigenous musical instruments, and includes several European musical instruments: Guitar, drums, accordion, harp, Chilean guitarrón, violin, mandolin. It reflects the Chilean gaucho culture, with rhythms that reflect Spanish flamenco.

**Andean music** Huaynos and others include tambores (drums), quena (panpipe), cavaquinho, rattles, Andean flute, maraca, charango.

## 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY (MODERN) PERIOD

### Composers

Alberto **Ginastera** (1916 – 1983, Argentina) Alberto Ginastera was influenced by his teacher Aaron Copland, and like Copland, he incorporated folkloric musical elements and indigenous instruments.

Antonio Carlos **Jobim** (1927 – 1994, Brazil) Jobim was born in Rio de Janeiro and was well known for incorporating the bossa nova music in orchestral works.

Manuel **Ponce** (1882 – 1948, Mexico). Ponce was a scholar of Mexican folk music and he incorporated the elements into classical guitar and orchestral compositions.

Ernesto **Lecuona** (1895 – 1963, Cuba) Lecuona wrote more than 600 pieces, mainly for the piano, and incorporated traditional Cuban songs into his own. Many of his compositions, such as Malagueña and Andalucía, became standards.

Heitor **Villa-Lobos** (1887 – 1959, Brazil) Born in Rio de Janeiro, Villa-Lobos is the best-known Brazilian composer, and his use of dissonance, indigenous melodic and rhythmic elements within traditional classical Western forms influenced many composers.

### Discussion/Questions

1. The Spaniards received a surprise when they encountered the music of the indigenous peoples. It was nothing at all like European music, and what is more, the instruments were utterly different. The Spaniards were quick to denounce the music as being of the devil, because it often accompanied dances and rituals (including human sacrifice and self-mutilation). Further, the instruments were often made of bone, skin, and shells. Describe some of the musical instruments and how they were used.

2. Music could be considered a kind of technology, a mechanism / sound machine that influences the human brain to move it into different emotions and states of consciousness. Pre-Hispanic music was used in conjunction with religious rituals, to the point that individuals entered into a trance-like state. The music associated with Carnival could also be considered a technology of consciousness as well. Describe how and why the music associated with Colonial festivals altered the attendees affect and states of consciousness.

3. When the Spanish brought their music to Latin America, many different fusions occurred. Compare and contrast the different Latin American music forms that are associated with dance and which have clear European influence.

4. Modernism, nationalism, and a pride in the nation's indigenous heritage were major influences on musical composition in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. Who are some of the main composers of 20<sup>th</sup> century Latin America, and what are they famous for?

#### *Readings*

Brill, Mark. *Music of Latin America and the Caribbean*. London: Routledge, 2011.

Olsen, Dale; Daniel Sheehy, and Daniel E. Sheehy. *Garland Handbook of Latin American Literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Taylor & Francis. 2007.

Schechter, John M. *Music in Latin American Culture: Regional Traditions*. New York: Schirmer, 1999.