

## Specific elements of Cuban music, evolution

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**Abstract:** *Although there is a substantial variety of educational materials that generally address jazz, improvised, harmonic moment, composition and orchestral arrangements, there is very little analysis of Cuban composers of music for Afro-Cuban jazz ensembles. The paper focuses on transcription, analysis of the background of the works selected by Chucho Valdes for the group Irakere, with emphasis on the selected passages for the rhythmic-harmonic section.*

*Fundamental elements of Cuban music, including the executions of the clave formulas, the African rhythmic cells that subsequently influenced the bebop style, the Cuban vocabulary and dance music are addressed and provide the basis for analysis.*

Key-words: *rhythmic cell, traditions, cuban music, irakere, montugno, formulas, piano-base lines.*

### 1. Introduction

The decoding of the musical stylistics of Chucho Valdes for the group *Irakere* (Mauleon 2018, 96) is intended to bring to light the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic components of the modern afro-cuban style, the jazz genre.

For an efficient structuring of the roots, implicitly of the evolution of Cuban music, it is important to differentiate the traditional styles as well as to implement the specific *montuno* accompaniment formulas. Basically, *montuno* is the section based on melodic-rhythmic piano formulas that are usually inserted immediately after the couplet begins.

### 2. History of the Montuno pianistic style

A multitude of Cuban ethnomusicologists delimit the montuno style starting in the late 1800s when the *danzon* style (later combined with the “*son*” style) leads to the

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emergence of stylistic variations. Cuban musicians (mostly of color) begin to develop a *montuno* style based on what is heard in the surroundings of their neighborhoods, everyday life, a typical Latin rhythmic-melodic figuration in continuous harmony with harmonic support. They perform and render stylistic variety in general in the social or religious events of society, many of whom live in unfavorable conditions in the suburbs of cities in the immediate vicinity of the American continent.

The succinct rise of *mambo* and *cha-cha-cha* styles directly influences the way, the concept in which the *montunos* (Mauleon 1999, 47) formulas were implemented in Cuban music, unison pianistic execution or harmonic mood offset at a third interval, subsequently constituting the basic segment of traditional melodic-rhythmic expression.

Previously, there were multiple attempts to rank and structure Cuban music, but the success was not an exact one. Some artistic creations were nevertheless ordered as *son-bolero*, *son-montuno cha*, or even *danzon cha*.

## 2.1. Son Montuno style

The first stable forms of the style are found around the 1920s, the existence, the strong presence of the elements of the *montuno son* style in most musical expressions of the ensembles, perpetuating continuously in all modern Cuban music.

It consists of a mixture of previous influences incorporating musical stylistics (extended territorially outside the islands), predominantly outside the African one, being the American one.

The image shows a musical score for two staves, treble and bass clef, in 2/4 time. Above the staves are the following chords: F, B♭, C, B♭6, F, B♭, C, B♭. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and accents, representing a typical montuno rhythmic pattern.

Fig. 1. *Montuno standard formulas* <sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Fig. 1 illustrates classical *montuno* style formulas applied in *son* or *son-montuno* musical styles

Harmonic stands out the standard classic plagal relations (T-SD-D-SD-T) (Figure 2) where additional correlation of the bass line (Figure 3) and rhythmic structuring have a special relevance.

The figure shows three staves of music. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics: "lá yu - ca se me es - tá pa - san - do". The middle staff is a bass line in bass clef with chords B<sup>b</sup>, C, B<sup>b</sup>, and F. The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment in treble clef with chords B<sup>b</sup>, C, B<sup>b</sup>, and F. The music is in 4/4 time and features syncopated rhythms and accents.

Fig.2 Montuno style harmonic illustration

The figure shows a single staff of music in bass clef, representing a bass line. It is in 4/4 time and features a syncopated melodic line with accents.

Fig. 3. The base line of melodic-rhythmic expression

One of the possible extended complete formulas of the style (Strom 1991, 83) could be graphically structured in Figure 4. as follows:

The figure shows three staves of music. The top staff is a piano part in treble clef with chords F, B<sup>b</sup>, C, B<sup>b</sup>6, and F. The middle staff is a piano part in bass clef. The bottom staff is a Bass Guitar part in bass clef. The music is in 4/4 time and features complex structuring, syncopation, and accents.

Fig. 4. Complex structuring, syncopated common rhythmic accentuation of the piano and base line

## 2.2. Cha-cha-cha style

*Cha-cha-cha* is considered as a constituent part of the style of the *danzon*, perhaps the most recognizable of the styles of Cuban music. So deriving from the dance with an additional vocal part, Enrique Jorrin being considered as one of the founders of the style in the late 1940s. Silver Star is the song that critics place at the transient evolutionary confluence between *danzon* and *cha cha cha*. Olavo Alen Rodriguez (Rodriguez 1994, 87) hypothesizes that it is the rondo form of the *danzon*, the melodic-rhythmic transformation being an internal one, the appearance of flute and violin in the stamp structure being a new one. The distinguishing element between the 2 styles is the transformation of the rhythmic cell structured by 2 optimum values followed by quarter.

An overview (Figure 5.) on the stylistic organization of the instruments will highlight the new rhythmic structuring of the piano as well as the bass line, their counterpoint combination is the surprise element of the resulting style.

The musical score for the piano part of a cha-cha-cha piece is shown in Figure 5. It is written in 4/4 time and G major. The score consists of three systems of music. The first system has four measures with chords A min7, D7, G, and E min7. The second system has four measures with chords A min7, D7, G, and E min7. The third system has four measures with chords A min7, D7, G, and E min7. The piano part features a complex rhythmic structure with many beamed eighth notes and rests. The bass line is a simple eighth-note pattern.

Fig. 5. Stylistic structure *cha-cha-cha*

The distribution of voices (Figure 6) in the harmonic structuring of the pianistic interpretation of the style (Helio 2004, 87) is complex, the alternation of the soprano line in the form of seventh-third, seventh-fundamental, constituting a descending line in gradual walking.

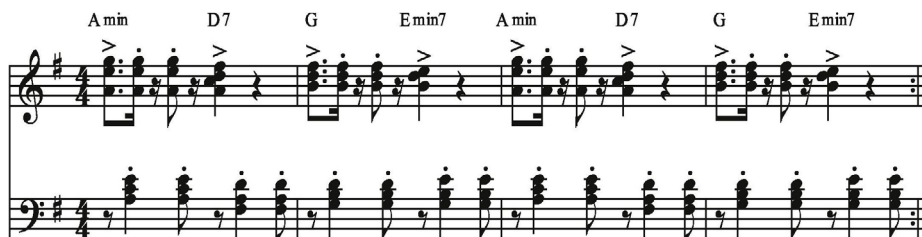


Fig. 6. *Harmonic distribution of voices*

### 2.3. The *Danzon Style*

This style seems to have been strongly influenced both by the native inhabitants of Haiti and by immigrants from France at the end of the XVIII-th century. The French have implemented that specific European control that was quickly adapted to Cuban conformation, by implementing the rhythmic section (percussion) as well as the characteristic instrumental stamps, namely those of the violin, the pope said, the flute and of course the piano. There are two important sections represented by the style of *charanga* and the typical Cuban orchestra.

*Charanga* (Fernandez 2006, 23) is structured by five elementary instruments (flute, two violins, piano, bass, *timbales* and *guiro*) while the traditional Cuban orchestra consists of two violins, two clarinets, bass, trumpet, trumpet, *ophicleide* (bas trumpet), *timbales* (percussion instrument with open posterior surface) and *guiro*. These will merge over time, the typical *Cuban orquesta* being attributed to both. It is worth mentioning the appearance of the elements of the *clave* rhythm, a special, fundamental feature of the Latin south American music implicit to the Cuban one, without which a functionality of the rhythmic pulsation is not achievable.

In general, once a song starts with the *clave* formula it remains the same throughout the song, it can be structured as 2:3 (Fig. 7a) or 3:2 (Fig. 7b) according to which of the parts the first measurement of the part begins. In modern Cuban music the formula *clave* usually does not endure rhythmic changes of pulsation, direction, or development by elimination (*cruzado clave*).



Fig. 7a. *Clave formula*

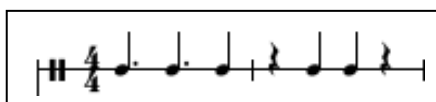


Fig. 7b. *Clave formula*

## 2.4. Bolero Style

The Bolero style is a romantic fusion of emotions sustained by a sophisticated harmonic coloring with the origins of both Cuban and Caribbean islands. The Cuban *bolero* (Acosta 2000, 74) is thought for the ambient moment, the dancing function being in a slightly distant secondary plane, a contrasting aspect to the modern Cuban style where the dancing aspect is predominant.

Noteworthy is the stylistic aspect (Fig. 8a., 8b), the baggage of harmonic knowledge necessary for pianists to carry out the procedure is a rich one, the appearance of added sounds, slash hybrid type agreements, the support of the left hand through a structured rhythmic variety with notes values of octaves, quarters, halves, exceptional subdivisions of triplets, the application of the interpretative manner *arpeggiato*, etc.

Fig. 8a. Interpretative manner *arpeggiato*

Fig. 8b. Exceptional subdivisions of triplets

## 2.5. Mambo Style

The style of *mambo* and *cha-cha-cha* are very close as an interpretative manner both of which are constitutive styles of the style of *danzon*. The *mambo* style (Ex. no. 9) has its own identity, not all works in this style having a vocal, textual structure, elements such as sustained rhythmic pulsation, pregnant, pulsation, the

subsequent compilation with typical Cuban patterns fully elements such as sustained rhythmic contributing to the consolidation, success of the style.



Fig. 9. Stylistic solutions of the mambo style

## 2.6. Timba Style

*Timba* is a typical Cuban word of origin, the mixture of several component elements (passion musicality, rhythmic sense, dance) in native direct translation representing the “joy of living”. It is not considered to be a clearly defined or stable style, generally being realized in accordance with the internal rhythmic improvisational creativity of the protagonists, of each of us.

The piano is formed as standard expression with a *tumbao* (repetitive formula), but the opposite bass works according to another, freer model. There are variations of interpretive structure represented by a movement contrary to the *tumbao* formula, the piano part. *Tumbadora* (conga) imitates a static pattern, while the drum set creates a rhythmic, steady and sustained counterpoint. When all these elements (Figures 10 and 11) are played simultaneously, as a consistent musical whole, the *timba style* is obtained.

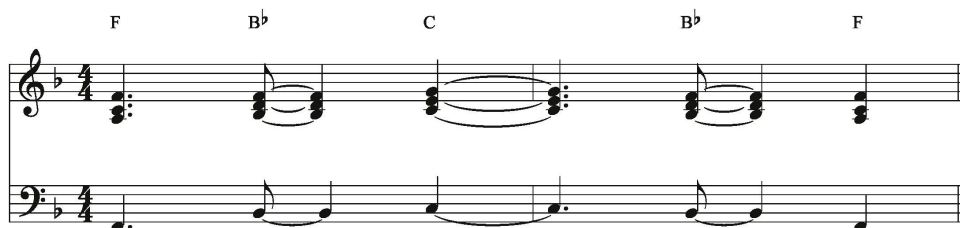


Fig. 10. Structure of the timba style



Fig. 11. *Advanced rhythmic structure of the timba style*

## 2.7. Changui Style

*Changui* is considered by critics to be a very old style, originated in Guantanamo, Baracoa, represented essentially by a previous fusion with another traditional style called *nengon*. The difference lies in the existing classical stamp colour of the musical ensemble, supported by 4 specific instruments such as *marimbula* (lamelophone with a hollow wooden cavity), bongo, *tres* (cuban string instrument), and, guiro (or *guayo*), as well as an active representative of melodic expression, the vocalist.

## 3. Chucho Valdes, the central figure of stylistic evolution

For the well-founded assessment of the notion of “inheritance of afro-cuban” jazz, the analysis and perception of how Cuban musicians contributed to the generation of the phenomenon is of crucial importance, directly defining cultural identity.

Chucho Valdes pianist, composer and orchestrator is the central figure of a long line of native pianists who have contributed to the development, transformation and promotion of authentic Cuban music around the world. Dionisio Jesutans Valdes Rodriguez, also known as “Chucho Valdes” or simply “Chucho,” was born in Havana, Cuba, on October 9, 1941.

He is the winner of six *Grammy Awards* and four Latin Grammy Awards, considered the most influential figure in modern Afro-Cuban jazz. His father, Bebo Valdes, also a pianist with a strong impact on the influence, development, and previous stylistic rise of Cuban artistic creation, band leader, composer, and orchestrator, he is regarded as one of the most influential musicians of early Cuban evolution.

At the age of three, Chucho begins playing the piano memorizing, recognizing, and playing the songs after hearing, at the age of nine, he continues



his musical education, attending classical music classes, surrounded by famous musicians who often visited his father.

In 1959, Chucho debuted with the *Sabor Orchestra*, founded, and run by his father considered one of the greatest bands in the history of modern Cuban music.

In 1960, when Bebo Valdes left Cuba, Chucho took over and continued his father's work as both a pianist and musical director of the House orchestra in the Night Club Tropicana.

In 1963, Chucho joined the *El Teatro Musical Orchestra*, where he met guitarists such as Leo Brower, Carlos Emilio Morales, or saxophonist Paquito D' Rivera, a year later, Chucho recorded his first two albums, *Jazz Nocturno* and *Guapacha en La Habana*.

In 1967, Chucho became a member of the much-praised *Cubas Modern Music Orchestra*, which, according to musicologist Leonardo Acosta's description, tried to practice jazz style despite communist government policies, the restrictions on clothing and physiological appearance, or more, a complete ban on the reproduction of any musical style that has anything to do with that of the United States of America.

Chucho Valdes was the first to introduce the dialectal *Yoruba* as a way of musical verbal expression, of lyrical message. *Yoruba* has a multiple compilation of other dialects including *Ekiti, Igbomina, Ijebu, Ijesa, Oyo, Ondo, Owo, Ikale, Ilaje, Ikare, Yagba, Gbede, Ijumu, Ife, Ife, Ikiri, Isabe, Ijo, Ijumu*, and *Irun*. Even though the official language of Nigeria is English, *Yoruba* along with *Igbo* and *Hausa* are those quasi-official dialects that serve as the *lingua franca* for the speakers of the 400 regional dialects practiced on Nigerian territory.

In southwest Nigeria, where most *Yor* speakers are concentrated, *Yor Turba*, although not considered to be the official language, is used in government administration, in print and electronic media, at all levels of education, literature and film.

### **3.1. The Irakere group**

Chucho Valdes will continue his musical experiments at the *Music Modern Orchestra*, focusing mainly on typical Cuban musical writing. Thus, he manages to gather a small group of elite instrumentalists, such as trumpeter Arturo Sandoval or Jorge Varona, saxophonist Paquito D' Rivera, guitarist Carlos Emilio Morales, bassist Carlos del Puerto, and so on, drummer Enrique Pla and Bernardo Garcia, as well as percussionist Oscar Valdes.

The members of the *Irakere* are characterized by musicality, creativity and unity over the years, which led to the realization and consolidation of a coherent

group with a new period-appropriate sonority. Chucho Valdes was the pianist, leader, principal orchestrator and composer of the new revolutionary group, as author Isabelle Leymarie said (Leymarie 2002, 88). *Irakere* emerged as one of the most popular entities among the new local and country bands, blending folk elements of percussion and electronic instruments into musical genres such as jazz, funk, and more, Cuban rock and dance music.

Art critic Maya Roy (Roy 2002, 165) notes that over time the sound of the *Irakere group* founded in 1973 was characterized by the connection between classical music, Cuban folk music, rock, rock, rock, rock, and rock music, samba and funk alongside the implementation of *bat* percussion instruments, rarely seen instruments in public performances.

From his father, Chucho learned that outstanding musicians must be familiar with all genres of music, not just the traditionally inherited one. According to Maya Roy, Bebo Valdes had previously directed his son to the premise that Cuban music could be modernized by broadening the harmonic concept as well as the high-perfection appearance of jazz improvisations, precision and technical accuracy obtained by most of them, especially through previous classical education.

Chucho certainly applied much of his father's visions to the concept of the repertoire and style of the artistic approach of the *Irakere group*. From the beginning, the *Irakere group* was composed of accomplished musicians who developed the most sophisticated Cuban jazz possible at the time. Thus, under the guidance of Oscar Valdes, for example, in the percussion section *Iraqers* were presented sacred and secular Afro-Cuban rhythms, as well as religious-style interpretations sung in dialect *Yoruba*.

The author Rafael Lam (Lam 2011, 162) comments in his book on Chucho and Oscar Valdes about the research work he has done on the development of *Yoruba* language traditions, including sacred tools such as *arára* (percussion), *yuka* (musical tradition that compiles rhythm, melodic line and dance) and goat skin (*samanic*) drums used during religious ceremonies. The legacy of the relationship between African folklore and Cuban music is diverse and yet complicated. It is obvious that the richness of African rhythms along with diversity, the cultural descent of Cuba played an important role in defining the artistic style of *Irakere*.

As Rebecca Mauleon (Mauleon 2018, 55) points out, Chucho Valdes and members of the *Irakere* grew familiar with the rhythms and instruments brought from Africa, as well as the popular Cuban, American, jazz, and jazz songs, dances and other cultural expressions, European religious practices. The valuable information inherited and transmitted verbally from their predecessors leads to the observation of the evolutionary performances, which represent an intense phenomenon over the years.

#### 4. African cuban rhythmic cells

Cuban musician Fernando Ortiz (Ortiz 2014, 273) says that the rhythm is the most predominant element in African communities. He has done extensive research on the music of African countries and Cuba, particularly on rhythmic instruments *batá*<sup>3</sup> considered to be the most important in the timbral colouring of Cuban music.

Professor Gaspar Agüero (and Fernando Ortiz) first studied the rhythms of West African origin present in Cuban folk music. To this end, he analysed the rhythmic structures of some Cuban dance musical styles, focusing on the main elements and manages to elaborate a classification consisting of six basic African rhythms, “absolute”. These rhythmic patterns appear in Cuban music, not only in the expression of percussion instruments, but also in the melodic or harmonic accompaniment.

##### 4.1. Tresillo

The first of the six rhythmic cells is known as *tresillo*. It is often noted by some composers and orchestrators, as shown in Figure 12 (A). It is also frequently used by the bass line with an emphasis on all three notes, the desired interpretation being the one in point Figure 12 (B).



Fig. 12

##### 4.2. Conga Rhythm

The second cell, as plotted in Fig. 13 (D), is often misinterpreted, with both notes being emphasized. It is also used in the bass line and requires an execution according to Figure 13 (E). This is the primary cell of the *Conga* rhythm as demonstrated in Figure 13 (F).



Fig. 13

<sup>3</sup> *Bata* drums, native to Nigeria, are sacred, two-headed, hourglass-shaped drums. They are used in the ritual music of the *Yoruba* religion, better known as Santería.

### 4.3. Clave

The third rhythmic cell, as mentioned by Ortiz, is known as the *clave* model (Figure 14).



Fig. 14. *Clave model*

### 4.4. Cinquillo

The fourth rhythmic cell brought to Cuba by French Creoles in Haiti is called *cinquillo* and refers to a rhythmic five-note pattern (Leymarie 2002, 18). It is often noted and read in the representation of Figure 15 (G).

However, a more readable notation is presented in Fig. 15 (H). As Ortiz suggests the first, second and fifth notes are emphasized for correct interpretation and pulsation.

Bassists and percussionists often use the *cinquillo* model in contemporary Cuban creation in dance music such as *mambo*, *cha-cha-cha*, *danzon*, *bolero*, *son montuno*, *guaracha* and *habanera*.



Fig. 15

### 4.5. The junction of the danzon style with the *clave* formula and the base line

The following example demonstrates the relationship between the *cinquillo* model implemented in *danzon*, with the formula *clave* 3-2, as well as the support of the base line in the song *La Comparsa* by Ernesto Lecuona<sup>4</sup>. (Figure16)

<sup>4</sup> Ernesto Lecuona, he is considered one of the most prolific Cuban composers with more than 1000 works published in different styles. Also virtuous pianist and special orchestrator.



Fig. 16

Authors Alejandro Madrid and Robin Moore (Acosta 2003, 17) identified (as shown in Fig.17) other significant rhythmic cells such as *Habanera* and *Amphibrachs* found in the early Cuban *contradance* of the nineteenth century.

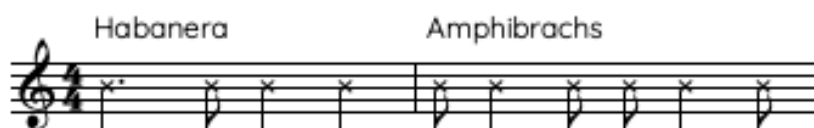


Fig. 17

## 5. Conclusion

Cuban music possesses a multiple rhythmic variety both in rhythmic cells derived from African music and in traditional genres such as *danzon*, *contradanza*, *cha-cha cha* and other rhythms. Critic Rebecca Mauleon suggests that Cuban music and its musicians have inherited a wide and wide range of musical traditions. To support this, Chucho hypothesized that he could perform songs for an hour, offering various Cuban rhythms without repeating one of them.

Music, Cuban artistic creation crossed several cultural and stylistic boundaries, Chucho Valdes experimenting intensively with traditional Afro-Cuban elements, consciously trying to modernize the folk music of Cuba. He sought and

explored beyond the realm of the Cuban people genres such as, *swing, bebop, rock, funk, Brazilian samba, Argentinian tango* and many others that were not necessarily based on the concept of *claves*.

This unfettered approach to rhythm was one of the features that brought Cuban music from the boundaries of dance to the concert scene. This is the parallel to the artistic growth of American jazz, similar to the situation in which the dancing swing later opens the gate to the styles of *bebop, fusion*, then to concerts, and so on, large-scale works for concert halls outlining the creative apogee.

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