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by Jane Werry

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## INTRODUCTION: WHY TEACH SALSA AT KS3?

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Salsa has immediate appeal. Its rhythms and riffs are irresistibly catchy. Its combination of syncopated rhythms with simple harmonies and structures give it just the right level of challenge for KS3 classes. A few simple layers, done well, can create a performance or arrangement that will sound effective, even impressive.

This resource starts with a percussion groove and a group performance of 'Toca bonito', and from there moves into the creation of salsa-style cover versions, which could be performed live or using ICT. Listening to salsa examples and models of salsa covers is integrated with practical exploration of salsa characteristics along the way. It's possible, too, just to do the performing part of the project without the cover versions section if you need it to take less time.

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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This project covers performing, arranging, listening and appraising. Students will work on their singing and instrumental skills, and will also practise ensemble skills. They will deepen their knowledge of the way that melodies, rhythms and harmonies work together to create the unique sound of salsa. They will listen to a range of salsa music, and practise describing it accurately using appropriate terminology.

Knowledge *about* salsa that students will gain from this project will include knowing that it is a Latin American style of music, its musical characteristics and specific terms to describe these. Knowledge *of* salsa will be gleaned from performing 'Toca bonito' and creating a salsa cover version, experiencing its musical features at first hand, and understanding them through manipulating them.

Key terms:

- Polyrhythm
- Syncopation
- Son clave
- Riff/guajeo
- Texture: melody, bassline, chords, harmony
- Intervals (3rds and 6ths)
- Structure: intro, verse, chorus, call and response, tag

# GETTING THE FLAVOUR OF SALSA

## WHAT IS SALSA?

Salsa came about in New York in the mid-20th century, and is a fusion of Cuban music and jazz. Cuban *son* is itself a mixture of Spanish songs and Afro-Cuban percussion. At the time, there were many Cuban and Puerto Rican musicians working in clubs in New York City, where there was a thriving multicultural music scene. Since the 1940s, Latin dance had been extremely popular, with *mambo* and *chachachá* being particular crazes.

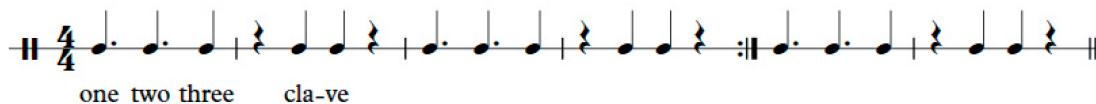
There is a great deal of controversy about the use of the term salsa. Some people say it can apply to pretty much all Latin American music, and others claim it is simply Cuban dance music. For some, it is a manufactured term used by record companies in the 1960s to start a craze – and sell more records.

A typical salsa band consists of piano; bass; congas; bongos; timbales; a horn section of trumpets and perhaps saxophones; smaller handheld percussion including claves, maracas, guiros and cowbells; a principal singer (*sonero*); and backing singers (choro) who sing in Spanish. The music is based on the son clave rhythm and is almost always in 4/4 time.

Salsa literally means 'sauce', and its distinctive sound is derived mostly from its spicy syncopated rhythms. A good way to start, therefore, is to get your class into those rhythms from the very beginning, with a percussion groove session.

One of the essential rhythms of salsa is the son clave. Clave (pronounced 'cla-veh') literally means 'key' in Spanish, and really is the key to all Latin music. It is often played on the claves (which can be pronounced the same way as the rhythm, or using an anglicised pronunciation to rhyme with 'caves').

If you have some claves for students to play, emphasise the proper way to hold them: they should not be held like drumsticks. There is a good demonstration on YouTube here.



Get students saying the rhythm, with the lyrics shown here. This version is known as the '3+2' clave as there are three notes in the first bar, and two in the second. It is possible to reverse the bars, however, to make a '2+3' clave. Students can practise the rhythm both ways round. Whenever you listen to a salsa track with your class, identifying which version of the clave is being played can be the first task.

Now the essential clave has been identified, named and mastered, you can progress onto building salsa polyrhythms. Unless you're very lucky, you are unlikely to have a full set of salsa percussion in your classroom. You will need to sort out some substitutions for some of the characteristic salsa sounds:

- The **guiro** part can be played on any kind of scraper.
- **Maracas** are likely to be something that you have in the classroom; any kind of shaker can be used, and the handle-less egg type are more controllable. Show students how to get an even quaver rhythm using forwards/backwards forearm movement.
- **Claves** are another common classroom instrument, although ensure that students play them with the proper technique (see above). A woodblock can be substituted for claves.
- With the **bongo** and **conga** parts, the high and low pitches are part of the groove. If you do not have pairs of bongos, you might be able to find small drums of different sizes to put into pairs. Alternatively, you could ask students to find two ways of hitting the drums to achieve two different sounds.
- Congas need to produce a bigger, deeper sound than bongos, so your biggest drums can be put into

action on this line. Djembes or even surdos could be used, with students being encouraged to find different sounds for the high and low pitches.

- **Timbales** are small, high-pitched, tightly tuned pairs of tom-toms played with sticks. If you have samba drums, a tamborim could be used, perhaps with a rimshot (which is a characteristic part of timbales technique) for the higher sound.
- The **mambo bell** is a regular cowbell.
- The cowbell part here is intended for a two-tone cowbell. You might have double-headed samba agogo bells, which are perfect. If you don't have these, you could use two different-sized ordinary cowbells, or be creative with other sound sources: glass bottles filled with different quantities of water could work very well.

In an Afro-Cuban band, the bongo player swaps onto the double cowbell (agogo) for certain sections of the piece, and the timbales player also plays the mambo bell. Depending on your resources, you may wish to keep these separate, or even pick and choose your rhythms from those shown here to create your own polyrhythm.

Teach each rhythm separately using body percussion or vocal sounds before putting it onto instruments. The suggestions here really are only suggestions: you, or your students, might come up with much better ones. The groove can be played with this backing video which shows the structure very clearly. Ideally, we need different rhythms for the verse and chorus. However, the main difference is that the bells feature much more heavily in the choruses, so you could make it that the cowbell and agogo rhythms drop out in the verse, and keep that as what marks out the choruses.

Verse rhythms:

Musical notation for Verse rhythms in 4/4 time. The notation is organized into six staves, each representing a different instrument. The Guiro staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The other staves have a common time signature of 4/4. The Guiro part consists of eighth notes with F# and G. The Maracas part consists of eighth notes. The Claves part consists of dotted quarter notes. The Bongos, Congas, and Timbales parts consist of eighth notes.

Chorus rhythms:

Musical notation for Chorus rhythms in 4/4 time. The notation is organized into six staves, each representing a different instrument. The Guiro staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The other staves have a common time signature of 4/4. The Guiro part consists of eighth notes with F# and G. The Maracas part consists of eighth notes. The Claves part consists of dotted quarter notes. The Cowbells part consists of eighth notes. The Congas part consists of eighth notes. The Mambo bell/Timbales part consists of eighth notes with a key signature change to one sharp (F#) in the final measure.

# PERFORMING 'TOCA BONITO'

The idea for performing 'Toca bonito' came from a Musical Futures project designed for whole-class instrumental teaching of saxophone, trumpet and double bass, described in detail here. However, the version of the project described in this resource is designed for standard classroom instruments such as keyboard, ukuleles, guitar and bass guitar, although it would be very easy to integrate students' own instruments into groups as well.

'Toca bonito' is an ideal starting point for performing in a salsa style because the melody only uses a very limited range of notes. It's easy to work out by ear, and creating harmonies for it follows a simple pattern common to salsa that's easily replicated.

Here is the melody for the song (note that the first four bars are repeated twice, so sung three times in total):

To-ca bo - ni - to — bue-nos di - as! Ho - la! A - di-os!

A backing track for 'Toca bonito' is available on Soundcloud. Singing the melody through a couple of times over the backing should be enough to enable your class to join in. Having the lyrics on the board will help.

Once they've got the hang of how it goes, focus on the first four-bar phrase, and ask them to identify how many *different* pitches are used. It can be helpful to draw the ups and downs of the melody in the air with a finger. Once it has been established that three different pitches are used, ask whether it is the highest, lowest or middle pitch that's the first note. We now have enough information to be able to play it by ear:

- Three pitches are used.
- The middle one is the first one.
- The notes are next to each other.

Tell students that the melody is in their heads (it must be, because they can sing it) and that now their task is to get it out of their heads and onto an instrument.

You could challenge them first of all to find the pitch of the starting note, and then work out the other two required pitches from there. You could give additional clues, for instance that on the keyboard only white notes are required (at this stage). Some students are likely to be able to do this quite quickly: it's always interesting to see who they are, as an individual's ability to pick out a melody can sometimes be surprising. Those that pick it up immediately can either model the melody for other students to emulate, or could be challenged to play the melody in harmony by adding a 3rd and/or 6th below.

A fourth pitch is needed to add the 'Hola! Adios!' tag that marks the end of the section. When the time is right, add this section to what's being played, identifying that the new pitch is not next door to the lowest of the three notes used previously.

As is common in salsa, the melody is harmonised using 3rds and 6ths. What we have sung and played so far is the highest of the layers of harmony. The other layers have exactly the same shape, so students can work out how to play them once they know that the other two starting notes are (concert) C and G:

To-ca bo - ni - to — bue-nos di - as! Ho - la! A - di-os!

This is probably enough for one lesson. You could finish off by getting a class performance going over the backing track, with students choosing their starting note from E, C or G. Those on keyboards or xylophones could play two parts at the same time. It would be great to add some vocals as well, especially if they can be in harmony too.

### Adding son clave, bassline and piano riff

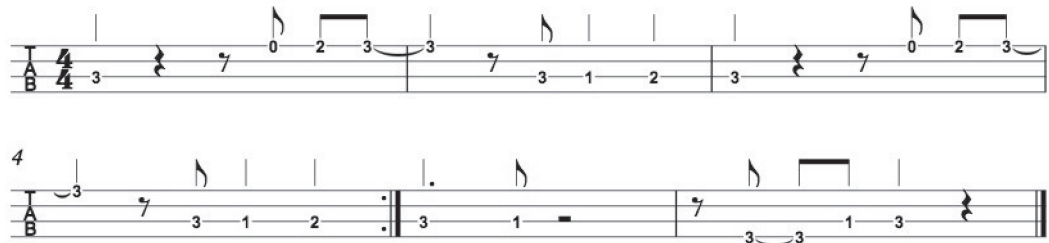
You might want to introduce the rest of the parts for 'Toca bonito' by showing your class the end product that they're aiming for. There is a video showing all the parts being played together here. Students should recognise the 'Toca bonito' melody being played in the bottom right of the screen. It's also being played by the guitar in the top right-hand box. Additionally, we have the clave rhythm top left, the bassline centre top, and a piano riff bottom left.

The bassline for 'Toca bonito' is this:



To play this on a keyboard, students could use both hands: the right hand can hover over G, A and B flat, and the left hand reserved for the four lower notes, C, B, B flat and low G. It is less complicated than it looks, and with some modelling from the teacher, most students will soon pick it up.

The bass line can also be played on the bass guitar:



There's a video tutorial for this here.

Understanding tab is an excellent thing to teach students: it is nowhere near as complicated as staff notation, being in essence a method of telling you exactly where to put your fingers. It is also a skill that students are quite likely to use in their musical lives outside school – point out to them that tab for thousands of songs is easily available free on the internet, and accessing this is a brilliant way for them to learn to play their favourite songs. The essential piece of knowledge to reiterate frequently is that the lines represent the strings, and the numbers represent the frets.

Using tab also gives us the option of incorporating guitars or ukuleles for playing the melody, alongside keyboards, voices or orchestral instruments. Here is the tab for guitar, which is all on one string:



There is a video tutorial for guitar here.

This is the ukulele tab:



There is a video tutorial for ukulele here.

The final part for 'Toca bonito' is the piano riff – sometimes known as a *guajeo* (pronounced wa-hey-yo). Guajeos are perhaps the most distinctive sound of salsa, and the one for 'Toca bonito' is not too difficult to play, but sounds quite impressive:



This pattern is played six times, followed by the 'Hola! Adios!' tag. Again, a two-handed approach to playing this pattern can make it more accessible to students. The left hand can play G, F and E, while the right hand plays the B flat/D and B flat/C chords above. There is a video tutorial [here](#).

It would also be possible to play the guajeo on a xylophone with some nifty three-beater action (one in the left hand, two in the right) if you have B flat keys.

Getting all of this together can be practised as a whole class before moving, if you wish, to small-group performance. Use the backing track for whole-class practice to keep the structure tight and maintain the groove. You could have this as an option for small-group too, if it works with the logistics of your classroom.

Explain to the class that they need to ensure that every part is covered. This is especially important if there's a choice of instruments, as they need to understand that it's not the instruments used that are important, but the parts that they play. One option is to present them with a checklist such as this one:

- 'Toca bonito' melody: keyboard, guitar, ukulele, xylophone, singing, orchestral instrument
- Bassline: keyboard or bass guitar
- Piano riff (guajeo): keyboard or xylophone
- Clave rhythm: claves (optional)

As well as ensuring that all parts are covered, success criteria need to include ensemble (is everything together and in time?) and balance (is anything too quiet or too loud?).

The checklist and the success criteria can be used as a structure for assessing work in progress. You could invite students to give peer feedback on other groups, or record work in progress and leave the recording running while you provide verbal feedback at the end.

### SALSA DANCING

Your students may be interested in salsa dancing: perhaps they might have seen it on *Strictly Come Dancing*. Salsa dance at its very simplest is based on a straightforward forward-back step in beats 1, 2, 3 and 5, 6, 7. A fun example of some salsa dancing from the musical *In The Heights* can be seen [here](#). Fans of *Hamilton* will enjoy the mixture of salsa and rapping!

You might even want to teach your class the basic steps, and happily there are some great YouTube videos to help out. This one is very clear and will cover the basics in a few minutes.

### Listening to different versions of 'Toca bonito'

Now that students know 'Toca bonito' well, it can be interesting to listen to a few different versions to see how various musicians have interpreted it in different ways, and to make the point that our version is just one possibility out of an infinite number. The listening need not take place in one chunk within a 'listening lesson': each different version could be listened to and discussed as part of a starter or to end a lesson.

This version of 'Toca bonito' – as well as being hair-raisingly fast – features the melody played by saxes and trumpets, while the vocalists add a 'Toca bonito' response at the end of each phrase. Draw your students'

attention to the improvised passages: this might be something to add into your own versions of 'Toca bonito' if everything else is sorted and working well.

This video shows a performance that probably sounds more like what's happening in your classroom, with the harmonised melody shared by saxophones, flutes, violin and trumpet. Notice how everything stops neatly for the 'Hola! Adios!' tag. There is a guitar improvisation over the guajeo that is punctuated by a 'Toca bonito' response in a similar way to that heard in the previous version.

A slicker version can be found here. This also features a slightly different structure, with a call and response between saxophones and vocalists before each 'Hola! Adios!' tag. There is also a marimba improvisation that might stimulate some good discussion and perhaps inspire your xylophonists to give it a go.

### ADDING IMPROVISATION

Putting in some improvisation sections lends a further dash of authenticity to any salsa performance, particularly if combined with some call and response. However, the main teachable point when tackling improvisation with a class is that it is absolutely *not* just playing random notes! Improvisers need to use pitches that will fit with everything else that is going on in the music, and create rhythms that are interesting and fit with the style.

It's a good idea to start with purely rhythmic improvisation, as you can establish structure (when to play) and the idea of staying with the groove and using syncopation. This can be quite easily combined with the idea of using call and response to break up the improvised phrases and give structure to the whole thing.

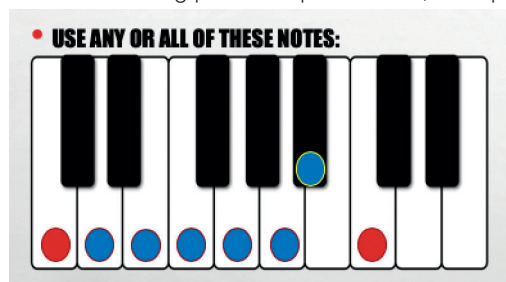
Let's steal the 'Toca bonito' response from the first video that we watched:



Over the backing track, sing the call yourself and ask the class to sing the response. Once they've got the hang of it, stop singing the call and improvise clapping rhythms in its place, with students still singing the response each time. After three responses, it's time for the 'Hola! Adios!' tag. It may take some practice to get into the pattern of this.

Once established, ask students to take turns improvising a call, with everyone singing the response. Pick out any particularly good rhythms that come up, and explain the features that make them stand out: it may be that they've created an interesting rhythm that's syncopated, but without copying the rhythm of the original melody. Encourage these characteristics in the rhythms before adding some pitch.

When introducing pitch to improvisations, it's important to limit the pitches to what will fit with the backing.



However, a full set of eight notes can be daunting for a beginner, so make it clear that using two or three notes to start off with is absolutely fine, as long as the rhythms used are good. If using a limited number of notes, having C as one of them will help to anchor the improvisation to the key.

It will take a little practice for groups to absorb improvisations into the structure of their performance of 'Toca bonito', organising who improvises when, and where this comes in relation to the overall structure of the piece. More able students can use more pitches in their improvisations, and perhaps even aim for some use of repeated motifs. Keyboard players and tuned percussionists might include some harmony in 3rds in what they play.

# CREATING A SALSA COVER VERSION

The second phase of the project could be to create a cover version of a chosen song in a salsa style. To do this requires a very good synthesis of the characteristics of salsa. Fortunately, the rhythms and patterns of salsa are not only very distinctive, they are also relatively easy to reproduce and apply to another song. This makes creating a salsa cover version a simpler task than if you were to attempt to replicate some other styles.

This could be done 'live' in groups of between three and six. There needs to be a piano guajeo, a bassline and at least a clave rhythm to form a percussion section. You may decide to add more percussion, or add vocal harmonies, in which case you will need to steer your students towards having a slightly bigger group. Alternatively, you could get them to record the backing and then sing over the top of the recording. Another very effective way of doing this would be to use a sequencing or notating program to input the entire backing and then sing over the top of that.

As with the performance of 'Toca bonito', it can help to start with some good exemplars to demonstrate what you are aiming at.

- This salsa cover of 'Hey Jude' takes a little while to get going, and starts off with a polyrhythm over a 3:2 son clave rhythm. However, by 1:10 there are horn section stabs and a guajeo, and the salsa style is well and truly in evidence.
- 'Hey Soul Sister' brings in the guajeo right from the start, and also features polyrhythm, but does not have a horn section.
- 'Shape of You' is an extremely popular song with students, and is built on a repeating chord pattern, which lends itself very well to a salsa cover. This version uses manipulation of texture to provide variety much like Ed Sheeran's original, and combines salsa features with synth sounds.
- This version of 'Happy' is very useful as you can see the musicians and dancers in action. Here, the polyrhythm is created with congas and drum kit, and the horn section is kept busy with stabs and harmonic support.

So what will we need in order to create our own salsa covers? We will need to pick a song, and then work out how to add salsa features to its chords and melody. It's going to be easiest to pick a song to cover that has a very simple chord progression with a lot of repetition. Here is a list of songs that fits this requirement and may also be popular with your students:

- 'Wake Me Up' – Avicii
- 'Halo' – Beyoncé
- 'Knocking on Heaven's Door' – Bob Dylan/Guns'n'Roses
- 'Get Lucky' – Daft Punk
- 'Price Tag' – Jessie J
- 'Firework' – Katy Perry

If you want to restrict choice and make the whole thing more rigidly structured, you could ask all groups to make salsa versions of a I-V-vi-IV chord sequence in the key of C (C-G-Am-F) or G (G-D-Em-C). They can then pick one or more songs from the many hundreds that use this progression. There are many lists of songs that fit with these chords, but this one from Hook Theory is perhaps the most informative.

Once you've chosen a suitable song to cover, the next task is to create a guajeo version of the chords. Model two different guajeo patterns for students to choose from: the first one shown here is slightly easier as it only uses one note at a time.

The image displays two musical staves. The first staff shows a single-note melody for chords C and G. The second staff shows a more complex guajeo pattern for C and G using chords.



Once they've tried them out and settled on which one they prefer, students can practise the chords from their chosen song with the guajeo pattern, alongside a clave rhythm (either 3:2 or 2:3) and any other percussion they want to include. It would also be good to add a bassline, either on bass guitar or low down on a keyboard. By far the easiest bassline pattern is the *tresillo*, which uses the '3 side' of the clave rhythm and just goes up the notes of the triad:



For students who need a challenge, a slightly more authentic pattern can be made from taking the tresillo and tying notes over the barline:



Now we have guajeo, percussion and bassline, we have a perfect salsa-style backing. All that remains is to add vocals over the top. Students can decide whether to keep the vocals single-line, or try adding some harmony in 3rds and 6ths, as we had in 'Toca bonito'.

### SUCCESS CRITERIA AND FEEDBACK

It will take a little time to put all of this together, and you will undoubtedly be listening to work in progress and providing students with some feedback. As with the performance of 'Toca bonito', having an explicit checklist of success criteria can make expectations clear for students and provide a framework for self-assessment and peer assessment. Here is a list that you can use as a starting point:

- Chords played in an accurate guajeo pattern on a piano sound.
- A bassline based on a tresillo pattern on bass guitar or low on the piano.
- A percussion part with at least a clave rhythm, but perhaps more parts to make a polyrhythm.
- Good sense of rhythm and keeping together in the ensemble (or accurately inputted if using computers).
- Vocal line performed with accurate pitch and in time with the backing.
- Vocal harmonies added using 3rds/6ths above/below the melody, and/or a response at the end of lines.
- Improvised instrumental sections.
- Good sense of balance between parts: nothing too loud or quiet.

As you listen to work in progress, you may uncover common problems that need to be identified, discussed and added to the list. Some classes need help with basic organisation and time management, so you might need either to add that to the list of criteria, or set aside specific time for discussion and planning before anyone gets out any instruments.

Recording work in progress is always a good idea, as it will remind students what they were doing, and also highlight what it is that they need to work on. A good trick is to leave the recording running while you give verbal feedback. This is a very time-efficient way to give feedback, as students will be reminded of it the following lesson when they listen back to their work.