

World tour: Latin America

KS3

Simon Rushby

Introduction

In the January 2020 issue of *Music Teacher*, the first in our KS3 World Tour series of resources explored the music of Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago. This month we look at some examples of Latin American music found in parts of the Caribbean and South America.

These resources provide background information and teaching ideas for Key Stage 3 class music lessons, with the aim of expanding students' knowledge and interest in music from other parts of the world. In doing this we can make links with music that the students already know and learn more about the fusion caused by migration of people and the broadcast of music across countries and continents – particularly how local music can be influenced and infiltrated by styles from elsewhere.

Where is Latin America?

The term 'Latin America' perhaps describes a people and a culture rather than a specific area, but it can mean almost anywhere in Central and South America from Mexico in the north to Chile in the south, and also a good number of the Caribbean islands.

The term was first used in the 19th century and has come to describe countries in this area where the main languages are Spanish, Portuguese or French. The music of Latin America strongly reflects these European influences – especially Spanish ones, mixed with local traditions and the strong impact of American jazz and popular music.

It would be wrong, however, to simplify Latin American heritage as simple ethnicity. Latin Americans are a multi-faceted people, varied in ancestral origin and nationality. Across Latin America you will find German, Jewish, African, Italian, Middle Eastern and Japanese backgrounds as much as Spanish, Portuguese and French ones, and there's a large indigenous American presence in their cultural make-up, too. As a region, Latin America is one of the most culturally diverse anywhere in the world.



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The music of Latin America

It follows that the music of this region is hugely varied with a great many influences. Much of it can be traced back to the Spanish and Portuguese settlers of the 16th century, and is Spanish or Portuguese in style and language, though there are strong African and American flavours too.

Latin American music is best known for its importance in the world of dance, and also for its influence on the world of jazz, pop and hip hop, among other genres. In this resource, we'll look in some detail at music found in **Cuba**, and follow that with a brief tour around other parts of the **Caribbean** and **South America**.

Cuba



Cuba, the largest island in the Caribbean, is situated south of Florida and the Bahamas and north of Jamaica. It is an island republic with a colourful and varied history.

It was claimed for Spain by Columbus in 1492, and remained a Spanish colony for nearly 400 years, though the western part of the island was very briefly occupied by the British during the Seven Years' War. Under Spanish rule, one of Cuba's chief exports was sugar, and African slaves were used on plantations up until the mid-19th century.

Cuba's struggle for independence began with rebellions from 1868 onwards, supported increasingly by the US, which eventually went to war with Spain over the island in 1898. This short war resulted in a treaty that eventually allowed Cuba, with the United States' blessing, to become an independent republic in 1902, though the US retained rights to remain involved in the country's affairs and leased a naval base at the now infamous Guantánamo Bay.

Since becoming a republic, Cuba has endured much political turmoil. In 1952 the dictator Fulgencio Batista came to power, but he was overthrown by Fidel Castro and his supporters in 1959. Castro led the country until 2008, aligning his political system with Russian communist principles and distancing relations with the US. His brother Raúl took over and the country remains under communist rule, though national restrictions and relations with the international community are gradually easing.

The music of Cuba

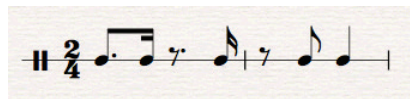
Cuban music combines Spanish and West African styles, and is one of the most popular, recognisable and influential musical traditions in the world. Spanish settlers and African slaves both brought their musical traditions to the island, and so percussive rhythms played on different types of drums, boxes and wooden sticks combined with the Spanish guitar and European musical structure to create new styles that are now synonymous not only with the island but also with much of the region. Our look at Cuban and Cuban-influenced music will only scratch the surface of this rich heritage, but we can cover some of the best-known genres.

Rumba

Of African origin, the word 'rumba' came to describe a party and the music and dancing that took place there. Rumba is at the very heart of Cuban music, and it's very different to the kind of rumba we might see on the BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*. It dates back to the 19th century, when slavery was still rife in Cuba, and it primarily began as the music of the slaves who played drums and performed African songs and dances. The settlers replaced African languages with Spanish and added Spanish character to the melodies.

Performing activity: rumba clave

Cuban rumba is rhythmically complex, but at its heart is a rhythm played by the claves, known as **rumba clave**. Variations of this subtle 'three-plus-two' rhythm are found in many types of Latin music, so a great first activity is to get the class to perfect it. Here it is, written in simple duple time:



A simplified way to learn this rhythm is to practise it with the note values doubled, and count in quavers:

Count: 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + | 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +

Clap: x x x | x x

Once this is mastered, gradually speed up the pulse until you're counting two in a bar.

The dominant drum in rumba is the **conga drum** or **tumbadora**, which comes in many sizes and plays a constant quaver rhythm with syncopated accents to match the movements of the dancers.

Singers might add improvised call-and-response phrases.

This video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vB3qc_U9FHk&list=RDvB3qc_U9FHk&start_radio=1&t=62) shows the traditional rumba dances which fall into three types: **guaguancó**, in which the male dancer makes advances and the female fends him off; **yambú**, a more sedate dance; and the virtuosic and showy **columbia**.

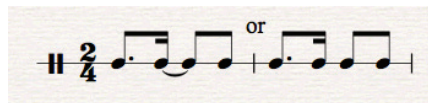
Listening activity: Cuban rumba

One of the best-known Cuban rumba groups is Los Muñequitos de Matanzas, who have been performing and recording since the 1950s. Here is a clip of them in action (www.youtube.com/watch?v=M9b4oPHv8u8), best watched from around 1 minute 30 seconds onwards, along with some pointers for your students to watch out for:

- ▶ The main singer is also playing the rumba clave rhythm, and sings verses that are semi-improvised. There are additional, busy rhythms from the wood block and maracas.
- ▶ The other singers sing the refrain in close harmony to make a call-and-response pattern.
- ▶ The cajón – a box-shaped percussion instrument – provides ground rhythms.
- ▶ The congas play highly complex, energetic and syncopated rhythms.

Some other Cuban dances

The **habanera**, which takes its name from the capital Havana, actually originated in Spain and started to develop in Cuba in the 1700s and 1800s. In Cuba it was originally called the **contradanza**, and is a slowish, stately song with verses known for its repetitive rhythm, similar to the rumba clave rhythm we met above. Here are two ways in which that rhythm might appear:

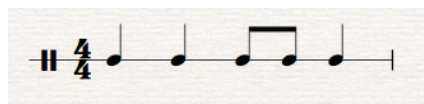


The first variation of this rhythm is known as **tresillo** due to its three-over-two pattern. The second variation is more popular and there is a very famous version of it in Bizet's *Carmen*, which you can watch with your students here (www.youtube.com/watch?v=tSsNFPkzvNA).

The **bolero** originated in Spain in the 18th century but took on great popularity not only in Cuba but also in parts of Central and South America such as Mexico and Venezuela. A complex but repetitive song and dance found in two- or three-time, this style influenced composers worldwide, and boleros can be found in a number of major classical works – not least, of course, Ravel's famous triple-time *Boléro* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhkhGyJog2E) with its repetitive snare drum rhythm – a good opportunity to introduce or revise identification of orchestral instruments!

The **mambo** developed out of the rumba and was influenced by the American big bands and their swing music of the 1930s. Beginning on the fourth beat of the bar, the mambo is full of exciting, complex polyrhythms, underpinned by consistent claves and maracas.

The **cha cha cha** is derived from the mambo and has a characteristic rhythm, of which this is one of the most common variations:



Listening activity – mambo and cha cha cha

By the 1950s, mambo and cha cha cha were extremely popular dances in America, especially in New York City. Here (www.youtube.com/watch?v=DnUmUqvL6Fw) is the famous ‘Dance at the Gym’ scene from Bernstein’s 1957 musical *West Side Story* (the film was made in 1961) which told the story of love between a New York boy (Tony) and a Puerto Rican immigrant girl (Maria).

The dance sequence begins with a furious mambo and – as Tony and Maria meet – calms down into a cha cha cha. Watch the scene with your students and get them to consider these questions:

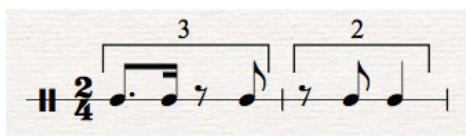
- ▶ The mambo begins at 0:43 – what percussion instruments can be heard here?
- ▶ Tap or clap the four-in-a-bar beat and see if you can hear the syncopated rhythms that make the mambo so exciting.
- ▶ What instrument plays a short solo from 2:32? How would you describe this solo?
- ▶ The cha cha cha is very short in this clip – from 3:06 to 3:25. Apart from its tempo, how does this music differ from the mambo?

As an interesting aside, you could play this cha cha cha ‘take’ on Beethoven’s *Für Elise* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgBennsVLHc) played by a Brazilian orchestra, and ask students to consider how Beethoven’s famous piano piece is turned into a piece of Latin American music.

Salsa

Our brief look at *West Side Story* above leads us neatly into salsa, which is a popular music genre that developed in New York in the 1960s due to the large Cuban and Puerto Rican communities there. Its name means ‘sauce’ in Spanish, and it’s a fusion of Cuban and Puerto Rican music with the jazz and rock music prevalent in America at this time.

The strongest flavour in musical salsa is the Cuban style of **son** – a genre that originated in the 19th century and blends Spanish and African elements. Spanish aspects of son include the improvisatory singing style and the use of the tres, a three-string Cuban guitar. African characteristics are primarily the call-and-response structure and prevalence of percussion instruments – especially the claves which play our now familiar ‘three-plus-two’ rhythm known as son clave:



The first part of the son clave rhythm is the tresillo rhythm mentioned above. You can also see a very strong similarity with the rumba clave rhythm.

Music from other parts of the Caribbean

We looked at music from Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago in the last World Tour resource (January 2020). The Dominican Republic, an independent country that shares the large island of Hispaniola with Haiti, also has a strong musical tradition. The **bachata** is probably its most famous style, also popular in Puerto Rico and in some South American countries. It developed as a form of bolero in the mid 20th century and uses guitars, bongos and the guiro. It has a fast, complex rhythmic style with call-and-response singing – here is an example (www.youtube.com/watch?v=5E7yuLsgXOE).

Brazil

The largest country in Latin America and fifth largest (by area) in the world, Brazil was colonised in the 16th century by the Portuguese and is the only country in North or South America with Portuguese as its official language. It covers nearly half of the South American continent and has huge natural diversity, particularly since the vast Amazon River flows through the country from west to east.

Seen by many as an emerging superpower, Brazil has a strong economy powered by its abundant natural resources and significant coffee and meat exports, though the latter has resulted in an alarming rate of deforestation in the country in recent years. It became an independent republic in the late 19th century and has an elected president, though many remotely situated tribes remain, some virtually untouched by modern ways of life. Brazil's history as an independent country has been checkered by dictatorships, military coups and corruption.

Brazil's capital was Rio de Janeiro from the mid 18th century until 1960, when a new city, Brasília, was founded to be the country's federal capital and seat of government. The most populous city in the country is São Paulo.

The music of Brazil

As with Cuba, Brazil's musical heritage is colourful and draws on European, African and indigenous characteristics. Though the culture of the country is strongly influenced by the Portuguese who governed it for so long, Brazil's music has flavours from all over Europe and is infused with African rhythms.

There are popular Brazilian versions of commercial styles such as pop, rock and hip hop, and much Brazilian classical music. The Brazilian Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959) is probably the best-known South American composer of all time. However, two particular genres of 'Brazilian' popular music have developed and become especially popular since the 1950s – samba and bossa nova.

Samba

Samba was born in Rio de Janeiro, the old capital of Brazil, in the early 20th century. It is seen as Brazil's national dance and the mainstay of the Carnival – an annual festival held in Brazil during the days leading up to Ash Wednesday. Samba is a highly percussive style with syncopated rhythms, usually in 2/4 metre with a busy polyrhythmic texture. There is usually a solo singer with a chorus of singers responding. The most popular kind of samba is called **samba batucada**.

Batucada is a repetitive, fast-paced and exciting style, played by a group known as a **bateria**. A wide variety of instruments features, the most significant of which are the **repinique**, **tamborim** and **surdo**, which are all drums of differing sizes; the **caixa**, a kind of snare drum; shakers and cowbells such as the **reco-reco** and the **agogo**; and perhaps most noticeable, the **apito** which is otherwise known as the samba whistle, used by the leader to call rhythms or sections of the samba.

A research and listening activity

A good research activity would be to ask students to find pictures and perhaps listening examples of each of the instruments mentioned above. Then, get them to study this clip (www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQLvGghaDbE) of an exciting samba batucada performance. Ask them the following questions:

- ▶ Can you identify some of the instruments playing in this clip from your research and the information above?
- ▶ How could you describe the patterns played by some of these instruments – for example the different large drums, the caixa and the apito?
- ▶ How does the leader signal changes in the sections of the samba? What else does he do?

Bossa nova

The bossa nova developed out of the samba in Brazil in the 1960s. It was largely coined and developed by the famous artist Antônio Carlos Jobim, whose famous song 'Desafinado' is often cited as a key example of bossa nova music.

In bossa nova the different elements – melody, harmony, rhythm and so on – are treated more equally than in the rhythm-dominated samba. Rhythms are more laid back, there is more minor tonality and the singing style is quite 'lounge-like' and understated. The guitar has become an important instrument in bossa nova.

There's a performance of 'Desafinado' by the composer himself, along with some stellar band-members, here (www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCMhuN3o530).

Tango

The tango originated and developed in the streets of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Montevideo, Uruguay. It was an urban genre popular in poor areas at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, which quickly found notoriety in the glitzy ballrooms of European cities such as Paris and London. Consequently, Argentinian tango dancers moved to Europe and made names for themselves as touring 'authentic' performers, though their passionate dancing often had to be toned down for more conservative European audiences.

An Argentinian composer named Astor Piazzolla began his career as a tango musician and worked in France, Italy and the USA, fusing the style with jazz and classical music. His most famous work, 'Libertango', can be found here (www.youtube.com/watch?v=kdhTodxH7Gw) and is a must-watch.

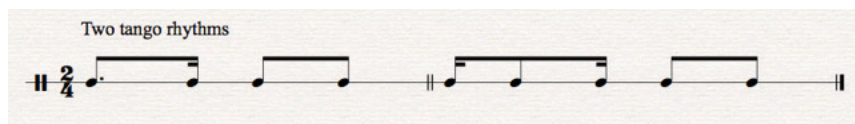
Tango songs are normally in two equal parts, the second in a related key to the first. Their main feature is a 2/4 rhythm which can be exactly like that of the Cuban habanera or similar to it, featuring dotted rhythms or syncopation. See the composing activity below for examples of this.

Instruments found in the tango vary, but most commonly included an accordion or **bandoneon** – the instrument played by Piazzolla – along with violin and guitar.

Composing activity – writing a tango

Writing a tango is an excellent project to undertake with a KS3 class, as it teaches rhythm, harmony and melody, one by one, with very simple musical ideas. The following examples can be given to students, who can work in groups to create their own tangos.

Rhythm: use one of these two tango rhythms for your percussionists to play. Keep the percussion instruments simple – a tambourine is possibly the best instrument.



Harmony: the simplest harmonic plan for a tango is to pick a minor key, and use the tonic, subdominant and dominant chords to make a four-bar or eight-bar sequence (one chord per bar). Here are two examples:

Am – E – E – Am (repeat)

Dm – Gm – A – Dm (repeat)

The instrument playing the bassline should either play the root note or outline the triad of each chord, using the rhythms above.

Melody: tango melodies often move in step and use chromatic notes. Get students to start on the tonic and move to the dominant by step using a combination of white and black notes. Encourage them to write short two-bar phrases in a question/answer style and use lots of repetition.

Structure: once an eight-bar section has been completed with chords and a melody, this can be repeated. Tangos will normally then have a contrasting section of the same length, perhaps in the tonic major key, making overall binary form, though you could also return to the first section to make a ternary form tango.

See *Music Teacher*, January 2013, for a full resource devoted to tango.