

What Is Charanga? An article from www.cafecito.co.uk.

All terms in Cuban music seem to have more than one meaning - certainly the most confusing one must be “Mambo”, which can be a dance; a tune type; a rhythmic feel and a section of a composition (not just of a mambo). Even the original composition “Mambo” was a *danzón*!

Charanga is almost as confusing a term - it is most likely to be a type of Cuban musical group; but also it is a style, and can be the name of a band that doesn't play charanga style!

But the essence of charanga is that it is based on the line-up of the *charanga francesa* (flute, violins and rhythm section) as opposed to that of the *orquesta típica* (*brass instruments, clarinets, violins and percussion*), and that is what the band **Cafecito** is modelled on.

Charanga bands developed in Cuban music in the early twentieth century playing *danzones*, the beautiful semi-formal partner dance which evolved into the *cha-cha-chá*. And since it was charanga bands who invented the *cha-cha-chá*, it was charanga bands who played it during the hey-day of this dance in the 1950's and early 1960's. It was also musicians in charangas who invented the *mambo* and the *pachanga*.

Famous charanga ensembles include *Arcaño y sus Maravillas*, *Orquesta América*, *Orquesta Aragón*, *Orquesta Almendra*, *Orquesta Ritmo Oriental*, and *Estrellas Cubanas*. There are dozens more.

To understand charanga it is first necessary to understand the *danzón*, which in some ways is the classic Cuban dance-form.

Extraordinarily the line of descent of the *danzón* appears to have started in England in the 17th century with the “country dance”, where the sexes face each other in lines and dance sequences, the style of which was imported into French aristocracy as the *contredanse*. The *contredanse* evolved into the *cotillion* and the *quadrille*. After the slave rebellion in Haiti at the end of the 19th century many French landowners together with their slaves emigrated to Cuba, taking their dances and musical culture with them. The *contredanse* became the Spanish *contradanza*, which gave birth to the *danza*, which developed into the *danzón*. The essential difference between the *danzón* and its antecedents is that it is a dance for couples, instead of a dance of two rows or a square dance. *The contredanse* also been revived in the twentieth century in the United States as the *contra dance*.

Of course before the *danzón* the *contradanza* also evolved into the *Habañera* (that is, a *contradanza* from the capital Havana - and so more elegant and presumably more respectable, as opposed to one from Oriente province - and so closer to the people), which swept Europe in the mid-19th century. The most famous example is undoubtedly the *Habañera* from Bizet's opera *Carmen* - “L'amour est un oiseau rebelle” - actually not originally by Bizet but by the Spanish Basque composer Sebastián de Iradier y Salaverri (Sebastián Yradier) - the composer of the *Habañera* “La Paloma” (written after a visit to Cuba). Bizet mistakenly thought that he was adapting a folksong. The *Habañera* was extraordinarily popular in the 19th century in the Americas and Europe and it was the influence of “La Paloma” in particular that influenced the composers of the great number of *Habañeras* subsequently written and still being written today. There is a *Habañera* in the 16-bar strain of W C Handy's “St Louis Blues”, and the Neapolitan song “O Sole Mio” by Eduardo di Capua, Giovanni Capuro, and Alfredo Mazzucchi is a *habañera* - and its characteristic bass pattern [Ex 1] became the bass of the *milonga* in Argentina and it is now ubiquitous in the Tango.

EXAMPLE 1
HABANERA BASS PATTERN



The *danzón* is less well-known outside the Spanish speaking world than any of the other Cuban dances mentioned so far - most people have never heard of it, and if they heard one would probably think that it was a *tango*. The one *danzón* that is known in Europe and America today is "Social Club Buena Vista" by Israel "Cachao" Lopez, which gave its name to the album and the worldwide phenomenon of the *Buena Vista Social Club* band and CD's which revive earlier Cuban popular music forms.

It's a great pity that it is not better known though, because it is a fantastically rich form, one which has challenged composers to produce their best work. The first piece officially accredited as being a *danzón* is "Las Alturas de Simpson" (Simpson Heights) by Miguel Faildes, written in 1877. Interestingly when it was first performed the dancers were dancing sequences in rows whilst carrying arches and flowers, but by the time it got into the ballrooms of Havana in the early 20th century the dancers were couples, dancing very close as in the tango, the woman carrying a fan. Also, according to Alejo Carpentier, the *danzones* by Faildes are to all intents and purposes identical in form and style to other *contradanzas* of the time, and pieces called *danzón* had already been published, so it does seem as if originally the dances were identical musically, but they differed in what the dancers did - if the dancers danced sequences in rows they were performing a *contradanza*, if they danced as couples they were dancing a *danzón*.

Under the influence of the dance form *son*, a new section was added at the end of the *danzón*, the *montuno* section or *mambo* section, over which musicians would improvise. This was first done in 1910 in "El Bombín de Barretto" by José Urfé. Later in the 1930's & 40's this *mambo* section was developed by the Lopez brothers Israel ("Cachao") and Orestes ("Macho") Lopez, both members of the charanga *Arcaño y sus Maravillas*, in the so-called *danzón de nuevo ritmo*.

The Lopez brothers often made this section very elaborate, always exciting and danceable, with short rhythmic vocal *coro* sections, punchy violin motifs (*guajeos*), sometimes new melodic material, and exciting flute and piano solos, the flute always playing in the highest register (often as high as f^3 , which is the highest possible note on the western concert flute) which makes the flute sound as if it might be a piccolo. (It is now mandatory for Cuban flute players to be able to play with complete facility in this super register, and even today it is not uncommon for bands with a virtuoso flute player to have one new *danzón* on a modern CD, even though the rest of the featured music is in salsa or timba style. Actually a search of YouTube will show you that flute players have almost pop-star status in Cuba and the Latin American world.)

Eventually two things happened to the last section of the *danzón*. The section became a new dance form in its own right - actually two new dance forms - the *mambo* and the *cha-cha-chá*. Both of these forms swept the western world in the 1950's, and the *mambo* evolved (through its close connection with *son*) into the music which is now known as *salsa*. Part of the appeal of the *danzón* is in the way it fuses European and African musical elements in a way that leaves their origins clear. For instance the *danzón* section is clearly European, with the flute, strings and piano to the fore and sounding very much like a small chamber ensemble, or like a palm court orchestra. And the *mambo* or *cha* section is clearly more African inspired, with the congas joining the rhythm section and the emphasis on rhythm and punchy string *guajeos*.

Even though *danzones* are no longer danced in night clubs, the *danzón* form itself is alive because of the high regard in which it is held by musicians. *Danzones* worth checking out are the classics *La Angoa* by Felix Reina & Carlos Reyes, *Almendra* by Abelardo Valdés, *El Progreso* by Israel ("Cachao") Lopez, and the recent (though in traditional style) *Danzón Barroco* by Orlando "Maraca" Valle. *Cafecito* feature in their repertoire *La Angoa*, and two new *danzón* influenced pieces by Janet Sherbourne - *El Gato Que Tiene Hambre* and *Bolero-Cha*, the scores of both of which can be downloaded for free from the *Cafecito* website www.cafecito.co.uk/freescores.html

A musical analysis of a *danzón* - *La Angoa*.

To understand the musical aspects of the *danzón* it is worth spending some time analysing one. In this article I am using the version recorded by **Cafecito** which you can hear here on the **Cafecito** website (it is available as a link from the online version of this article), and which is itself a reconstruction of the version on the Ethnic Folkways CD FW04066 *The Cuban Danzón: Its Ancestors and Descendents* by *La Orquesta Folklórica Nacional Cubana*. The musical examples are transcribed from this recording by our **Cafecito's** flute player Jan Steele, though there is also a short score of the full composition in *The Latin Real Book* by Rebeca Mauleón-Santana and Larry Dunlap (Sher Music 1997). The letter scheme used below is the same as in *The Latin Real Book* version.

The instrumentation in the **Cafecito** version of *La Angoa* is:

Flute, 2 violins, viola, piano, timbales (*pailas*), guiro, congas (*tumbadoras*), and double bass.

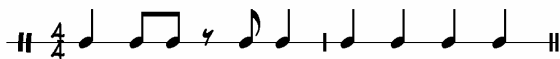
The structure is as follows:-

b. 1 Opening chord on the dominant 7th (E7) a sort of a “call to dance” (as in a Viennese waltz).

Letter A to H - *Danzón* Proper

Letter A, bb. 2-9. Introduction & Paseo (key of A minor) with melody on flute. The *paseo* section of a *danzón* is derived from the *contradanza*, where the man guides the woman to the place where the couple before were dancing. In the *danzón* the dancers choose partners, chat, flirt etc, then start dancing when the first strain of the composition begins, in this case b. 9, letter B. Musically the *paseo* section in *La Angoa* is characterized by 4 bars of the regular percussion pattern of *danzón* called *baquateo*, a two bar pattern played on the *timbales* (*pailas*) and *guiro* and notated thus [Example 2].

EXAMPLE 2
BAQUATEO



The first bar of the *baquateo* has its own name - *cinquillo* (five notes). [Example 3].

EXAMPLE 3
CINQUILLO



This rhythmic pattern is ubiquitous in all Cuban music since the middle of the 19th century, as well as in Tango and in ragtime. It is also worth noting that the *baquateo* is a slightly more complex version of the *son clave* pattern which is the basis of *salsa* [Examples 4].

EXAMPLE 4
BAQUATEO COMPARED WITH SON CLAVE

BAQUATEO



-----CINQUILLO-----

SON CLAVE



Note that the congas don't play at all during the *danzón* section. This is followed by 4 bars where the *timbales* play *paseo*, which is a one bar pattern played on open timbales [Example 5].



In bar 9 the rhythm section breaks on beat 2, followed by a minim (half-note) leading into the main theme (*prima*) where the dancing proper starts. Harmonically this section is characterized by IV, V, I in Am, the Am chord falling on the second bar of the phrase (feminine perfect cadence).

Letter B, b 10. *Prima*.

This theme (in A minor, with a short section in F major) lasts 16 bars, the last two bars (bb 24 - 25) of which feature a unison break which leads to

Letter C, b. 26.

Reprise of the Introduction & *paseo* (letter C, bb 26 - 33). The dancers stop dancing here and return to chatting and flirting, but they are always ready immediately for the *segunda*, which is signalled by a slightly modified break.

Letter D, E & F, bb. 34 - 67. *Segunda*.

Violin theme. The *segunda* traditionally features the strings, and it is always a more romantic, relaxed, lush section after the *prima*, which tends to have rhythm section breaks at the end of sections, and features the flute often in its highest registers. In this case, the *segunda* has its own more complex structure - 8 bars in A minor (starting with an A minor chord in the first bar, which is a strong contrast to the feminine cadence which occurs many times in the *prima*) with a digression to F major, the whole 8 bars repeated and ending in A major, followed by 16 bars in A major with a digression to C# minor, and the last 4 bars leading back to a reprise of the first 8 in A minor. The last two bars of this reprise (bb. 66 - 67) have a break leading to

Letter G, bb. 68 - 75. Reprise of *paseo*.

The last bar of this *paseo* reprise has a unison break (featuring a pattern which is often used as a standard ending in *danzón*) leading to

Mambo

Letter H, bb. 76 - 85. *Mambo*

Here the tempo picks up and the rhythm section are essentially playing a *cha-cha-chá*. The congas (*tumbadoras*) join the other two percussionists. The timbales play a triple *abanico* (fan - as in the fan held by the female dancers, and a characteristic pattern for *timbaleros* in all Cuban music styles) which is a seven-stroke role on beat 2 or 4 ending on a rim-shot on beat 1 or 3 [Example 6].



This dramatic flourish really gets the mambo going and is essentially telling the dancers that there is no going back to the elegant aristocratic *danzón* and that they can let their hair down! The *mambo* features a two bar string riff, or *guajeo*, [Example 7]

EXAMPLE 7
STRINGS QUATEO

Musical score for strings quateo. The top staff is for Violins 1 & 2, and the bottom staff is for Viola. The Violins play a melodic line with eighth notes and triplets. The Viola plays a sustained harmonic line with a long note in the first bar and a half note in the second bar.

over the chords Am, Am⁶, B^ø, E⁷, with standard cha-cha double-bass *tumbao* and piano *montuno*, [Example 8]

EXAMPLE 8
PIANO IN DANZÓN SECTION

Musical score for piano in the danzón section. The top staff shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The bottom staff shows a harmonic line with chords Am, Am⁶, B^ø, and E⁷.

EXAMPLE 7
PIANO IN DANZÓN SECTION

Musical score for piano in the danzón section. The top staff shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The bottom staff shows a harmonic line with chords Am, Am⁶, B^ø, and E⁷.

while the flute has a short melody prefiguring the style of the later improvised solo, the section ending with a unison break lasting 2½ bars, and leading to

Letters I & J, bb. 86 - 117. Piano solo.

The piano solo is one of the characteristic features of the 20th century *danzón*. The strings drop out for the piano solo. Normally solos take place over a two or four bar harmonic structure, as in the flute solo later in this piece, but *La Angoa* is unusual in that after 16 bars of the 2 bar scheme in A minor there is a modulation to C major for 10 bars, before modulating back to A minor and ending with a 2 bar break into

Letter J, bb. 118 and subsequent. Flute solo.

This takes place over the same strings and rhythm section *cha-cha-chá* pattern as at letter H. At the end of the open-ended solo the flute plays the first four bars from the melody in H, which signals the

Codetta to the rest of the musicians, which is a composed phrase with a two bar break with a standard *danzón* ending.

Lastly it is worth noting the differences in the piano playing style between the *danzón* section and the *mambo* section. If you listen to the **Cafecito** recording, you will hear that the piano part is considerably elaborated in the *danzón* section with romantic flourishes and

arabesques. As we perform it the pianist plays from a short score with chord symbols and it is up to her how she chooses to play the part.

References

Much of the information above was gleaned from the following sources, which should be consulted by anyone who wants to know more about this wonderfully rich and varied music.

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Recordings

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We hope you enjoy reading this article and that you find it informative. Please let us know if you have any suggestions to improve it, or suggestions for future articles. We will gradually add more articles about charanga and related music to our website.

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Jan Steele is the flute player in Cafecito, an English charanga ensemble based in Reading and London, and directed by pianist and composer Janet Sherbourne.

Cafecito performs with the following different line-ups

1. As a 6-piece of flute, piano, congas, bongos/guiro, timbales, double-bass.
2. As a 9-piece adding 2 violins and viola
3. As a 7-piece which is the 6-piece plus solo violin.
4. Lead vocalist can be added to any of the above ensembles.

We can also supply any number of specialist dancers who can teach and demonstrate the classic early styles of Cuban dance - danzón, cha-cha-chá, son, mambo etc, as well as giving full performances with the accompaniment of the band.

Cafecito's charanga-style music is very cheerful and danceable, and it is ideal music for concerts, festivals, parties, background music, wedding receptions, corporate events and Cuban and Latin American themed evenings, especially when the intense presence of a full salsa band is not required.

Cafecito can be contacted through its website

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Cafecito also has a sister band - **Jan y su Salsa** - a 9-piece salsa band that can be contacted through the following website

www.jazzandsalsa.co.uk