

Improvisation techniques of the *repique* drum in Uruguayan Candombe drumming *

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Abstract

With its deep African roots, Candombe drumming is one of the most defining features of Uruguayan culture and symbol of the identity of communities of African descent in Montevideo. Its cyclic, *clave*-based rhythm results from the interplay between the patterns of its three drums. The small, high-pitched *chico* drum establishes the pulse by repeating a simple one-beat pattern throughout the whole performance, while the bigger, deep-sounding *piano* drum delineates the timeline with a more varied and ornamented pattern.

The *repique*, the drum with the greatest degree of freedom, introduces an element of syncopation and complexity through a great variety of rhythmic figurations. Although it has a primary pattern or “*repique básico*”, the *repique* is essentially an improviser and its repertoire of patterns is difficult to classify.

This article presents musical transcriptions and analyses of several *repique* solos from both field and studio recordings of notable players belonging to the two most important traditional styles. The purpose is to assess the importance of the primary *repique* pattern and its derived forms in the improvisation, as well as identify patterns not directly related to the “*repique básico*”. Differences among players of different generations and neighbourhoods will also be taken into account.

1 Introduction

1.1 Candombe drumming

With its deep African roots, the Candombe tradition is widely acknowledged as one of the most defining features of Uruguayan popular culture. It has long been adopted by the larger society, but remains a symbol of the identity of communities of African descent in Montevideo [1].

Candombe drumming is the essential component of this tradition, and its most characteristic manifestation is the *llamada de tambores*, a drum-call parade taking place

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specially on weekends and public holidays. On these occasions, groups of drummers meet at specific points of the city to play the drums marching on the street. These groups, called *cuera de tambores*, typically comprise between approximately 20 and 60 players, but during the Carnival parades they may include even more. Historically, this practice was mostly restricted to certain neighbourhoods or *barrios* in Montevideo, each with a distinctive and recognizable style of performing the rhythm. The three most important styles are Cuareim, Ansina and Gaboto, so named after the central streets of their respective neighborhoods [2, 3].

1.2 The drums and their rhythmic patterns

Candombe drumming shares many traits with other drumming styles in the African and Afro-Atlantic music tradition, and its cyclic, *clave*-based rhythm results from the interplay between the patterns of three drums of different size and pitch, called *chico*, *repique* and *piano*. An additional timeline pattern, called *madera* or *clave*, is played by all the drums as an introduction to and preparation for the *llamada* rhythm, establishing the tempo and serving as a mean of temporal organization and synchronization. During the *llamada*, the repiques may also play the *madera* pattern, alternating it with the characteristic *repique* phrases.

Each type of drum has a specific function in the rhythm. The small, high-pitched *chico* drum is the timekeeper, and repeats a simple one-beat pattern throughout the whole performance, establishing the lower levels of the metrical structure: pulse and beat. The bigger, deep-sounding *piano* drum lays the foundation of the rhythm, delineating the timeline with more complex one-cycle patterns that admit countless variations and ornamentations. The *piano* is also an important stylistic marker, being the drum that more clearly reveals the distinct characteristics of the style of each *barrio*.

The *repique*, the drum with the greatest degree of freedom, introduces an element of syncopation and complexity through a great variety of rhythmic figurations. Although it has a primary pattern or *repique básico*, this drum is essentially an improviser and its repertoire of patterns is difficult to classify. Outstanding *repique* players have easily recognizable personal styles, characterized not only by their particular choice of rhythmic patterns, but also by their sound and the way they “swing” the *repique* pattern [4, 6], two very important stylistic markers that are lost in the transcription.

Figure 1 shows, in a very simplified form, the main patterns of the three drums and the basic *clave* or *madera* pattern, as well as the three levels of the metrical structure: pulse, beat and cycle.

2 Analysis of the *repique* drum

It has been proposed that the *repique básico* not only may constitute a significant portion of the performance of a *repique* during the *llamada*, but also that, applying a few simple



Figure 1: Candombe patterns in simplified form.

transformational rules, many of the most characteristic *repique* phrases may be derived from it [4, 5].

During this research, several *repique* solos by notable players were transcribed and analysed, representing the two most important traditional styles, Cuareim and Ansina. The database includes field recordings of large *cuerdas de tambores* playing on the street, as well as studio recordings of smaller groups of three to five drummers [7, 8]. Several aspects of the performance of the *repique* drum were of interest: the proportion of cycles of *madera* pattern in the performance, the importance of the primary *repique* pattern and its derived forms during the improvisation, and the identification of patterns not directly related to the *repique básico*.

All these aspects vary with each player’s personal style, which in turn is conditioned by both the neighborhood and the generation they belong to. But the same performer may also develop a solo with different characteristics when playing in a large *cuerva* than in the context of a small group.

Figure 2 shows the transcription of a solo by Pedro “Perico” Gularte, one of the most outstanding *repique* players of the older generation of the Ansina style, while the solo in figure 3 was performed by Wilson Martirena, a player belonging to the following generation of the Cuareim style. These two players have distinct and recognisable personal styles, and their solos reveal very different approaches to all the elements mentioned above. Both examples are excerpts transcribed from field recordings of *llamadas de tambores* performed by the Ansina and Cuareim groups respectively.

Gularte plays two shorter *repique* phrases (9 and 13 cycles long, respectively), with an interposed section of approximately the same length of *madera* pattern. The *repicado básico* also plays a fundamental role in this solo: the first phrase consists of two ornamented expansions of the primary pattern, while the second phrase is based on closely related patterns that can be explained applying a few transformational rules to the *repicado básico* [5, 4].

$\text{♩} = 136$

repique

4

7

10

13

17

21

25

28

31

34

37

Figure 2: Transcription of a *repique* solo by Pedro Gularte.

Martirena, on the other hand, plays a longer phrase (22 cycles) without interruption. The primary *repique* pattern also plays more limited role in his solo: it is played for no more than two or three cycles at the beginning, the middle (cycles 11 to 13) and at the

end. In the rest of the solo, Martirena plays several patterns not so directly related with the *repicado básico*, including a personal pattern characteristic of his playing (cf. cycles 7 and following).

♩ = 138

repique

The image shows a musical transcription of a *repique* solo by Wilson Martirena. It consists of 21 numbered staves, each representing a measure of music. The notation is written on a five-line staff with a double bar line at the beginning of each measure. The notes are primarily eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. There are various rhythmic patterns, including some with accents (>) and some with rests. The tempo is indicated as ♩ = 138. The word 'repique' is written at the beginning of the first staff.

Figure 3: Transcription of a *repique* solo by Wilson Martirena.

Comparing these two examples, it can be seen that the older player relies mostly in

the more traditional elements of the *repique* (the *madera* pattern and the *repicado básico* with its direct derivatives), while the younger player departs more from these elements.

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