

The piano drum style of Gustavo Oviedo, candombe master drummer*

Luis Jure

Universidad de la República, Uruguay

The purpose of this research is to analyse the piano drum style of Gustavo Adolfo Oviedo Gradín (1953-2021), a leading figure in the community of practitioners of candombe drumming and very influential in the development of the technique of his instrument.

In the studies of traditional musics it is common to focus on the general characteristics of the style, giving more weight to corpus analysis compared to the analysis of the styles of individual performers, who in most cases remain largely anonymous. This research takes a different approach, trying to assess the importance in the community of certain players—in this case, Gustavo Oviedo—and their influence in the development of the tradition.

Uruguayan candombe drumming is a rich tradition with deep African roots, originated in Montevideo and now practiced in the whole country. Its most important and representative manifestation is the “llamada de tambores”: a large group of drummers (typically 20 to 60) marching on the street playing the characteristic Candombe rhythm. Like other drumming traditions of the Afro-Atlantic culture, candombe has a cyclic, timeline-based rhythm, that results from the interaction of the patterns of drums of three different size: “chico”, “repique” and “piano”. The piano drum—the largest of the three—is the most important defining the style of each neighborhood or “barrio”. Some notable players also developed distinctive personal patterns, which influenced other players.

The piano drum actually has two functions: playing the base rhythm aligned with the clave or timeline (“piano base”), and occasional more complex figurations (“piano repicado”), derived from the primary pattern of the repique drum. It is usually a piano drum—typically in the front row—who leads the group during the “llamada”, and for many years Gustavo Oviedo was the undisputed leader of the community of drummers of “barrio” Palermo, center of the style known as Ansina. In the eighties, Oviedo and other outstanding players like Eduardo “Malumba” Giménez were key figures in the evolution of the style of the piano drum of Ansina, introducing new patterns and redefining the role of the piano drum in the rhythm. His influence was acknowledged by noted players in following generations.

The analysis of audiovisual recordings from 1992 reveals the main “base” and “repicado” patterns that were characteristic of the style of Gustavo Oviedo at the peak of his career.

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