

# Latin American Music

*By Oscar Escalada, Composer, Arranger, Choir Conductor and Musicologist*

When you hear talk about Latin American music, immediately you think of lively, rhythmic, joyful and syncopated music. However, it was not always like that. The music of the Americas is the result of a blend of three great cultures: Native, European and African. A unique flavor is given to this music, and a wide range of diverse rhythms and styles are heard in jazz, tango, salsa or bossa nova, although they are all quite different from each other.

Researchers call this blend an “Indiana culture”, due to the incorrect idea that the first Spanish conquerors had found their way to the Indies through the West. After Amerigo Vespucci discovered that it was not the West Indies, as Christopher Columbus had originally thought, but instead a whole “new world”, in 1507 the German geographer Martin Waldseemüller published a map in *Cosmografia Introductio* with the scheme sketched out by Vespucci. He called this new land *the Land of Americo*. However, since all the other continents bore female names, **the Land of Americo** soon became “America”. Thus it is absolutely incorrect to call the United States of America, *America* and its citizens *Americans*. That idea completely ignores all the other American countries from Canada to South America and all the people in those countries. All the other American countries would be delighted if the United States citizens realized this error and gave their country any name of their choice, but not “America”. (See *figure*)



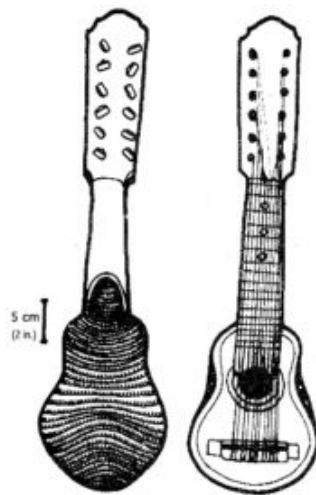
*America in Martin  
Waldseemüller's map*

However, this does not change the origin and development of the Indiana culture that has influenced the music of the Western Hemisphere in many ways.

Briefly, the musical elements that each culture brought to the new world and their strong influences may be described in this way: Europe brought modes and scales, Africa contributed syncopated rhythms and Natives added tritonic [scales of just three notes, spaced like a major chord in the European tradition, but probably based on the overtones of the native wind instruments, and without the harmonic function of a major chord – translator, after consulting the author] and pentatonic scales. Africa brought all kinds of drums, and Europe contributed strings and winds. Natives had just a few string instruments which were mainly monochords and not used for melodic purposes but rather as rhythmic ones, like the Brazilian *berimbau*, and many different kinds of aerophones (see *figure*) and percussion instruments, such as idiophones, were used. The cordophones gradually adapted to the various regions, and thus, on the basis of the *vihuela* (guitar), instruments developed like the *charango* (see *figure*), used in Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina, or the *cuatro* in Venezuela.



*Man playing a  
"quena", an  
aerophone made of  
cane*



*Charango made of  
armadillo*

Indiana culture recognizes two areas of influence: the area of tunes in triple time on the western part of the continent, and the area of music with two beats to the bar on the eastern side of the Americas, as far as they were conquered by the Spaniards. The Spaniards, residing in the two most important cultural centers of Mexico and High Peru, influenced the western area, and the eastern area received its influence

directly from Africa.



*Area of music  
using triple time,  
influenced by  
Spaniards*



*Area of music using  
duple time,  
influenced by  
Africans*

The influence of music in triple time extended to the rural areas from Mexico to Argentina. The similarities in their rhythmic patterns such as superposition and/or juxtaposition

of 3/4 and 6/8 are characteristic of much Latin American music.

The music in duple time, dominant in the east, was, however, more urban, and it is better known in the rest of the world. The influence of black music has been so strong throughout the continent that we can easily say that there is not a single note in the music of the Americas that has not been influenced by black origins.

### **Hanaqpachap**

The first polyphonic composition in the New World that has come down to us is the *Hanaqpachap*. It was published in Cusco, High Peru, in 1631, and preserved by a priest in the town of San Pedro de Andahuailillas (see *figure*), Don Juan de Bocanegra.



*The little chapel of San Pedro de Andahuailillas*

*Hanaqpachap* is a good example of this cultural blend, as it is written in the Renaissance style but in the language of the Incas, Quechua. (See *figure*).

(Click on the image to download the full score)

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled 'Hanaqapachap'. The score is arranged in two columns and four rows. The left column contains parts for Tiple, Tenor, and Baxo, while the right column contains parts for Alto and Baxo. The lyrics are written in Spanish and are: 'Hanaqapachapcullicuini, huaracáta muchalcaqui', 'Yupairurupu coc mallqui, runacuna puyaculini,', and 'Callpannacpaquemicuini, huaciacaita'. The music is written on staves with various notes, rests, and clefs, including a treble clef for the Tiple part and a bass clef for the Baxo parts. The time signature is 3/4.

*Hanaqapachap First composition in several parts written in the New World*

Though the composer is unknown, in my opinion it may have been written by a native student of music, as the piece contains some unorthodox parallels between the parts as well as unprepared dissonances, something which was unusual at the time. (1)

## Music in Argentina

### Folk music

Similar to music in many countries in Latin America, Argentinian music is also split into pieces using duple or triple time. According to the maps shown previously, the western part of the country received the Spanish influence from High Peru in the times of the Viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata. The "Way of Silver" crossed the Viceroyalty from

northwest to southeast, ending in the port of Buenos Aires, in order to cross the Atlantic Ocean on its way to Spain.

The basic rhythm in this area uses the juxtaposition and superposition of 3/4 and 6/8 as shown in the figure below.



Folk rhythms like *chacarera*, *gato*, *zamba*, *cueca*, etc. employ this pattern. They can be played faster or slower depending on each style. *Zamba* is slower than *chacarera*, *gato* or *cueca*. The difference between these songs is based on its form. This needs to be maintained in the case of dances for separate couples that each have specific choreography. One can say that *gato* and *chacarera* have the same rhythm. The difference lies in the form, because of the choreography.

Independent of this use of triple time, we also find duple time, like in the *carnavalito*.

## Tango

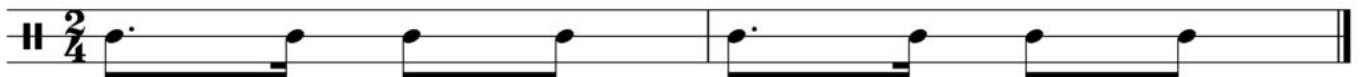
A great and important immigration from particularly Spain and Italy, but also Poland, Germany, Hungary and other nations took place at the end of the 19th century and between WW1 and WW2 in Uruguay and Argentina which had a dramatic influence on *tango*, *candombe* and *milonga*, the three urban rhythms of the region with binary patterns. But the contribution of black music was also of great importance, particularly in the *candombe*. However, the basic pattern of these rhythms also occurs in other musical styles that we find throughout the

Atlantic coast of America, from the Gulf of Mexico to the Rio de la Plata. This pattern has different names, depending on the country in which it was developed: *Habanera* in Cuba, *Maxixe* in Brazil, *Tango* in Argentina, *Candombe* in Uruguay, etc. We even encounter it in the USA in *early blues* and *ragtime* such as the *St. Louis Blues* by W. C. Handy or *Solace* by Scott Joplin.

In each of these regions, the pattern underwent its own special development. As an example, let's investigate the *tango*.

In my opinion the word *tango* has its origin in the Quechuan *tanpu* which means "a place where people meet". The Spaniards changed this word to *tambo* due to the lack of the phonetical group 'np' in Spanish. Later on it became *tango*. (2)

Around 1870 the rhythm of *tango* hardly differed from *habanera*, *candombe* and *milonga*, really only in the one feature that the *Candombe* has an accent on the last eighth note of the bar, and the *milonga* one on each heavy beat.



The *candombe* consolidated itself in Montevideo (Uruguay) and had a different development from the *milonga* which remained popular in the Province of Buenos Aires, even though it was still alive in the urban area of Buenos Aires, where, however, it more or less merged with the *tango*.

Around 1940, under the influence of war and military governments, the *tango* started to be played as a kind of march (\*) and its rhythm was:





Then, around 1960, under the influence of Astor Piazzolla, the rhythm gradually became:



(\*) The violinist and bandoneon (see figure) player Emilio Balcarce (1918-2011), founder of the Buenos Aires Tango School Orchestra, mentioned this in his classes. Maestro Balcarce died at the age of 92 and witnessed the history of this genre.



*Bandoneon*

### **The relationship between classical and popular music**

Classical composers such as Alberto Ginastera, in his ballet *Estancia*, or Carlos Guastavino in his *Indianas* for SATB and

piano (3), or Ariel Ramirez in his *Misa Criolla* (4), as well as many others used folk rhythms as a source of inspiration for their works. Some of these composers made subtle use of them, whilst others took them over unchanged.

On the other hand, tango composers also took over ideas from classical music. For example, Astor Piazzolla used compositional devices like fugues, whereas in “The four seasons of Buenos Aires” he fell back on Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” (5). *Verano Porteño, Otoño Porteño, Invierno Porteño and Primavera Porteña* (6) comprise this suite. This suite consists of the movements *Summer, Autumn, Winter and Spring in Buenos Aires*. In *Invierno* [Winter], Piazzolla offers a kind of homage to Vivaldi by using a characteristic harmonic sequence at the end.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that great poets such as Jorge Luis Borges cooperated in the production of lyrics for *tangos*, thus showing the great importance that Argentines accord to their national music.

### **Some publishers and links focused on Argentines and Latin American Music:**

Latin American Choral Music – [www.latinamericanchoralmusic.org](http://www.latinamericanchoralmusic.org)

Latin American Choral Music Series –

[http://www.kjos.com/sub\\_section.php?division=2&series=109](http://www.kjos.com/sub_section.php?division=2&series=109)

Ediciones GCC – [www.gcc.org.ar](http://www.gcc.org.ar)

Porfiri & Horvath Publishers (Los cantares de América Latina)

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[www.ph-publishers.com](http://www.ph-publishers.com)

Earthsongs – [www.earthsongschoralmusic.com](http://www.earthsongschoralmusic.com)

## Notes

- 1) – Oscar Escalada. *Hanaqpachap, the first published work (and composed?) in the New World*, Research undertaken for the University of La Plata, published in the Choral Journal, downloadable from [www.oescalada.com.ar](http://www.oescalada.com.ar)
- 2) – Oscar Escalada. *Origen de la voz tango*. *ibid.*,
- 3) – Oscar Escalada. *Carlos Guastavino*, *ibid.* Published in the International Choral Bulletin, downloadable from [www.oescalada.com.ar](http://www.oescalada.com.ar)
- 4) – Oscar Escalada. *Misa Criolla*, *ibid.*, published in the Choral Journal
- 5) – Oscar Escalada. *Astor Piazzolla*, *ibid.*
- 6) – The whole suite is published for SATB and piano by Neil A. Kjos, music publisher in San Diego, California.

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