

Los sentimientos del alma: cultural dialogue and the multiple origins of Panamanian *típico*

SAMUEL ROBLES 

Centro de Investigaciones Históricas, Antropológicas y Culturales – AIP, Musicology, Calle 3a y Ave. A, San Felipe – Casco, Antiguo, Panama

E-mail: samuel.robles@icloud.com

Abstract

In this article, I explore the processes of cultural dialogue through which European and Caribbean dances such as the waltz, the pasillo, the polka, and the danzón became tributaries of Panamanian *típico*. These genres, particularly the thriving danzón culture in Panama, contributed in various degrees to the shaping of *típico* as local performers adopted, adapted and reinterpreted rhythms and melodic material from the context of existing musical traditions. Expanding on recent research, I show how this cultural dialogue developed into a platform for innovation from which *típico* emerges as a distinct genre in the mid 20th century, a reinterpretation of the dance repertoire known as danzón–cumbia by composers which I collectively call the Azuero School. I examine how this repertoire and its performance practice became channels for discontinuous cultural dialogue, experimentation and reinterpretation of multiple influences in a context of political and social change in Panama.

Introduction

‘That’s the stroke that binds it all’, says master percussionist Joaquín Chávez as he addresses an audience made up largely of music students, ‘all the band listens for it and they all hang from it’ (Chavez 2017). The stroke Chávez refers to is the second crotchet of the *baqueteo*, a pattern which usually accompanies the verse section, or *canto* of a *típico* song, and which ties *típico* to a rich history of cultural dialogue in the Caribbean. *Típico* is the common term for a popular dance genre in Panama, practised by accordion-led bands called *conjuntos* (González 2015, pp. 22–3, 145).¹ ‘Dancers may not know it’, continues Chávez, ‘but they all hang from that beat, too’ (Chávez 2017). Chávez is one of the most highly regarded *timbaleros* among *típico* performers. He plays with *Los Patrones de la Cumbia*, the *conjunto* led by accordionist Sammy Sandoval and his sister, the singer Sandra, who are among the most on-demand *típico* performers in Panama. Their current place in Panamanian popular music was first studied by ethnomusicologist Edwin

¹ Ethnomusicologist Melissa González addresses the issue of the naming of *típico* in her PhD Dissertation. See González (2015, p. 145f).

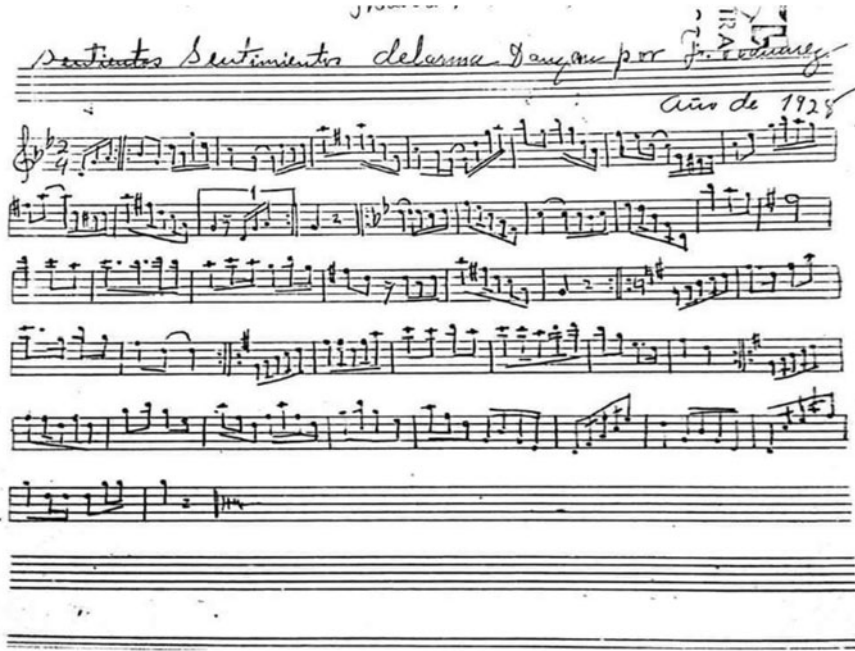


Figure 1. Autograph score for 'Los sentimientos del alma', reproduced with permission (private collection, Ramírez family).

Pitre-Vásquez (2008), whose ground-breaking study on *típico* remains a fruitful reference. *Los Patrones* are known for innovations which seem to break from 'traditional' *típico*, frequently borrowing from other urban Caribbean genres – from *son* to *reggaeton* and much in between. Yet, in spite of their apparent diverse musical influences, the group remains closely connected to a tradition which stems back to a generation of violinist-composers born at the turn of the 20th century who set the bases for what is now regarded as Panamanian 'traditional' music – the term used here to denote a corpus which is widely accepted to be foundational of a 'national' music.² Among the main figures of this generation of creators is Francisco 'Chico Purio' Ramírez (1903–1988), author of several of the most celebrated dance pieces of the Panamanian music repertoire. Arguably the most iconic among them is 'Los sentimientos del alma' ('Feelings of the soul', 1928, see Figure 1),³ a piece which helped to define the *danzón-cumbia* genre. I will propose below that the culture of innovation, adaptation, adoption and reinterpretation of tradition in modern *típico* is strongly linked to the history of Panamanian popular dance music, which is itself the result of a diverse Caribbean cultural dialogue (Matory 2005). I will likewise explore how the Cuban *danzón*, acknowledged by Melissa González (2015) and Sean Bellaviti (2021) as a strong influence on *típico*, was quite popular in Panama

² Sydney Hutchinson discusses the use of terminology by scholars, which sometimes contrasts with that used by practitioners (see Hutchinson 2011). For this essay, we have adhered to the terminology and categories used by musicians and producers.

³ While some sources say 'Los sentimientos del alma' was composed in 1927, an autograph score provided by the composer's family shows 1928 as the composition date. The score is presented in this paper as Figure 1.

from a time before previous researchers have hitherto recognised in scholarship – indeed, evidence shows Panama even exported their own *danzones* to the Caribbean and beyond from the earliest days of recorded music. This exploration will enable us to significantly broaden our understanding of the complex matrix of currents which forged modern *típico* during a time of profound social change in Panama.

I will trace the prehistory of *típico* through the contributions made by the *pasillo-waltz* complex, the Cuban *danzón* and the Panamanian *cumbia* in order to show how these coalesce in the music of Chico Purio and his contemporaries, whom I collectively call the Azuero School. I approach, comment on, and expand the work by musicologists Edwin Pitre-Vásquez (2008), Melissa González (2015) and Sean Bellaviti (2015, 2020a, 2020b, 2021), particularly in regards to the rhythmic aspect of *típico* and the central role of the timbal, through analysis of data from my ethnographic research and study of the recorded repertoire. Foundational literature by Narciso Garay (1930) and Manuel Zárate (1962) and the work of *folkloristas* such as Eráclides Amaya (1997), Juan Antonio Vargas (2003) and Milciades Pinzón (2018) are also addressed as part of my discussion.

The introduction and creolisation of European dances, the thriving *danzón* culture in Panama City since the late 1800s, the advent of radio, the introduction of the accordion, and the acknowledgement of the *danzón-cumbia* as a unifying ‘Panamanian’ musical genre – in spite of a complex reception history (González 2015; Bellaviti 2020a) – contributed to the development of *típico* as a distinct popular music genre, separately from the Colombian *cumbia*. A mixture of mixtures, *típico* is the result of the amalgam of cultural elements coexisting in Panama in the first decades of the 20th century and part of a Caribbean cultural dialogue. While catering to a discreet audience within Panama, accordion-led *típico* is perceived by many locals today as a truly ‘Panamanian’ music, connected to the country’s history and paradigmatic in reference to its traditions. Before I discuss how tributary elements helped to shape modern *típico*, it is important that we first explore how each of these made their way to Panama and the context in which these cultural practices exerted influence on, and were influenced by, established local traditions during a crucial time in Panamanian history.

Panama’s role as a logistical hub in colonial times was reiterated during the California Gold Rush, when numerous travellers crossed the isthmus. This prompted the building of the Panama Railroad, a feat which required foreign labour (McGuinness 2008). Not a half-century later, Ferdinand De Lesseps began his ill-fated attempt to build a canal across Panama, and many more workers arrived from the Antilles, Europe and Asia. Finally, as the French effort subsided, the United States took over the construction of the waterway while Panama declared itself a sovereign nation. It was soon after this time of social-political change and copious immigration that the predecessor of *típico*, the *danzón-cumbia*, developed from an active dialogue among diverse cultures from across the Atlantic, but also between local social circles, through dance and rhythm.

The Panamanian *pasillo*: a unifying dance

The *pasillo*, a creolised Panamanian version of the waltz, contributed in various ways to the development of a modern dance culture which led to the advent of *típico*. Like the also widely popular European waltz, the *pasillo* is a dance that does not require

complex choreographies like other dances, such as the *quadrille*. This allows the *pasillo* to be learned and performed across social circles, which is particularly relevant in an age where social mobility is effervescent in Panama.⁴ Consequently, the *pasillo* brought the richness of harmony and structure of European salon dances to a wider public. While a descendant of the waltz, the *pasillo* retained its own identity and was performed together with waltzes at least through the first decade of the 20th century (Moreno de Arosemena 2004). Sean Bellaviti (2021, pp. 33–5) argues that the sectional nature of the *danzón*, itself influenced by European dances, is most responsible for the structure of the *danzón–cumbia*. However, the fact that the waltz and the *pasillo* – both featuring sectional structures, contrasting sections in related keys and couple dancing – had already become quite popular in Panama City and in the countryside points to an earlier introduction of these features into Panamanian musical consciousness. Furthermore, the *pasillo* culture in Panama is intimately linked to the *danzón–cumbia*, as several of the Azuerense composers and performers known for *danzones–cumbia* also composed *pasillos*, and both forms were played in private house dances in coastal towns of Azuero and in Veraguas (Ramírez, E. 2021, 19 November, personal communication (Purio, Panamá); Ramos, C. 2021, 26 August, personal communication (Santiago, Panama)). I will discuss below the musical ways in which the interchange between European, Caribbean and local elements in the context of the Panamanian cities and towns constructed the platform for the discontinuous cultural dialogue which developed into Panamanian *típico*.

In Panama City, social mobility between classes was frequent in the 19th century and the waltz became a platform for inclusion and participation (White 1868, p. 89). Even though Panamanian urban society remained strongly divided between the elite and the lower classes after the 1821 independence from Spain, military and civil service, as well as successful commercial activity, were common platforms for advancement (Figueroa Navarro 1978). In the hinterland and countryside, the waltz was enjoyed in balls, where it framed local dances such as the *punto*,⁵ but also European ones, like the polka and the *mazurka* (Porras 1882/1944, p. 14). The popularity and cross-cultural performance of the waltz allowed for it to be influenced by rhythms and social practices already established in many cultures in the Caribbean and South America (Riedel 1986; de Jong 2003; Gansemans 2007). Local dances were in turn enriched by the harmonies and formal structure of European waltzes, as is evident from the harmonic structure of the earliest Panamanian *pasillos* on record. The waltz, as attested to by several sources, was practised commonly in Panama even before the *danzón* coalesced into a definitive dance form. Certainly, notwithstanding, other popular sectional dances practised in the 19th century on the

⁴ French diplomat Gaspard Théodore Mollien observed with curiosity that in recently independent Panama City, newly appointed black garrison officers were ‘admitted to society’, and therefore allowed at dances, where they were offered ‘all kinds of respect’, even though the ‘whitest of ladies’ (*les dames les plus blanches*) initially refused to dance with them, only to be obliged to do so by their husbands (Mollien 1825, p. 143). This is one of the earliest first-person accounts of a ball in post-independence Panama where social mobility is reported, if not indeed the earliest. The initial reticence of the ‘whitest of ladies’ is a testament to the tension which permeates during the 19th century in Panama, during which social mobility was a constant (Figueroa Navarro 1978).

⁵ The *punto* is a couple courting dance in compound time which is widely taught and performed by folk dance troupes and also in informal settings in Panama. It is, for instance, danced by newlywed couples as their first dance in country-style weddings.

Isthmus also contributed to the structural development of *danzones–cumbia* – Jenny White mentions, for example, the Czech *redowa* together with the polka and the waltz (White 1868, p. 89) played by a local band in Panama City led by Miguel Iturrado (+1879), a prodigious Panamanian violinist and composer, nicknamed Paganini for his prowess on the instrument (Garay 1915, p. 213). A number of composers of *pasillos* were active in Panama City from the 1860s, including Frenchman Jean Marie Victor Dubarry, Lino Boza from Cuba and Isthmian bandleader José Suárez. Jaime Ingram notes that these musicians, along with those of the following generation, also composed waltzes, polkas and marches (Ingram 2019, pp. 456–7). The *pasillo* developed into a distinct dance form and musical genre toward the end of the 19th century in Panama, Colombia and Ecuador, in a process which parallels that of the Cuban *danzón*. The first known notated *pasillos* in Azuero come from the beginning of the 20th century (albeit only melodies and mostly in manuscript), and also from this period are the first clear written descriptions of balls where the dance is featured.

Celia Moreno de Arosemena recalls an account from a ball held in celebration of the 1907 inauguration of the Governor's Palace in La Villa de Los Santos, at that time the capital of Los Santos province in the Azuero peninsula. National and local authorities were present at the event together with the town's elite. 'The organisers, with anticipation and under the highest zeal, procured the main musicians from the town', writes Moreno de Arosemena (2004, p. 255). The group was formed by two violinists, two guitarists, a flutist, a contrabassist, a triangle player and three drummers.⁶ The ball at La Villa de Los Santos proceeded in customary fashion, with waltzes framing polkas, mazurkas and a *pasillo* 'whose lively notes had a *je ne sais quoi* that filled listeners with joy' (Moreno de Arosemena 2004, p. 256). While the main ball progressed, a second ball was being held in a nearby open-air venue. This alternative event was open to the larger public, specifically those without access to upper class socialisation. There, a more rustic dance music was performed, along with spontaneous *tamborito*. The *tamborito* is a song and dance genre where one or a group of percussionists accompany a lead female singer, called *cantalante*, and a chorus of women who sing in call and response (Robles 2022, pp. 4–5). When the formal ball ended, Moreno says, revellers decided to continue celebrations and moved to the popular dance, where '[t]he party concluded with the first morning light' (Moreno de Arosemena 2004, p. 257). This event, which came to be known as the 'Ball of the hundred lights', is but one example of the degree to which musical cultures from the elite and lower classes coexisted and influenced one another at the turn of the century in Azuero. It also reveals that by 1907 the *pasillo* was already a well-established, respected, distinct dance form, separate from the European waltz.

Below is one of the earliest notated Panamanian *pasillos* from Azuero, 'Recuerdos de Josefa' (1917), composed by flutist and violinist Artemio de Jesús Córdova (1896–1988, see Example 1). The first AB section is in G minor, followed by a contrasting trio which begins in the relative. This sectional structure with modulation can be found in *danzones–cumbia* by both Córdova and later Azuerense musicians such as Francisco Ramírez and Escolástico Cortez. *Pasillo* melodies are often

⁶ Melissa Gonzalez (2015, p. 99), informed by Manuel Zárate, describes a similar ensemble, when discussing the prehistory of *típico*.

Recuerdos de Josefa

A $\text{♩} = 50$ Artemio de Jesús Córdova

Violin

8

15 *To Coda*

B

27

34 *D.C. al Coda*

C ♩ *Trio*

42

48 1. 2.

Example 1. *Recuerdos de Josefa* from an autograph copy by Artemio de Jesús Córdova. Reproduced with permission (private collection, Segistán-Córdova family).

nostalgic like this one, but can also be cheerful and playful as exemplified by the well-known ‘Suspiro de una fea’ (c. 1940) by Vicente Gomez Gudiño.

In a performance of Panamanian *pasillos*, we can hear a rhythmic accompaniment similar to that of the Antillean waltz (Gansemans 2007, p. 442), which effectively generates a two-dotted crotchet pattern, while still preserving a ‘waltzy’ feel of one pulse per bar. Panamanian violinist Luis Casal recorded ‘Recuerdos de Josefa’ using the same instrumentation described by historical records and in a style informed by early recordings such as Panamanian tenor Alcides Briceño’s 1928 *pasillo* performances of ‘Deseos’ (Victor 81933) and ‘Corazón’ (Columbia 3249-X), as well by as extant scores. Casal’s rendition is a useful tool for understanding the rhythmic complexities of the dance, as well as the harmonic structure of the

A. Tambor Corrido
 ♩. c. 76
 slap
 dry
 bass
 R R L R L L

B. Atravesao
 ♩. c. 114
 R L R L R L

Example 2. Panamanian drumming airs in 6/8.

form, which are not quite evident from the melodic score alone. The compound accompaniment is juxtaposed against a melody organised in triple time, creating a polyrhythmic feel which provides a sense of ebb and flow to the music. While the 'feel' is in one, like a waltz, the n E e q pattern generates an agogic accent at the end of the bar, which propels the flow of the music to the next bar – as we will see below, this is a relevant feature of modern *típico* patterns. This isorhythm can also be observed as the underlying base of two of the main drumming airs in Panama, the *tambor corrido* and the *atravesao* (see Example 2). The accompaniment of Panamanian *pasillos* at the beginning of the 20th century frequently involved drums. According to accounts from surviving musicians like those recalled by violinist Simón Saavedra,⁷ a rhythmic pattern similar to the *tambor corrido* mentioned above would have been used to accompany the earliest *pasillos*, as it is today. The same drums and patterns which were used for *cumbias* and *tamboritos* were also used for salon dances and, quite importantly, the same musicians as well (Moreno de Arosemena 2004; Saavedra, S. 2021, 1 July, personal communication (Guararé, Panama); Ramírez 2021, personal communication; Ramos 2021, personal communication).

In the case of Azuero, the percussion accompaniment included single-headed conical drums as in all Panamanian drumming traditions,⁸ as well as a drum of European ancestry with profound implications for the development of modern *típico*: the *caja santeña* ('Los Santos snare drum'). The *caja santeña* is a double-headed membranophone played indirectly on one of its goat or deer drumheads (see Figures 2 and 3). A set of gut snares is affixed against the other head. These snares vibrate against the resonating head in much in the same way as early modern Iberian, Swiss and German military side drums. There are three important differences between the *caja santeña* and other Panamanian double-headed membranophones. First, other *cajas* are played on both heads and have no snares. A second difference is the way in which the heads are fixed: larger *cajas* from Darién or La Chorrera lack rims, the heads being affixed directly to the body of the drum by rope. The *caja santeña*, on the other hand, has wooden rims on both sides which are then tightened

⁷ Mr Simón Saavedra is a retired violinist and guitarist from Guararé. He was the guitar player for Alfredo 'Fello' Escudero for over 30 years, although he started at a very early age as a violinist. His teachers were disciples of Francisco 'Chico Purio' Ramírez, whom he met during his youth.

⁸ Panamanian one-headed conical drums fall under two categories: the singing drums and the rhythm, or 'music' drums. In Azuerense drumming, the former are called *repicadores* and the latter *pujadores*. *Pujar* (literally to push) means to keep the rhythm or groove in traditional music argot; *repicar* refers to improvisatory ornamentation. While drums are made respectively higher and lower, they share roles by taking turns. See Brenes (1963/1999) for a detailed description of all Panamanian drums by region.



Figure 2. *Caja santeña* and *pito*, at the bullfight during the *Mejorana Festival* in *Guararé*, ca. 1960. Photograph: Patronato Festival De La Mejorana.

with rope to fix each skin, in turn tucked with a flesh hoop in order to generate tension. A single rope is used which, after securing the heads and rims, becomes a shoulder carrying strap – this brings us to the third difference, the manner of playing. Larger rimless *cajas* are placed on their sides either on the floor or on a pedestal, and played indirectly with a hand on both heads (like a Dominican *tambora*). The *caja santeña* is carried from the shoulder on the drummer's side; players are then free to walk and perform in the same manner as military drummers. This is a significant difference, since it makes the *caja santeña* a readily portable instrument in contrast with other Panamanian *cajas*, allowing performers of this region to play while walking with carnival *tunas* (Zárate 1962, pp. 89–90) and religious processions, as its military predecessors did alongside marching troops in training and in battle as signalling devices.



Figure 3. *Caja santeña*. The right panel shows the gut snares affixed to the bottom resonant drumhead. Photographs by the author.

Portability meant that *cajeros* from Azuero could then accompany processional music in religious and secular celebrations as much as they did *pasillos*, waltzes, polkas and other salon dances while sitting down indoors. Violinists, likewise, played in formal balls, popular *tamboritos*, *juntas de embarre* (mud-walled house-building celebration, see Figure 4), and in religious services both within the church and in procession. Violinist Manuel José Plicet (1869–1967) is remembered by Moreno de Arosemena as a staple during Sunday service and Feast Days at St Athanasius parish in Los Santos. ‘Manojo,’ as Plicet was affectionally known, would lead the congregation in music as he ‘played the violin and sang at the same time’, but could also be found in secular celebrations both formal and spontaneous (Moreno de Arosemena, 2004, p. 161). Professor and Los Santos Museum director Manuel Moreno (1 July 2021, personal communication, La Villa de Los Santos, Los Santos) recalls listening to ‘Manojo’ Plicet in church as well as during Corpus Christi parades, accompanied by drums – his son, Tobías, became a famous *pasillo* and traditional violin composer and performer. Violinists, like drummers, served as bridges between the salon and the street, generating nuanced connections through melodic design and rhythm. Whether parading with a merry *tuna* during carnival celebrations (Sáez 2008, p. 45), accompanying Corpus Christi dances, or in spontaneous gatherings in Azuero’s characteristic front porches (Moreno 2021, personal communication), violinists and drummers were there, seamlessly bringing together traditions from European salons and churches with creolised drumming and melodic gestures from cultures across the transatlantic circuit.

Even though the *pasillo* is now almost exclusively performed in the contexts of preservation and nostalgia, ramifications from its performance practice and cultural dialogue in Azuero persist. The violin is still regularly used today in Panama

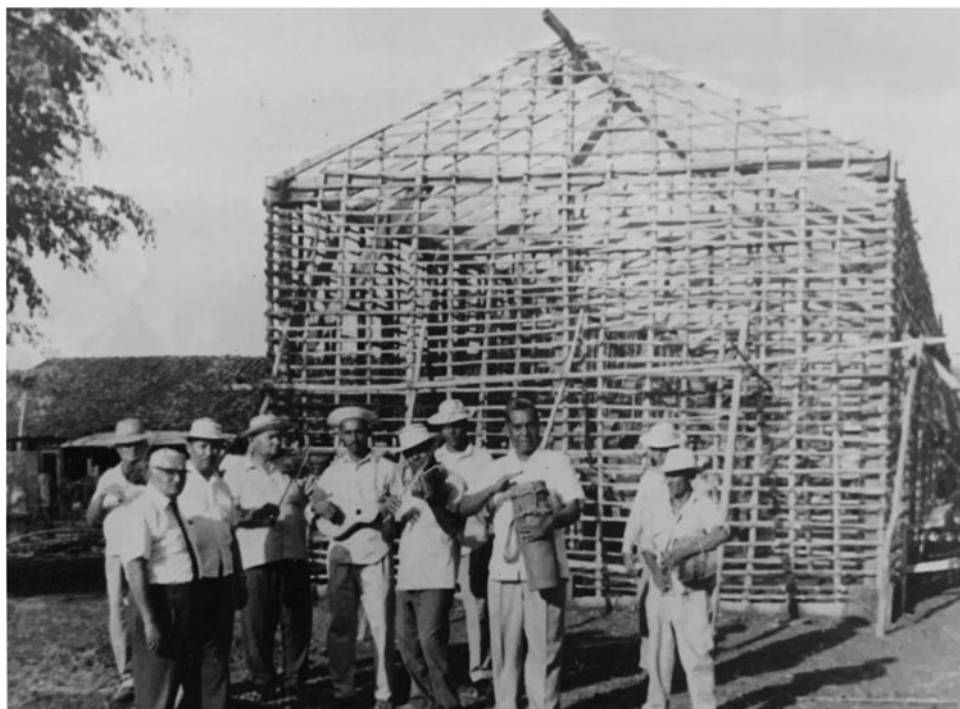


Figure 4. Violinists and drummers during a *Junta de Embarre* in Guararé, ca 1968. Photograph, courtesy of Casa Museo Manuel F. Zárate, Guararé.

alongside drums in religious and secular contexts. They can be heard in *tunas*, at the Parade of the Thousand Polleras (see Figure 5) and the *Desfile de Carretas* at the *Festival de la Mejorana*, for example.⁹ Religious celebrations where the violin and drums are prominent in parade include the *Cristo de Esquipulas* pilgrimage in Antón, the translation of Saint Images in North Coclé and the *Cucuá* ritual-game. Similar violin and drum practices, stationary and on the move, are not uncommon in the region. The '*Paradero del niño*', for instance, is a Venezuelan tradition where musicians, playing violins, mandolin and drums, walk along with the townsfolk in representation of the first steps of the child Christ, celebrated on the days after Christmas (Suniaga 2013, pp. 160–3). The *Violines Caucanos* tradition from Colombia is another remarkable example. As is the case in Panama, these musicians perform on various platforms, becoming themselves participants in an active cultural dialogue and continuous musical development.

The introduction of the waltz, the mazurka, and the polka to Panama in the 19th century, and the subsequent development of the *pasillo*, were indeed quite influential in the formation of the 20th-century musical landscape on the Isthmus. Socially, the dances provided a platform concomitant with the social mobility

⁹ Violins, like voices and accordions, are nowadays amplified in large *tunas* because of the amount of people in an event such as the *Desfile de las Mil Polleras* (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-KK-rDjSL8>). However, when we consider smaller towns, violins were and are still used even without amplification. I have witnessed this practice from an early age in places such as Pedasí, Purio, La Villa de Los Santos, Las Tablas, Penonomé, Ocu and Soná.



Figure 5. Violinist Efraín González performing with drummers in a *tuna* at the Festival de las Mil Polleras, 2020, Las Tablas. Photograph: ACODECO.

throughout this eventful era in Panama. Musically, their popularity contributed structurally, harmonically and rhythmically to the forging of a unique dance music language. The triple/compound rhythms from dances like the *pasillo* became associated with the *tambor corrido* (see above). Duple dances, like those part of the *contradanza*, and later the *danzón*, mingled with the traditional *tambor norte* and the *cumbia* (see Example 3).

It is clear from both the historical record and the musical evidence that the sectional form of the *pasillo* and its own European tributaries had a defining influence in the structure and harmonies of what is now universally acknowledged as traditional Azuerense music. When the Cuban *danzón* became popular in Panama, its similarly sectional structure (Manuel 2009) fit nicely into a cultural interchange already begun in Panama's dance floors, thus becoming a part of the discontinuous cultural

A. Tambor Norte B. Cumbia

♩ c. 72 ♩ c. 88-94

slap
dry
bass

R L L R R L R L R R L R R L L (R) L R L (R) L R L

Example 3. Panamanian drumming airs in binary time. Transcription by the author.

dialogue which evolved into the *danzón–cumbia*, and then into *típico*. While the contribution of the Cuban *danzón* to Panamanian music is significant, a phenomenon discussed by Melissa González (2015) and to a larger degree by Sean Bellaviti (2021), the earlier popularity of the *pasillo* had a profound influence on Panamanian dance customs – musically and socially – and certainly merits our attention. I contend that the aforementioned structural, harmonic and rhythmic traits introduced by the *pasillo* and its European counterparts to Panamanian dance music became the soil in which *danzón* could flourish and itself evolve into a locally forged dance form and music. Furthermore, the *danzón* developed in Panama in parallel with Cuba and Mexico, not merely following them, as I discuss below. In the following sections, I explore how these diverse sources became the tributaries of the *danzón–cumbia* which, in turn, resulted through performance practice in the advent of modern *cumbia popular*, or *música típica*. I do this in tandem with a glance at the notion of legend and myth associated with the origins of *típico* and which so profoundly influence the ‘making’ of the tradition.

A thriving Panamanian *danzón* tradition

Origin stories for the *danzón–cumbia* and tales of how the Caribbean *danzón* found its way to Azuero dance between legend and reality, a phenomenon that becomes quite relevant when approaching the forging or ‘making’ of traditions in Azuereño music through scholarship. According to musician Simón Saavedra, for example, in recalling music lessons by his elders, a group of Puerto Ricans arrived in Los Santos province in the mid 1920s. They settled in the town of Pocrí, 10 kilometres from Purio, the home of Francisco ‘Chico Purio’ Ramírez. The visitors had brought a phonograph and listened to Caribbean music in their hours of leisure to remind them of home. It was not long before townsfolk pointed them toward Ramírez: ‘A man in the next town will play all of that music for you if you pay him’ (Saavedra 2021, personal communication). According to the legend, Ramírez was called in to Pocrí and pretty soon he became a fixture at the foreigners’ parties. ‘He played their music’, Saavedra adds, ‘but lots of it was very similar to the songs he later wrote’. We cannot know for sure which music the expats asked Chico to play, or how he played them, only that the legend seemed important enough to be passed on by music teachers – including Chico himself – to their students, as part of teaching the tradition of performing itself. A large-scale geographical survey was conducted by the United States across Panama from 1916. The 11th Engineers were indeed in the Azuero region in the mid 1920s, and remained there for a number of years, producing maps and detailed records of the terrain and demographics. The survey had the purpose of creating accurate cartography as well as supplying information ahead of the deployment of a defence strategy for the Panama Canal, then under U.S. administration (Young 1925, Wilson 1935). Further inquiry into this survey could potentially support the legend of Chico and the Puerto Ricans, but there is certainly evidence of a large and active US presence in the area in the 1920s.

Myth aside, the Cuban *danzón* was deeply rooted in Panama soon after it became a distinct genre in Cuba. Sean Bellaviti (2021, p. 29), citing Jaime Ingram (2002), points toward a pre-1900 introduction of the *danzón* into urban centres in Panama, possibly through ‘several Cuban musicians’ who were active as bandleaders. We indeed know of waltzes, marches, polkas, *pasodobles* and *pasillos* (though

not *danzones*) written by Cuban émigré Lino Boza, who arrived in Panama in 1880. His nephew, Máximo Arrates Boza, arrived with him at a young age and was active as composer after 1900. Arrates, as discussed below, did leave *danzones* as well as other dances, concert pieces and marches (Ingram 2019, p. 464). Certainly, Arrates played an integral role in the growth of the *danzón*, but his output is post-1900. Cuban influence in Panamanian dance circles, however, probably started before the arrival of the Boza family, and was quickly absorbed by bands such as Iturrado's and Dubarry's. A noteworthy instance of contact with Cuban dance music took place during an 1877 visit by famed Cuban virtuoso violinist José White (1836–1918). His performances probably caused an impact on Panamanian violinists, composers and bandleaders, considering the small population of greater Panama City at the time.¹⁰ White composed concert music as well as a number of dance pieces which are still widely performed today, such as *La Bella Cubana*. He played several shows at the Club Panamá with piano accompaniment (Ingram 2019, p. 458).

The *danzón* culture continued to flourish in Panama, as revealed by archival sources, scores, written accounts and pre-1930 recordings. Documents from the period, although scarce and scattered in various archives, do provide some valuable information. An 1890 proposal to the Municipal Council of Panama City mentions that *danzón* public dances were, at the time of its drafting, the only such events that had been taxed by the city 'at the rate of twenty-five pesos for an entire night' as opposed to *tamboritos*, private dances, *mejoranas*, and serenades, for which the petitioner suggests rates between 50 cents and 2 pesos per event (Arberola, 1890). This is a clear indication that, already before 1900, the *danzón* was firmly entrenched in Panamanian urban consciousness. By the early 1900s, many of the most popular songs in Panama City were *danzones*, including *La reina roja* (1919) by Máximo Arrates Boza (Brunswick 41065-A).

So popular was the *danzón* in Panama already by the 1900s that pieces by Panamanian composers were being exported from the earliest days of commercial recording and performed by famous orchestras of the day, including Ángel María Camacho y Cano's orchestra, the Brunswick house orchestra (*Orquesta Brunswick Antillana*, often led by Camacho y Cano himself), and González Levy's Los Reyes de La Plena. 'Tóqueme el trigémino doctor,' a humorous *danzón* by prolific Panamanian composer Ricardo Fábrega (1905–1973) was recorded by Camacho y Cano (Brunswick 40933), González Levy (Brunswick 40911), and the Orquesta Típica Panameña (Columbia 3708), among others.¹¹ It was one of the first pieces to be broadcast in the Colombian Caribbean coast (Wade 2002, p. 103). 'El duque del Happyland' (Brunswick 41065-B), a popular *danzón* by Panamanian Raymond Rivera (dedicated to the homonymous nightclub where *danzón* orchestras performed near the Panama City railway station) was another of the several Panamanian

¹⁰ The population of Panama City, which included San Felipe and Santa Ana parishes, was as little as 15,000 inhabitants (Jaén Suárez 1998, p. 509).

¹¹ Ricardo Fábrega's fame as songwriter extended throughout Latin America. Many of his *tamboreras*, *mambos*, *danzones* and *boleros* were recorded by artists within Panama and abroad such as Ángel María Camacho y Cano, Bobby Capó ('Rogelio, no me aprietas más'), Dámaso Pérez Prado and Nono Morales ('Guararé'). Panamanian singer Sylvia DeGrasse is perhaps the best-known *tamborera* performer. For a sample of her music and *tamborera* style, see *Cosa Linda*, a compilation album accompanied by Avelino Muñoz's band.

danzones recorded by Camacho y Cano with the Brunswick house orchestra up until 1930, including at least four others by Rivera.

This evidence reveals that Panamanian musicians did actively participate in a cultural dialogue with those from the circum-Caribbean region during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in a process akin to what Hettie Malcomson describes as ‘multiple origins’ at various stages of the prehistory of the *danzón* (Malcomson 2011), and which can be read through the lenses of a permanent discontinuous cultural dialogue (Matory 2005). French- and English-speaking immigrants from the Antilles brought their music with them during the construction of the railroad. The French, and then the US canal efforts provided further opportunities for migrant workers who travelled in large numbers, many of them settling in Panama after work was complete. By the time Antillean immigrants arrived for these events, they already had rich salon dancing traditions of their own (Guilbault 1985; de Jong 2003; Gansemans 2007). After a period of heightened musical activity in the transit zone since the Gold Rush (Castillero Calvo 2010, p. 312; Johnson 1848, p. 76; White 1868, p. 88), local Panamanian musicians were able to have influential careers playing international genres for diverse audiences in Panama. Some became instrumental in bringing Caribbean styles to Panamanian dance halls and schools. Trumpeter and bandleader Simón Urbina from Colón (1889–1974), for example, performed in dance and theatre orchestras in Guadeloupe, New York, Barranquilla and Europe. He received a degree in Composition and Harmony at the International Conservatory of Havana before settling back in Panama in the 1920s where he became an avid music educator (Wade 2002, p. 104; ISMU 2020).

Broadcasting was an important enhancement of the cultural dialogue between Caribbean music and Panamanian musicians. The first Panamanian experiences with the airwaves happened not long after the Panama Canal was completed in 1914. Marvin Alisky reports that the United Fruit Company began broadcasting as early as 1922 in Central America and the Caribbean (Alisky 1954, p. 516; IUAR 1923, p. 290). Some stations were powerful enough that emissions from Havana and San Juan would be heard in México (Alisky 1954, p. 515). One of such broadcasts from Havana was ‘heard over the radio in Panama’ in a 1923 programme which featured Panamanian singer María Teresa Vallarino and her sister Hilda María Vallarino, foreshadowing a series of live concert broadcasts that would begin later that same year from the radio transmitter installed at the US Submarine Base of Coco Solo on the Panamanian Caribbean coast, ‘which may be heard by radio enthusiasts in the Republic of Panama’ (IUAR 1923:290). The radio became a portal through which musicians were instantly communicated with music from the circum-Caribbean region and were deeply influenced by what they heard (Saavedra 2021, personal communication; Ramírez 2021, personal communication).

Considering the evidence at hand, and acknowledging that surely much remains to be uncovered, Cuban *danzón* arrived first in Panama most likely by way of water, informally, and became widely popular rather quickly through live performances in dances and cabarets, broadcast performances and notated music. Traits in the music were adopted and incorporated into practices already entrenched, as discussed in the previous section of this article. The *danzón*, I suggest, had become a part of Panama’s musical landscape – and, one could argue, of Panamanian identity (Robles 2022) – long before the first foreign commercial recordings became well known and during a time when much political and social change was in process. The

popularity of the *danzón*, as shown above and evidenced by sound recordings, archival records, scores, oral tradition and writings such as Narciso Garay's (1930, pp. 28, 194, 201), was already widespread by the 1920s in Panama City and the rest of the Isthmus. It should not be surprising that 'Chico' Ramírez's compositions and those of his contemporaries, which I call the Azuero School (*La escuela de Azuero*), feature a number of distinct style markers from the Cuban *danzón*. In the following sections, I will expand on Sean Bellaviti's observations (Bellaviti 2015, 2021), particularly those dealing with rhythm and performance practice. I propose that these style markers are evidence of a process of influence and re-influence of *danzón* in Azuero, as part of a discontinuous cultural dialogue. I will, through this prism, examine the above-mentioned piece by Ramírez, 'Los sentimientos del alma', which is representative of an ample corpus of compositions by the Azuero School. This repertoire is widely acknowledged by scholars as the basis for the development of *típico* (Pitre Vásquez 2008; González 2015; Bellaviti 2020a, 2021).

The Azuero School and the *danzón*–*cumbia*

The Cuban *danzón*, as well as other hybrid dance genres from the Caribbean, made it to the Isthmus at a time when Panamanians were experiencing the effects of a century of diverse and copious immigration while also struggling to find cohesive elements which could define a 'Panamanian' identity. As the *danzón* arrived in several waves and forms, it continuously found in Panama several bedrocks on which it could be adopted by performers, influenced by local traditions and reinterpreted by composers. It fit into musical practices already established such as sectional structures, harmonic-melodic design and polyrhythmic percussion platforms, as seen above. It also became an integral part of social interaction in light of mobility of both status and place. Cuban music influenced aforementioned Panamanian composer Ricardo Fábrega, who mixed local rhythms with formal and harmonic elements from both the *danzón* and the *son*, producing a type of *tamborito*-infused song style called *tamborera*, reaching international acclaim through performers such as Sylvia DeGrasse (González 2015, p. 297), which then itself influenced Caribbean artists such as Cuban Dámaso Pérez Prado and Puerto Rican Bobby Capó, who recorded Fábrega's music.

In Chico Purio's Azuero, the *danzón* reached a musical culture characterised, as we have seen, by salon dancing, spontaneous *tamborito* performances, popular outdoor dances and colourful religious celebrations – all using the same musicians. While Simón Saavedra adamantly declares that he prefers *pasillos*, he acknowledges that it was the *cumbia* where *danzón* hit the hardest, and then became much more popular in all social circles, a fact that is echoed by Evelio Ramírez, the son of Chico and a dance violinist himself (Saavedra 2021, personal communication; Ramírez 2021, personal communication). The new Cuban dance form *par excellence* became a protagonist within the discontinuous cultural dialogue (Matory 2005) in the heartland of central Panama.

We have seen how non-choreographed couple dances like the waltz and the *pasillo* were popular in Azuero during this time. We have also explored how the music performed at elite functions in Azuero was also played at popular dances, and further how the *tamborito* and the *cumbia* were also enjoyed in oligarchic circles. It was quite natural that the *danzón*–*cumbia* came to be adopted into the



Figure 6. Violinist Evelio 'Vellín' Ramírez, son of Francisco 'Chico Purio' Ramírez, 2021, Purio. Photograph by the author.

couple dance repertoire of both elite and popular dances. Composers of the Azuero School, violinists most of them, performed in all contexts accompanied by guitars, *mejoranas* (a five-string Panamanian chordophone of the lute family)¹² and drums: private homes, outdoor celebrations and religious ceremonies. Chico's fame grew up to the point of legend. Evelio 'Vellín' Ramírez (see Figure 6) recalls his father's stories of the first dances where he performed in Purio. According to 'Vellín', Chico began playing professionally at age 17, at a time when a small town such as Purio would hold four simultaneous dances in private houses for public feast days where *danzones*, *cumbias*, *pasillos* and foxtrot, among others, would be performed. This practice served the dual purpose of dividing the townsfolk into several venues (there were no public venues large enough for all to gather), and also for the practical reason that the single violin-led ensemble would not be heard for too numerous an audience. This meant that at least four violinists performed simultaneously on a single night in separate venues. As Chico's popularity grew, 'Vellín' recounts, couples lined up outside the house where he was performing for a chance to dance even once to his music. 'The older violinists had him play at far-away houses so that people would stay in the centre of town, but they still went to him, no matter how far his venue was' (Ramírez 2021, personal communication). Even though Chico lived in a small coastal town near the southern tip of Azuero, he was indeed connected through phonograph to a wide array of musical influences, 'even classical', reports Evelio, 'he always talked about Beethoven and Paganini' (Ramírez 2021, personal communication). Nowadays, there is a bust of Francisco 'Chico' Ramírez in the main square of Purio, and he is called the 'Father of the *Danzón-Cumbia*' (Carrasco 2015). His popularity began modestly, by playing in small affairs as described by his son, and arguably became quite large when his

¹² For a detailed description of the *mejorana* see Brenes (1963/1999).

Los sentimientos del alma

Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez

Violin $\text{♩} = 88$

Example 4. 'Los sentimientos del alma', as commonly performed.

music began to be recorded by accordion *conjuntos* from the 1940s onward – more on this in the following sections of this article. Perhaps Chico's best-loved composition, and one of the first to be notated, is the aforementioned 'Los sentimientos del alma,' written in 1928 and presented in [Example 4](#).¹³

Many of the traits found in 'Sentimientos' and discussed by Sean Bellaviti (2021) and below can be heard consistently in subsequent *danzón-cumbia* repertoire by Chico and his contemporaries of the Azuero School, among them Clímaco Batista (1907–1978), Manuel José Plicet's son, Tobías (1906–2004), Escolástico Cortez (1904–1976) José Antonio Sáez (1904–1956), Abraham Vergara (1905–1981) and José De La Rosa Cedeño (1903–1998). Ramírez uses two-bar rhythmic blocks for the melody of the first section, composed of closed phrases, where a *cinquillo*-based measure is followed by one without syncopation. Peter Manuel (2009, p. 197) shows how this alternated *cinquillo* pattern appears first in Cuban creolised *contradanzas* and then becomes a fixture of the *danzón* (one can hear it, for example, in the *baqueteo* pattern of the timbal, see [Example 6A](#) below). The alternated *cinquillo* pattern can also be heard in the traditional *caja santeña* accompaniment pattern for *danzones-cumbia* (see [Example 5](#) below). Furthermore, the *cinquillo*

¹³ In his 2008 dissertation, ethnomusicologist Edwin Pitre presents a transcription and analysis of Osvaldo Ayala's 1985 recording of 'Los sentimientos del alma'. Pitre's transcription shows Ayala's transposed version and the lyrics added by Leónidas Cajar (see Pitre-Vásquez 2008, pp. 81–5). Daniel Dorindo Cárdenas has an earlier recording of the piece, without the lyrics, in a single from the late 1950s or early 1960s.

A. 'Canto' section

♩ c. 80



B. 'Rumba' section



Example 5. Rhythms used on the traditional *caja santeña* when accompanying *danzón-cumbia*, in the *canto* or *verso* section (A) and in the *rumba* section (B). X shaped noteheads are played on the rim. Transcription by the author.

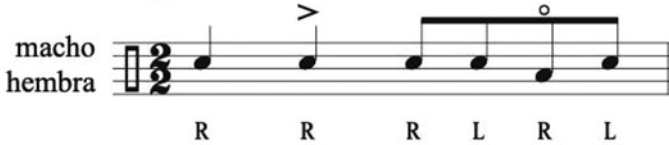
A. Two-bar *danzón* pattern

♩ c. 66



B. One-bar *típico* pattern

♩ c. 90



Example 6. *Baqueteo* patterns in Cuban *danzón* and Panamanian *típico*. The ° symbolises an open stroke. The X noteheads are played on the rim of the drum. Transcription by the author.

appears consistently in cadential figures in 'Los sentimientos' and frequently in Azuero School notated compositions.¹⁴ The contrasting section in the parallel major is yet another link to the Cuban *danzón* and, as discussed above, the *pasillo*-waltz complex earlier. While *danzones-cumbia* do not necessarily modulate in the contrasting section (see table in Bellaviti 2021, p. 34), the character of the music becomes livelier and phrases become shorter and end on the dominant, a trait described by

¹⁴ Ethnomusicologist Sean Bellaviti (2020b, pp. 74–8) notes a similar use of the *cinquillo* in Ramirez's *danzón-cumbia* 'Edicta no me quiere'.

Garay (1930, p. 198). In the case here presented, phrases first shorten to four repeated bars and then a two-bar refrain vamp. This allows for indefinite repetition of these phrases, as indeed they are performed today in popular dances and folkloric representations. Manuel (2009, pp. 198–9) brings attention to this trait in the Cuban *contradanza* repertoire which precedes the *danzón* and the *son*, a trait the author interprets as a potential contributing factor to the later development of the *montuno*.¹⁵ These open-ended sections are discussed by Sean Bellaviti (2021, p. 33), which he calls the ‘open-ended half’ or the *cumbia* portion of a *danzón–cumbia*. In the same way that the open-ended, ‘restless’ shorter phrases lent themselves for indefinite repetition in dance performance in the predecessors of the *danzón*, these shorter phrases often serve modern *típico* performers as improvisational passages to engage in call-and-response or instrumental soloing, much in the same ways as they do in Cuban *son* and even in modern *salsa*.

Chico Purio’s ‘Sentimientos’ is a representative example from a substantial repertoire of *danzones–cumbia* composed by a generation of musicians, violinists most of them. Their birth coincided with the decline of the formal dance era, the construction of the Canal, the separation from Colombia, the consolidation of the Cuban *danzón* and its quick transplant into Panamanian consciousness, and the advent of radio. It is now universally acknowledged that the vast repertoire of *danzón*-infused *cumbia* written by the composers of the Azuero School is the platform for the development of the modern *música típica*. This unique period was the stage for the forging of an early ‘Panamanian’ identity, affected by political change, a quest for sovereignty linked to the United States’ takeover of the Canal enterprise, and the cultural diversity of a people struggling to recognise themselves as a unified nation. A final step in the process of influence and re-influence would be taken later, when the generation following the Azuero School supplanted the violin in favour of the accordion, a phenomenon that has been approached by Panamanian folklorists such as Eráclides Amaya (1997) and José Antonio Vargas (2003), and further discussed by Melissa González (2015) and Sean Bellaviti (2020a, 2020b, 2021).

However problematic the reception of innovations was, performers enthusiastically sought to adopt the ever-increasing influences that arrived to Azuero from the 1940s. A wider array of local radio stations and commercial recordings certainly contributed. More importantly, musicians travelled between Panama City and the countryside, becoming active participants in the cultural dialogue which developed into Panamanian *típico*. The brothers Julián and Antonio Gáez, for example, transported Azuerense music to the capital, as well as foreign styles to the peninsula. Antonio was a member of the National Symphony, but also played formal balls and traditional music (Garay 1930; Charpentier 1975; Gáez, D. 2021, 5 October, personal communication (Las Tablas, Panamá)). Tobías Plicet from La Villa de Los Santos became a respected bandleader and arranger apart from being himself a composer of hundreds of dance pieces. He worked for various radio and television companies, recorded extensively with his *conjunto*, performed for dance troupes and formal balls, and was hugely influential in the efforts for keeping the violin a part of Panamanian musical traditions in spite of the accordion’s commercial conquest of Panamanian popular dance music. These representative examples reveal that,

¹⁵ Musicologist Natalio Galán (1997, pp. 150–67) also explores the origin of the *montuno* as related to the contrasting B section of the *contradanza*.

while the music scene in Panama kept continuously evolving and aware of foreign styles, it also made sure the perceived roots of traditional music remained relevant. Frequently, both sides were practised by a same individual, as is the case with Plicet, but the history of this evolution is still today the subject of critique by folklorists who perceive that changes bring about oblivion. I will address this issue in the context of my discussion on the inclusion of the accordion in the cultural dialogue of *típico* in the following section.

'Gelo' Córdoba: myth, legend, and 'Panamanian' musical identity

Much has been written concerning the introduction of the diatonic accordion to Panama and to its *cumbia*, where it 'replaced' the violin (Zárate 1962; Brenes 1963/1999; Amaya 1997; Vargas 2003; Pinzón 2018). The diatonic accordion found solid ground in other parts of the transatlantic circuit, replacing the violin and other traditionally performed instruments. This is the case of the Colombian Caribbean coast (Gilard 1987a, b; Wade 2000), Cape Verde (Hurley 1997) and the Dominican Republic (Hutchinson 2011), to name just a few. Although research on this topic is far from exhausted, it is plausible that the accordion arrived in Panama late in the mid 1800s, as it was quite popular among sailors of the time. Panamanian ethnomusicologist Gonzalo Brenes mentioned records which show the accordion accompanying *cumbias* and *atravesaos* on the Isthmus as early as the Thousand Days' War (1899–1902), although he did not provide citations. The author further declared that 'musicians from those times affirm that the accordion was used back then in town dances' (Brenes, 1963/1999, p. 331). It was likelier, however, that the few accordions that did make it to Panama in the 19th century were sparse, disseminated through various areas, and used to accompany salon dances and religious music in discreet contexts. Egberto Bermúdez (1996) and Peter Wade (2002) argue this point compellingly in reference to the Caribbean coast of Colombia. The accordion, in any case, did not become a sustained trend in Panamanian *cumbia*, with wide commercial support, until the 1940s.

Several theories will arise when local folklorists and musicians are asked who brought the first accordion to the *cumbia*, or how it was first used, or in which contexts. The matter can become heated, but there is little argument that the accordion is today a strong marker of Azuerense identity. It is only in the 1940s, as mentioned above, that we begin to see an actual 'accordion trend' emerge in Panama. This is when the first commercial recordings are made and when we have the first generation of musicians devoted exclusively and professionally to accordion performance, spearheaded by Rogelio Córdoba. The topic of elite *vs.* popular dances in Azuero and how the accordion made its way from the decks of ships to Los Santos will provide matter for study in coming years as documents continue to surface from personal and institutional archives. In the meantime, and for the purposes of this article, it suffices to say that the accordion made its way to iconic status in Panama from the sea, then upward from the grassroots. Along the way, accordion *cumbia* playing in Azuero became common ground for experimentation, where musical traits coexisted and influenced one another.

Rogelio 'Gelo' Córdoba (1911–1958) fully embodies the Panamanian accordion myth, in a manner similar to the way Francisco 'Pacho' Rada does in Colombia. The story of how and why he came to play music, how he learned the violin and how he

later decided to switch to the diatonic accordion is surely the topic of legend in Azuero. As is the case with 'Chico' Purio and his generation, legend and myth help to fuel at one time the preservation of perceived tradition as much as it does the impetus for evolution of said tradition. This tension is characteristic in the development of a culture of innovation in Azuerense music. Like many of the first professional accordionists, Gelo was originally a violinist, who catered to both *crème* (as Celia Moreno de Arosemena calls the balls of the Azuero elite) and popular dances. He is largely believed to be the first to switch to playing dance music on the diatonic accordion – he was certainly the first to make commercial recordings, for Grabaciones Eléctricas Chacón (GRECHA). Melissa González provides biographical information on 'Gelo', and the reader will find there an ample description of his instrumental role in the transition, and of the influence he exerted as the leader of his *conjunto*, 'Los Plumas Negras' (2015, p. 109ff). Gelo, González tells us, started playing the violin for religious occasions, and soon found a home in the dance circuit of Azuero, which is consistent with the trans-platform trend I discussed in previous sections. Gelo's incursions in public dances coincided with his decision to switch to the accordion. It is not surprising that the repertoire of his first recordings as accordionist included well-known *danzón-cumbia* compositions by Azuero School composers such as Escolástico Cortez's 'Arroz con mango' (Rice with mango). Some pieces were modified in order to accommodate for the lack of chromaticism of the diatonic accordion, a practice observed by Sean Bellaviti (2021).¹⁶ Even though Gelo's version of 'Arroz con mango' lacks some of the violin's idiosyncrasies, the music retains many of the elements I have discussed above concerning 'Los sentimientos del alma', such as closed phrases in the verse sections, the use of the alternated *cinquillo* pattern, and the shortening of phrases in the final section.

Performers like 'Gelo' who first brought the *danzón-cumbia* into popular accordion dances were at first frowned upon. 'Classical' *danzón-cumbia* was increasingly seen by *folkloristas* as a 'pure' Panamanian music, whereas the accordion *conjuntos* which appropriated many of its style markers were disdained by traditionalists (see Zárate, 1962). The music of the *acordeonistas* (accordion players) nonetheless endured thanks to the acceptance of audiences. The commercialisation that followed the first recordings helped to make accordion *conjuntos* widely popular throughout Panama, not only in Azuero. Former violinists who used to play at small dance venues began exploring the repertoire they already knew on the accordion in larger halls and many went on to have successful careers as professional *acordeonistas*. Industrially built accordions were sturdier and cheaper than imported hand-made violins; they were louder, and did not require the constant tuning and care violins did. Accordions were also picked up by microphones more easily than the violin, even if conservative observers like Manuel F. Zárate (1962, p. 150) considered

¹⁶ Matthias Hohner AG began manufacturing harmonicas in 1857, and soon after, diatonic accordions. Originally, one-line diatonic accordions could only play a single key. Beginning in the 1930s, Hohner introduced the 'Club', a two-row diatonic accordion with an added third line with accidentals corresponding to related harmonies of each of the two principal lines. Hohner's three-line model, the Corona, started as a diatonic accordion in three keys, and was later equipped with additional buttons for accidentals at the top of the fingerboard. This 31 button model is the standard today, and is made in several three-key layouts. Before the chromatic buttons were added, Panamanian accordionists adapted previously existing violin pieces to the limited diatonic layout. Diatonic harmonicas are still used to play cumbias in Panama.

heavy amplification ‘of very bad taste’ and incompatible with what he believed to be the elegant essence of the *cumbia*. As radio made it easier for musicians to learn from circum-Caribbean urban styles, the accordion *cumbias* flourished and became gradually more accepted toward the second half of the 20th century.

The generation following ‘Gelo’ Córdoba is responsible for setting the main trends in Panamanian *cumbia*. Lyrics were introduced and *típico* became a genre of songs, as opposed to only dance pieces – even older pieces such as ‘Los sentimientos’ were given lyrics when recorded by modern *conjuntos*.¹⁷ Roberto ‘Papi’ Brandao (1940–2017) was the first to play dances while standing up, thus creating the figure of a ‘frontman’ for *conjuntos* and consolidating the accordionist’s role as band-leader. Another violinist-turned-accordionist, Ceferino Nieto (1937–), introduced the electric bass to his *conjunto*. Dagoberto ‘Yin’ Carrizo (1939–) and Tereso ‘Teresín’ Jaén (1942–2004) pioneered the use of simpler song forms, foreign urban rhythms, and the mixing of *típico* percussion patterns. This is addressed in the following section. Competition and success furthered the culture of innovation, where even the most ‘traditional’ accordionists, such as Alfredo ‘Fello’ Escudero (1946–), are enticed to introduce changes routinely in order to remain relevant. It is during this generation that the music performed by the now established accordion *conjuntos* began to be called *música típica* (see González 2015). When the electric guitar and bass were introduced in the 1960s, players adopted patterns from both the traditional *mejorana* and guitar accompaniments they used for *pasillos*, *contradanzas* and *cumbias* as much as they borrowed figures from Cuban *son*. The resulting *bordoneo* guitar pattern was juxtaposed with syncopated versions of *tresillo* and *cinquillo* patterns in the electric bass, with liberal use of ghost notes and parallel fourths as ornaments. The use of syncopation and anticipation fit well with a percussion section that, as explored below, kept the march forward through de-emphasis of the downbeat and interplay of high and low accents on the off-beats, a relevant rhythmic device which has not been covered by the existing literature, and which serves as a link to the Caribbean multiple origins of *típico*.

The 1940s and the 1950s were the critical time when the burgeoning *típico* became a distinct genre, separate from the ‘classical’ Panamanian *danzón-cumbia*. At the same time, this new urban *cumbia* performed by the first generation of accordion *típico* bands absorbed performance practices from modern Cuban and Mexican *danzón* and *son* orchestras, just as the previous generation had adopted melodic-harmonic traits from the *danzones* they heard through live performance, contact with musicians and the radio. Sean Bellaviti states that one of the major innovations of *típico* performers, the inclusion of the timbales, occurred ‘as early as the 1930s’ and he credits violin *conjuntos* for it, ‘clearly modelled after the percussion section of (...) [La] Sonora Matancera’ (Bellaviti 2021:31). This claim seems problematic when confronted with iconographic, archival and ethnographic evidence. Even after accordions took over the dance music scene in the late 1940s, conical drums and *caja santeña* continued to be used regularly, as shown by photographs and recordings. According to Evelio Ramírez, many early violin performers including his father preferred to play even without drums, only accompanied by guitar and maracas (Ramírez 2021, personal communication). Furthermore, there are no commercial or field recordings to indicate that violinists in Azuero performed with

¹⁷ See note 13.

timbalitos in the thirties. The historical evidence leans toward a more organic introduction of the timbales to Panama when *danzones* became popular, as stated in the previous section of this article.

Compellingly, as mentioned above, we do have previous orchestral *danzón* recordings both from Panamanian performers or by Panamanian composers, which do use full percussion, including timbales. These recordings are from the same period as the very few early cuts of *La Sonora* back when it was called the *Estudiantina Sonora Matancera* (Victor 46225, 46447). *Timbalitos* do not show prominently in these *son* recordings, favouring bongos instead. *La Sonora* became popular abroad only after 1945 when Bienvenido Granda and Daniel Santos began recording with the ensemble, and by that time, timbales had long been introduced to Panama, at least in urban centres. Conversely, Panamanian recordings and composers (who already featured timbales) were so popular that they even influenced notable international artists. Dámaso Pérez Prado, who was the original pianist for the *Sonora*, would later record Fábrega's 'Guararé' in 1962, as leader of his world-famous *mambo* ensemble (RCA Victor 45N-1323B).

Aside from actual live performances, Panamanian *danzones*, *tamboreras* and *son* recordings would have been far more accessible than early *Sonora* recordings both in the large terminal cities and in Azuero. There are indeed a number of originals in local private collections today. The record points toward a more complex and discontinuous process of dialogue in Panama, which occurred in tandem with the development of, for example, *son* in Cuba, not only through the following of a single artist. Timbales, as I discuss in the section below, became a trend in *conjuntos* after the inclusion of the accordion. Pretty soon, the interaction between accordion and timbales became the heartbeat of *típico*. Understanding this history of Caribbean influence, adoption and adaptation is important when considering the multiple origins of *típico* and the subsequent evolution through its modern history.

The timbal: at the heart of *típico*

Most contemporary *típico* musicians, such as Joaquín Chávez mentioned above, acknowledge that the pairing of the accordion and the timbal is central to the identity of the genre. 'The timbal is the heart of *típico*', declares Chávez (2017), in contrast with Manuel F. Zárate's unflattering observations about this instrument and its role almost 60 years prior (1962, p. 61). The timbal was adopted into the *danzón-cumbia* from the late 1940s from local (Panamanian) pan-Caribbean music orchestras as the accordion was becoming a sustained trend in Panamanian *cumbia* performance, as shown by commercial recordings, iconography and testimony from its original practitioners (Patiño, A. 2021, 18 August, personal communication, Santiago, Veraguas). Timbales replaced the *caja santeña* as timekeeper of the 'traditional' ensemble, retaining some of the rim techniques used in the *aires de tambor*, where *danzón* style markers can still be heard today – *cajeros* will perform a paused, cinquillo-infused two-bar pattern for the verse section of a *danzón cumbia*, and a one-bar pattern for the refrain section, which later evolves into the rumba, as discussed below (see [Example 5](#)).

The peculiar timbre of the timbales quickly became one of *típico*'s most distinctive markers. At first, makeshift timbales were cut from gas, paint or milk cylinders in imitation of industrially manufactured ones used by famous Panamanian orchestras called the *Combos Nacionales*, whose performances were immensely influential in

Azuero and on its musicians. This is well remembered by Alberto ‘Fulo’ Patiño, the original *timbalero* for Alberto ‘Pepo’ Barría’s *conjunto*. When called by Pepo in the 1960s to play with him, Fulo Patiño built his *timbales* out of paint cans, since instruments were not readily available. ‘With those can timbales we toured all around the province, even going by boat from Montijo to Arena de Quebro [in western Azuero]’, recalls the musician (Patiño 2021, personal communication). Even in the 1950s, some *conjuntos* still recorded with traditional conical drums and *cajas*. Timbales truly became a trend in Panamanian music alongside the inclusion of the accordion, a trend that Manuel Zárate characterised as alarming: ‘the rhythms played formerly by drums, now come from boxes and cans’, suggesting that in the early 1960s, this was still very much an ongoing transition (Zárate 1962, p. 61). Gradually, however, factory-built timbales, congas, and tumbadoras supplanted all Panamanian percussion in *conjuntos*; the *churuca* remained a binding element to tradition.

Joaquín Chávez, aside from being first call for *típico* recording sessions, is also a much sought after teacher and social media personality. Like most modern players, he identifies two main sections in *típico* songs: *canto* and *rumba*. The *canto* or *verso* section, which is when the song verses are delivered, can be supported by either *baqueteo* or *pasebol* rhythms. The *rumba* section, somewhat equivalent to the *sonéo* of a *salsa* song, has its own rhythmic base. When discussing and teaching the *baqueteo*, Chávez touches on its function as the ‘key’ that holds the band together and also on the history of the rhythm as the ‘grandchild’ of the *danzón* and the *cumbia*. ‘You need to be aware of both function and history before you try to change things’, he explains young musicians when addressing his innovative playing with the Sandovals, ‘it is not enough to just learn the pattern’ (Chávez 2017). The reader may be familiar with the term *baqueteo* as referring to the isorhythm of the first section of a *danzón*, associated with the timbal. The term comes from the use of *baquetas* (drumsticks) instead of bare hands. The wide array of timbres possible through varying strokes and muffling techniques makes *baqueteo* a rich and easily recognisable pattern that cuts through the ensemble. While Cuban orchestras such as *La Sonora Matancera* were influential in Panama as mentioned by Sean Bellaviti, particularly addressing his conversation with Daniel Dorindo Cárdenas (2020a, p. 106), the popular dance music scene in Panama from the late 1800s made it possible for Caribbean trends, including the *timbalitos*, to enter organically through several channels, as I have discussed above. By the 1940s and 1950s, several Panamanian *combos* were busily recording and performing live dance shows featuring music with influences ranging from *son* and calypso to blues and soul (Buckley 2004). It is likelier that the change of percussion and string instruments used in accordion *conjuntos* starting in this critical stage of development is the result of a complex web of influences, mostly through local bands and their performers, rather than only from a single source. It should be noted that the *baqueteo* and *rumba* terminology is a relatively late addition to the *típico* vocabulary. Original timbal performers such as ‘Fulo’ Patiño, although they certainly played the rhythms, did not call them as they are now universally known by practitioners (Patiño 2021, personal communication) (Example 6).

The Baqueteo

The *baqueteo* rhythm of the *típico* is outlined by the timbales. As in the *danzón*, it is simple, but nuanced. My transcriptions of both *danzón* and *típico baqueteos* are presented in Example 6. Although both techniques imply muting one of the drumheads,

they are performed differently. As shown below, the *baqueteo* in *típico* is performed in a peculiar manner, requiring the use of a shorter stick, which performers switch to a standard-sized when playing other sections. One of the most important aspects of the *baqueteo* in Panamanian *típico* is a conspicuous accent on the second crotchet which provides a backbeat that serves as a signal for performers on the first half of the measure. Sean Bellaviti mentions this practice in passing (2020a, p. 143), pointing earlier towards a ‘prominent downbeat feel’ in the pattern (Bellaviti 2020b, p. 182). I contend, however, that the actual lack of a strong downbeat in the *baqueteo* generated by the audible emphasis in the second beat is a key marker of the genre which separates it from other regional *cumbias* and also links it to its Cuban roots as I discuss in this section.

The second-beat accent is also marked by the other percussionists in the *conjunto*, complementing the pattern and creating a polyrhythmic matrix which ties melodic gestures together and liberates dance steps from following beats strictly. This accent is the one referenced by Chávez, cited in the introduction of this article. The fourth crotchet is also accented, but on the low (*hembra*) drum. This beat fits into the fourth position syncopated anticipation of the bass line, following David Temperley’s terminology (2019, 2021). Figure 7 shows a basic timbal *baqueteo* setup in *típico*. Note that the smaller (*macho*) drum is placed on the left, as opposed to the traditional *danzón/son/salsa* setup. *Baqueteo* technique in Panamanian *típico* calls for the use of a third stick which is cut so as to fit *inside* the 13 or 14-inch rim of the *macho* drum, as shown in Figure 7. This shorter stick (used for the *baqueteo* section exclusively) cut to fit by *típico* *timbaleros*, is kept against the drumhead with the left hand, while the right hand holds the full-sized stick with a conventional match grip. Left-hand strokes are consequently performed with the entire stick, rather than the tip. This allows for a distinct set of timbres unique to *típico*, which the player controls through pressure of the left hand, both between stick and head, and also between hand and stick. *Timbaleros* use both the left stick itself and the



Figure 7. Timbal setup for *típico*, with the *macho* drum to the left. Notice the unmatched sticks used for the *típico* *baqueteo* on the left panel. The short stick is meant to fit within the rim of the 14 inch *macho* drum to allow for the left-hand technique, shown on the right panel. Photographs by the author.

	A. Yin Carrizo, 'Lucy' (1980)	B. Ulpiano Vergara, 'Linda Guaniqueña' (1982)	C. Victorio Vergara, 'Desde que llegaste a mí' (1997)
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Example 7. Examples of *baqueteo* variations from three well-known conjuntos. Transcription by the author.

heel of the hand for various degrees of muffling, producing a richness of timbral possibilities for both left- and right-hand strokes. While clearly a descendant of head-muffling from other Caribbean styles, the technique involving a shorter stick in Panamanian *típico* is quite unique.¹⁸ The pattern is played according to each *conjunto*'s style, so that they are acknowledged by musicians and audiences as unique, yet still characteristic of the genre. I have offered examples of *baqueteo* variations from popular songs from three influential *conjuntos* (see Example 7).

The Pasebol

Another pattern commonly used for the *canto* section is the *pasebol*, a term which comes from the contraction of *paseo* and *bolero*. Here, matching sticks are used, and there is no muffling, both hands are free. The timbral vocabulary and dynamic variety is less nuanced than the *baqueteo*'s, but it does add rim shots as a norm (see Example 8). The *pasebol* retains the main qualities discussed above for the *baqueteo*, regardless of tempo: a high accent on the second crotchet (a rim shot in the case of the *pasebol*), and a low accent on the fourth. The accented backbeat of the percussion de-emphasises the downbeat as it occurs in the traditional *aires: corrido, atravesao and norte*.

This helps the flow of the music propel forward, aided by the dynamic role of the *churuca*. The flow is 'circular' as the high and low accents alternate, avoiding a sense of 'arrival' at the downbeat. In spite of the high energy of performance, syncopation, nuanced timbale strokes and the second and fourth position alternation of high/low off-beat accents keep the music's forward pace agile. The curious observer at a *jardín* dance might notice that the most seasoned *típico* dancers do not step on the downbeat – or on any particular beat. They dance very close to one another – or *pegao* (stuck together) as Panamanians would say – and move usually at a faster pace than the music does. Even though beats do not coincide with steps, the flowing nature of both movement and music is undeniable. The absence of a downbeat emphasis

¹⁸ In 2016, I participated in the design of a factory-made short stick which did not require *típico* *timbaleros* to cut them. The design was then released as a custom batch by the Vic Firth Company in Massachusetts, to be sold in Panama. This is the stick is shown in Figure 7 alongside a regular-sized stick.

The image shows three staves of musical notation for the Pasebol pattern. The top staff is for Timbales, the middle for Congas, and the bottom for Churuca. All are in 2/2 time. The Timbales staff has a 'rim shot' (marked with an 'x') on the first beat and a quarter note on the second. The Congas staff has a 'slap' (marked with an 'x') on the first beat, followed by a quarter note on the second and a half note on the third. The Churuca staff has a dotted quarter note on the first beat, followed by a dotted quarter note on the second, and a dotted quarter note on the third.

Example 8. Pasebol pattern. Transcription by the author.

contributes to both the unbound dance step and the perception of flow. To illustrate this point, the reader may compare the *baqueteo* in *típico* to *cumbia* patterns in other regions of the Americas, such as Colombia, where stressed crotchets with the rhythm ! qn qn and heavy downbeats on the bass line ! h qq invite dancers to emphasise downbeat steps.

The Rumba

The *rumba* occurs usually in the final section of a song. It is somewhat analogous to a *soneo* section in Cuban *son* in that a cowbell is introduced, phrases become shorter and vocals employ call and response. Both may have derived from the final section of the Cuban *danzón*'s rondo structure – when *danzones–cumbia* are performed within a *típico* context, the final section of shorter open-ended phrases is almost invariably performed in *rumba*.¹⁹ In the *rumba* section of *típico*, a refrain and new verses are usually sung by the main singer in alternation with accordion iterations of the same melody. Some songs also include accordion improvisations in the *rumba* section. The cowbell is played on each crotchet, but emphasis remains on the backbeats through orchestration (see Example 9). The pattern is also sometimes used for the intro, where music from the later *rumba* refrain is often foreshadowed. As discussed above and shown in Example 5, in traditional *danzón–cumbia* practice, the *caja santeña* will mark this pattern even without the use of a cowbell. The change from a two-bar to a single-bar pattern is a clear manifestation of the agency that the early introduction of *danzón* effected on local Panamanian musicians, whose roots were already firm in local consciousness by the late 1800s. Later adoption of the timbale set – which includes the cowbell – fits quite well in modern *típico* as it does with the Cuban *son*, since the structural elements from both genres stem from the form used by the *danzones* which grandfathered both. It was quite natural for the cowbell to be incorporated in the *rumba* as it appears similarly not only in the *son*, but also in the *cha-cha*, the *mambo* and contemporary salsa.

¹⁹ The reader may listen to Osvaldo Ayala's 1985 and subsequent recordings of 'Los sentimientos del alma', where the open-ended phrases are performed in *rumba* pattern.

The image shows a musical score for three percussion instruments: Timbales, Congas, and Churuca. The music is in 2/2 time. The Timbales part is marked 'cowbell' and features a pattern of quarter notes and rests. The Congas part features a pattern of eighth notes and rests. The Churuca part features a pattern of quarter notes and rests, with accents over the notes.

Example 9. Rumba pattern. Transcription by the author.

A culture of innovators

By nature of its origins, and those of its main tributaries, *típico* is a platform for innovation and change.²⁰ The markers which make a song acknowledged as a *típico* song are usually circumscribed to instrumentation, the percussion patterns seen above, and song structure. First, I will address matters of structure and rhythm. A standard *típico* song will begin with an intro (possibly in *rumba*), then verses will be sung in the *canto* section using either *baqueteo* or *pasebol*, followed by a final refrain and/or instrumental section in *rumba*. In a number of songs, particularly those following the *cumbia-danzón* model set by 'Chico Purio' Ramírez and the Azuero School, there will be a modulation to a related key (as in most earlier *pasillos*). This will often be the parallel, but can also occur from a minor key to the major key one step below. This is the case of 'Penas' (1982), composed by Luis Carlos Cleghorn and recorded by Ulpiano Vergara & Lucho De Sedas. In this song, the G minor *canto* section modulates down to F major and then back to G minor for a *rumba* section with accordion solo. This unlikely downward modulation responds to the layout of the diatonic button accordion, where both these keys are played on the same row. *Danzones-cumbia* such as those by Chico Purio use more frequently the relative or parallel for the contrasting section, as they were originally composed on the violin and influenced by European salon dance harmonies. It is not uncommon to hear contemporary *típico* composers talk about a new song they just finished as using 'los acordes de Chico Purio' (Chico Purio's chord changes), as accordionist-composer Nicolás Aceves Núñez once told me during our lessons. To one in the *típico* milieu this indicates that the song has an A *baqueteo* section followed by a B *baqueteo* section in a related key, and then a final open-ended *rumba*. Núñez could simply begin playing and the band would follow without much effort or rehearsal, as I usually witness musicians do.

Not all *típico* songs follow *danzón-cumbia* structure conventions, though. Many variants in form and combinations of rhythmic devices do occur, and have since the regular adoption of the accordion and the timbales. *Típico* is, undeniably, a culture of innovation, the fruit of a dynamic dialogue. In a culture such as *típico*'s where change and cultural exchange are constant, many artists can fashion themselves 'the first' to

²⁰ For a theoretical approach to genre and style in modern *típico*, see Bellaviti (2015).

introduce a particular aspect of performance, whether or not it evolves into a trend. An early innovator is the aforementioned Teresín Jaén. One strategy that Jaén used in order to distinguish himself from the norm was the use of the *rumba* pattern throughout an entire song, thus omitting the *baqueteo*. This is the case with ‘Amor con papelito’ (‘Love with papers’, c. 1970), in which the audience will hear the cowbell-led pattern for the duration of the song. There is no *baqueteo* rhythm, but there are verses, and there is consequently no switch to a more active, involved section at the end of the *canto*. The whole piece is a *canto* with high-energy *rumba* rhythm. Jaén was considered an eccentric during his time, but he was no stranger to the history and traditions of his art. He started out as a violinist, learning technique and repertoire from his grandfather. Yet, in spite of him being considered an outlier by traditionalists, his innovations made his music quite popular, enough to earn him the nicknames ‘El taquillero’ and ‘El Rey’ (‘The Box-Office hit’, ‘The King’). Dagoberto ‘Yin’ Carrizo, from the same generation as Teresín, is another prominent innovator of *típico*. His 1985 song ‘Los algodones’ (‘The cotton trees’) features a fusion of Dominican *merengue* with *cumbia*. To bring attention to the blend, the song opens with the percussion section playing the *merengue*-infused pattern by themselves, before Carrizo’s accordion and rest of the *conjunto* joins in. Carrizo is unquestionably one of the most iconic performers in Panamanian *típico*, the first to enjoy international success and to have multiple platinum records as *típico* singer, accordionist and bandleader. Armed with knowledge and judicious use of the *baqueteo*, *pasebol* and *rumba*, early innovators as much as contemporary ones find significant ways to remain footed within the defining stylistic trends of *típico*. These are, of course, ever-changing themselves, as newer generations of musicians and audiences continue to reinterpret the music through performance and appreciation.

Not least important is the distinctive instrumentation used by *típico conjuntos* which crystallised through the 1950s and 1960s. This is seldom modified through innovation; the colours of the ensemble and the ways in which players interact with one another help listeners to acknowledge the music as *típico*. Once the ensemble became consolidated at the end of the 1960s – accordion, timbales, congas, *churuca*, electric bass, electric guitar, *cantalante* – it remained a recognisable, stable part of the *típico* identity. The accordion–timbal connection is the most determinant marker of the ensemble, considering that from this partnership flow the melodic gestures, the harmony and the isorhythmic structure which holds all the other elements and instruments together. A German instrument with Chinese ancestry paired with an afro-Cuban instrument which, in turn, replaced a Spanish drum of military provenance, came together in a music with complex, diverse roots from all across the transatlantic trade circuit.

‘El gusto’

When a *conjunto* performs with a natural, almost instinctive understanding of the *baqueteo*, the *pasebol*, and the *rumba*, and of the subtleties of the interaction between polyrhythm and melody, locals say they found ‘el gusto’, or ‘the groove’. As Joaquín Chávez points out, ‘you cannot play it if you cannot *feel* it’ (2017). The dancers can feel it and it propels them across the *jardín* floor. Musicians feel it and they are instantly connected to a musical tradition which, although recently consolidated, has older roots – and ‘routes’, to borrow from Malcomson’s title (2011). Of

course, Chávez is not referring to a sensorial tactile experience, but to the feelings attributed to the realm of the spiritual, like Chico Purio's 'Sentimientos del alma' that one cannot verbalise without taking shelter in metaphor and rhetoric, or in the eloquence of a textless melody.

Conclusions

Panamanian popular dance *cumbia*, or *típico*, and its main predecessor, the *danzón-cumbia*, are the dynamic result of mutually influential discontinuous dialogue (Matory 2005) between cultural-musical elements from all across the transatlantic trade network. These affluent elements themselves were subject to the same influence/re-influence processes, making the origins of *típico* diverse and rich, as evidenced by its rhythmic design, harmony, and structure. As diverse as its tributaries are the channels through which the contributing elements of *típico* made their way to Panama. Trade, religion and large construction projects all provided ample opportunities for cultural exchange and were rich platforms for cultural dialogue, long before popular Caribbean orchestras of the recording era. The Caribbean *cumbia*, salon dances both directly from Europe and in various stages of circum-Caribbean creolisation, Roman Catholic processional traditions, Panamanian *tamborito* and the Cuban *danzón*, among other contributing elements, coalesced on the Isthmus during a unique period of social change. So popular was the *danzón* in Panama that Panamanian composers such as Raymond Rivera and Ricardo Fábrega exported *danzones* from Panama which were recorded, performed and broadcast extensively abroad by acclaimed performers such as Dámaso Pérez Prado and Ángel María Camacho y Cano. This is clear evidence of a true cultural dialogue with agency by Panamanian musicians.

Panama's separation from Colombia in 1903, together with the United States' takeover of the Canal construction at the beginning of the 20th century and the problematic struggle for sovereignty which followed, posed the question of how 'Panamanian' identity should be defined, prompting Panamanians to forge cohesive symbols of belonging – *típico* emerged out of the *danzón-cumbia* milieu in Azuero as part of this search for 'Panamanian' symbols which became themselves problematic in their reception by traditionalists. Radio and industrialisation also played a key role in facilitating the influence of Caribbean urban genres and styles, as well as the instruments musicians played. Panamanian *típico* embodies the archetypal 'plurality' of the country's 20th-century emerging identity. It is acknowledged today by most Panamanians as an element which symbolises the multiple origins of Panama's diverse population. Panamanian *típico* is a powerful symbol which continues to shape a contemporary 'Panamanian' identity as its musical elements are reproduced, learned and re-interpreted by musicians, audiences and scholars.

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