Stringed Instruments of Latin America
by
William Cumpiano

Notwithstanding its great size and population, only a handful of different kinds of fretted instruments have evolved in the United States. A list of truly native or emblematic ones comprises just four members: the flattop steel-string guitar, the archtop jazz guitar, the electric guitar and the banjo.

But a list of the distinctive fretted instruments of Cuba or even tiny Puerto Rico would be just as large. A list of Colombian or Venezuelan instruments would be larger. Indeed, a list of different, uniquely Mexican or Brazilian fretted instruments would be far larger, comprising over a dozen unique members each. Depending on our criteria, a census of distinctive native fretted instruments of Latin America could total as many as a hundred.

GIVEN THAT STRINGED INSTRUMENTS are essentially cultural artifacts, one could offer several reasons for this disparity: the equalizing force of a more advanced mass media in the United States has increased the conformity of cultural tastes and thus reduced the diversity of its cultural manifestations including its instruments; the greater difficulty of travel in third-world countries created population groups more isolated from one another, a factor which may have fostered a greater diversity of localized cultural expressions. I could even suggest that the disparity may be fundamentally grounded in the different ways English Protestants and Spanish Catholics observe their religions! Some or all of these may be the cause, or perhaps none. Be it as it may, a survey of the way fretted instruments spread across Latin America may suggest some of the reasons behind this astounding diversity.

The "new world" that Columbus discovered when his galleons first alighted on the beaches of what today is the island of Santo Domingo (comprised of Haiti and the Dominican Republic) was as ancient as his own. Ten thousand years earlier the world that discovered him was populated by Asian tribes whose descendants still live side by side with modern-day inhabitants of the Americas — Native Americans as diverse as the Inuit and the Iroquois of North America; the Mayans of Central America; the Yanomami and Inca descendants of South America; and the Carib and Tainos of the Caribbean.

This great clash of cultures was typified not only by bloody and convulsive struggles between religions and social systems, but also by the fusion of far more humane and aesthetic expressions of the heart and mind: ones related to music and the tools for making music.

The ancient worlds that confronted each other when Columbus set foot on that sandy beach five hundred years ago shared the same primeval rationale for creating music: accompanying and inspiring the worship of their gods; celebrating the endings of bountiful harvests; marking the important happenings, the daily pains and joys of common folk as well of the deeds of great heroes.

Inhabitants of the world that Europeans found and

thought of as "new" accomplished this all with the help of a variety of instruments, most of which mimicked the sounds they heard in nature: instruments that sounded like birds, rushing water, the rattles of snakes, the groaning and knocking together of the tall, spindly bamboos swaying in the wind, or the whistling sound of broken reeds and grunting animals in the swamp.

But many of the ancient inhabitants of the Americas were also charmed by the twang of the stretched strings of their hunting bows. They learned to modulate their bows' pitch by flexing them and eventually to increase their sonority by coupling them to their cheek or to dried, hollow gourds — the earliest sound boxes. Indeed, these earliest of all stringed instruments still survive in modern Brazilian and Paraguayan music in the form of the *berimbau* and the *gualambau*. There are apocryphal tales of other Native American stringed instruments, too, but no surviving evidence of any.

MONTHS BEFORE HE ARRIVED on that Caribbean beach, Columbus disembarked from a port belonging to a world that had been a province of the Moorish Caliphate for almost a thousand years. In fact, in the very year that Columbus left the port of Cadiz in Southern Spain, the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella had succeeded in creating the Spanish nation after uniting the Iberian tribes and casting off the Moorish colonizers. But where the Iberian tribes were composed largely of crude and unsophisticated folk, the Islamic invaders that had ruled their land for sixty generations brought to Spain the fruits of one of the greatest civilizations in the history of the world—the creators of not only mathematics and the most advanced architecture, literature, philosophy and music of their time—but also of the precursors of both the plucked and bowed instruments that we use today.

The ancient Moors, themselves the descendants of the ancient tribes of Persia (modern-day Iran) and Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) were inhabitants of North Africa. Thus the African continent, particularly the regions bordering its western coast, had known by Columbus' time great civilizations, rich in music, art and civic structures, cultures deeply influenced through trade and politics with the Moors.

Thus the hapless West Africans brought in chains to the Americas — far from being the ignorant, muttering savages in loin cloths banging on jungle drums that we saw as kids in old Tarzan movies — brought with them the collective cultural memory of marvelously elaborate expressions of rhythm, song, and musical craft of their own civilizations. For centuries, West African music was created with the help of not only skin and log drums, but also a multitude of plucked and picked string instruments derived from the ancient Islamic cultures: harp-like instruments and instruments much like our own guitars, but with stretched skin soundboards like the *ngoni* and *banya*, instruments the enslaved West African would develop later here as the banjo. Banjo-like instruments would also appear across the Caribbean, Central and South America as well, each modified in distinctive ways by the unique cultural perspectives of the different peoples and places in which they appear.

The Catholic kings decreed that the colonizers had to spread the gospels to the native inhabitants. This was crucial

to the spread of stringed instruments all over the Latin American colonies. The tools the Spanish used to proselytize their creed were not only crucifixes and rosary beads, but stringed instruments as well. So it is certain and has been amply documented that significant numbers of Spanish string instruments were brought to the Spanish colonies from their beginnings. Priests brought them, as did Spanish sailors, soldiers, bureaucrats and later, even settlers from other Spanish colonies such as the Canary Islands.

BUT WHICH INSTRUMENTS came, and how specifically would they evolve in the "new" world?

Spanish musicologists divide the universe of their traditional fretted instruments into two major families: instrumentos de pulso ("wrist" instruments) and instrumentos de pua ("pick" instruments), that is, the family of instruments played with the bare hand and the family of those played with a pick or plectrum. At first the difference seems miniscule, but in fact, it is quite significant. The patriarchs of these two families both derive from the ancient Moorish lute-like instruments the invaders brought to Spain. They are the *vihuela de mano* and *vihuela de peñola* (mano=hand; peñola is an archaic term for pick).

Centuries later, the pulso family gave birth to the Spanish guitar of modern times. Characteristically, members of this family had the familiar hourglass soundbox shape, a flat back and predominantly low-tension strings made from animal guts.

In ancient Spain, a family of Moorish instruments with bowl-shaped backs coexisted with these other guitar-like instruments, as they did in other parts of Europe. These went on to become the great Baroque and Renaissance lutes of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. By decree, the bowl-backed instruments were banned by the Spanish monarchs because they represented and reminded them of the invaders. Only the flat-backed instruments were allowed to remain. Thus, bowl-backed instruments have been virtually nonexistent in the Spanish colonies of the Americas. One faint remnant of the ancient Moorish influence, however, is preserved in the name of the Moorish lute: its name. The laud, a word which translates directly from the Moorish as "lute", was a name given to the many bowl-backed instruments of Moorish descent (the term la-ud, or "the wood," distinguished Moorish wooden-top from skin-topped instruments). The term still remains for the Spanish Laud, which lost its bowl-back by decree and which evolved through the subsequent centuries. It is played all over Spain to this day, and its descendants in the New World are common throughout Cuba (almost without any perceptible change) and Puerto Rico (morphing into today's Puerto Rican *cuatro*).

Some chirangoes of the Altiplano, made from the native armadillo, or quirquincho.

The Chilean guitarron.

From the earliest times, members of the guitar family evolved for playing multi-voiced (polyphonic) music as a solo instrument that was either punteado, plucked with the bare fingers, or rasgueado, strummed with the bare hand, for accompanying a singer or a troupe. More often than not, instruments of the guitar family have an open tuning that includes a dropped interval, such as the on the third string of our modern guitar. Chords are often easier to manage with when the strings are configured in this way.

In the 1500s the great Spanish bard Cervantes, in a chronicle of daily life in his times, described seeing a great variety of guitars throughout the villages of Spain: tiny ones called *tiples* and *guitarrillos*; somewhat larger ones known as *requintos*; full-sized *guitarras* and even larger *vihuelas*; and far larger ones called *guitarrones* and *bajos de uña*. Each had their place and voice in the different groupings of their day. Some like the vihuela were reserved for the upper classes of Spanish society, while the smallest tiples were most often seen in the hands of the lowest.

The other family, no less important in Spain than the first, comprises its picked instruments (we can call them the *bandurria* family because the oldest and most popular was the small, picked bandurria). Members of this family had their own characteristic shape and musical use. Although flat-backed like the guitars, they had a characteristic pear-like soundbox outline or a modifi-

cation of the same that featured two projections or protuberances near the neck. Some musicologists call this the "pyramidal-semicircular" shape because the sound box, viewed head-on, is round on the bottom and projects outwards on top like the two apexes of an upside-down pyramid.

Both pearlike and pyramidal-semicircular forms survive all over Latin America today — alongside large and small hourglass-shaped, guitarlike instruments — betraying which of the two Spanish string instrument families they hailed from.

SURVIVING SHIPPING MANIFESTS preserved from the old Spanish galleons include numerous listings of guitars and vihuelas that were brought to the colonies, including their monetary value and the names of their owners. Listings of bandurria family instruments, however, are exceedingly hard to find — perhaps because their value was too low to matter or perhaps because of class differences: they never made it into the ship's holds because the lowly sailors carried them back and forth in their backpacks to while away the months on their ocean voyages. We are certain that indeed they came because there are so many descendants of the ancient Spanish bandurrias in virtually every country in Latin America today, usually tuned in similar ways.

Latin American descendants of the bandurria family, like the descendants of the guitar family, retained their forebears' musical usage through the centuries as well. Members of the bandurria family were notably melody-playing instruments heard played in concert with other instruments played accompaniment to them, as later did their New World descendants. They often played the melody part in traditional string bands such as rondallas, trullas, tunas and orquestas jibaras.

Although the early Spanish guitars were lightly built for low-tension gut strings, early bandurria family instruments had either gut or metal strings. Since the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, Spanish picked instruments acquired doubled-up metal-stringed courses, like our mandolins and twelve strings have today. On the other hand, gut, and later nylon, strings endured on guitar-family instruments — with some notable exceptions, which we will discuss below.

SO SINCE ANCIENT TIMES in Latin America, guitar-shaped instruments were strummed, used solo or as rhythm or accompaniment instruments in groups and carried gut strings, as their Spanish forebears did; and pear-shaped instruments based on the early bandurrias were played with a pick; were more or less pear-shaped, and were strictly melody-players in groups as their Spanish forebears were. These similarities to the colonizer's culture continue as predominant features across the modern-day Latin American musical scene.

The Columbian tiple — four courses of three strings each. Made by the author.

Yet an interesting historical occurrence at the turn of the twentieth century fuzzes up the clear parallels within these two families. It was this period when a remarkable musical craze swept across both the United States and Latin America. During this period a flock of mandolin orchestras from Italy and bandurria orchestras from Spain toured across North America and Latin America, playing a repertory of light classical and popular tunes. As these traveled across the continents they left behind an enduring legacy and a lasting fascination for wire stringed instruments of varying sizes.

The cultural impact of this wave was the proliferation of native wire-stringed instruments of similar shape and varying sizes all over Latin America, and even the crossing-over of doubled-up steel strings onto instruments that were traditionally singly gut-strung. Evidence of this crossover is the Mexican twelve-string *Bajo Sexto*, a large guitar featuring six doubled-up metal courses; the twelve-string, guitar-shaped Colombian Tiple, a small guitar featuring four triple-string metal courses; and the ten-string Puerto Rican cuatro, featuring five double-string metal courses. The forebears of these instruments had been strung with gut from the earliest times. Much like our familiar Martin and Guild twelve-strings, they survive as predominantly picked and strummed doubled-up metal stringed guitars.

THE CRAFT ASPECTS of Latin American stringed instruments point to an interesting social class phenomenon. For centuries, the manufacture of the instruments made for the elites and the bourgeoisie was overseen by the ancient crafts societies known as the Guilds. The Guild system propelled a refinement of the musical crafts to the greatest heights ever known. It embodied an ancient tradition of rigorous training and of strict standards that caused a flowering of the decorative arts for hundreds of years, up until the system faded with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. The highest technological advancements of the times were utilized: treadle-powered machinery like bandsaws and drills were introduced, and edge tools and handsaws of the best steel available were utilized. The finest exotic hardwoods were imported from around the world.

The strings themselves were the product of highly specialized guilds, originally an offshoot of the nautical cordiers or rope-makers. The ability to create strings of unsurpassed uniformity — the principle requirement for the most musical-sounding strings — was their stock in trade, and a set of strings alone could cost more than several instruments.

The Guilds were closed shops, that is, you could only be born into them or, at best, be invited in by existing members. If your standards flagged or your work turned too far afield you could be punished. Penalties for displeasing the Guild masters included banishment from the profession, banishment from the region, and even incarceration.

Guild craftsmen developed the technique of sawing plates thinly and planning them accurately so that they could be curved with judiciously-applied heat and moisture, into light, resonant, fancifully-shaped soundboxes. Instruments made this way produced

A Venezuelan cuatro

velvety-smooth, sustaining notes that were appropriate for the refined parlors and drawing rooms of the day. Often laden with semi-precious stones and other rare inlay materials, they served as presents to state officials from status-climbers or gifts of state between noblemen and kings.

Because of their cost, instruments produced by the Guilds were largely unavailable to the common folk. Folk musicians could only turn to their local woodworkers, rustic but resourceful craftsmen who could bring to the task only planks of local woods and a sparse kit of tools that included little more than knives and hatchets, scrapers, hammers, and awls. Country folk in the Spanish colonies made what they called *enterizo* or "whole" instruments, which consisted of a headstock, neckshaft, heel, sides and back hewn to shape from a single, continuous block of hardwood. A soundboard was then chopped and scraped from a plate of softwood, often with the bridge carved out as an integral bump on top. This would keep it from flying off: the glues used by folk craftsmen were unpredictable concoctions made from animal and vegetable materials at hand. Indeed, soundboards were often secured with tiny nails or short lengths of cactus spines tapped in around the perimeter to keep them from pulling up under string tension.

The result of this unique acoustical architecture, when coupled with multiple metal strings is a loud, piercing tone, ideal for outdoor festivities and community chants. The enterizo method of making musical instruments

was transferred to many of the members of the picked-instrument family that evolved in Latin America, notably to folk instruments made in Mexico, Panama and Puerto Rico.

SINCE ANCIENT TIMES the development of mainstream popular music in the various Spanish colonies in Latin America has followed a similar pattern. The colonists arrive during the 16th century, bringing their music and instruments with them. A new gene pool is created, in the form of a community of native-born inhabitants who consist of an amalgam of the Spanish and the aboriginal natives; or the Spanish and enslaved Africans; or a mixture of all three. These are the origins, for example, of the guajiro class in Cuba and the jíbaro class in Puerto Rico. These are the cultural archetypes of the populations of each modern Latin American nation. Typically, the stringed instruments of the colonizers become models for the native craftsmen, who make replicas relying on only locally available resources, so in each case novel and distinctive instrument forms arise. In most cases, the crop of native instruments retain the tunings and playing modalities of their colonial models.

Over the centuries, these mixed-blood native populations, largely rural and agricultural in nature, create a treasury of musical folklore in their owns lands, their music becoming an important tool of social cohesion, even of survival. Cities arose in Latin America during the 18th century. In the 19th century, a form of bourgeois European entertainment known as figure dancing (the Minuet, the Polka, the Mazurca, the Contradance, and dozens of others) was brought to middle- and upper-class salons in the cities in Latin America and become an enduring and widespread feature of Latin American city life. Aboriginal natives and mixed-blood subsistence farmers came into the cities to sell their produce, heard the music, liked it, and brought it back to the hinterlands with them. They fused this sophisticated city music with their own folkloric styles and created unique national genres like the habanera and the son in Cuba; the danza in Puerto Rico; the son in Mexico; and the maxixe (pronounced ma-sheesh) in Brazil; These 19th century fusions of city and country music became mainstreamed into the arena of Latin American pop music and, in evolved form, have become what Latin Americans listen and dance to in barrios and communities all over.

SEEKING TO BREAK OUT from their customary molds, many American, British and European musicians have been stung by the allure of not only Latin American music but also Latin American string instruments. We are now seeing these distinctively-voiced instruments finding their way into mainstream U.S. groupings, from Pop and Folk to New Age and Nashville to Jazz. American musicians have become aware of the novel palette of compelling sound textures that these instruments have to offer. As the population demographics start shifting the U.S. musical scene towards the Latin American cultural sensibility (a process which has been occurring in fits and starts over the last century), these instruments will progressively—and inevitably, play an expanded and increasingly more familiar role in our own musical lives.

In the second installment of this article, to be published in guitarmaker 51, I will take the readers on a country-by-country tour of Latin America, describing the major stringed instruments along the way.