THE LANGUAGE OF THE MASTERS

TRANSCRIPTIONS AND ETUDES OF 10 GREAT LATIN PERCUSSION ARTISTS

by

Michael Spiro

and Michael Coletti

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"By definition this book is a tribute to the great artists whose solos are transcribed here. It is not an overstatement to say that a large part of my artistic life has centered on the study of their music, their style and their creativity. I hope this book gives you some insight into these iconic musicians, and brings you the same joy I have felt over these many decades as I've tried to "get inside" their musical genius."

- Michael Spiro

"I would like to thank my parents, Bob and Wendy, for their undying love and support for me throughout my life. They have encouraged me to carry on in even the darkest of times and I am eternally grateful!

Without question I need to thank my mentor, my teacher, my friend, and my big brother: Michael Spiro. Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to work together on this project; it has truly been an honor. But more importantly, I need to thank you for not only making me a better musician, but a better human being. I have learned far more from you outside the classroom than in it, and I will forever be thankful for the time we have spent together over the years!"

- Michael Coletti

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We all stand on the shoulders of those who came before us. It is undeniable that you can't master a musical style unless you understand its lineage; Latin percussion is no exception. Modern Latin percussion playing has become a very sophisticated and technically advanced art form. Players such as Giovanni Hidalgo, Pedrito Martinez, Paoli Mejias, Richie Flores, Jesus Diaz, Adel Gonzalez, Yaroldy Abreu, Jose Febres, Eliel Lazo etc. (to name but a few of the current generation of brilliant conga players) have taken their instrument to an entirely new virtuosic level. Yet it was the work of their predecessors that provided the foundation for this development. In order to help understand the 21st century approach to Latin percussion, we have transcribed the work of seminal artists who helped define the sound and style of the 20th century conga drum, bongo, and timbale.

We began this process by selecting several masters of each instrument who are universally recognized as "trailblazers" of their generation:



In addition to their mastery, each of these artists has an extensive body of publically available recorded work from which we chose certain solos that define their classic styles. They are transcribed as accurately as possible, with the understanding that notation is not an exact science and is always open to interpretation.

From these transcriptions we then composed several etudes, each of which represents the signature style of these artists. While we find it essential to both transcribe and play along with recordings, it is also useful to play transcriptionlike compositions without the aural support of the original artist. This develops a musical independence and confidence that can't be acquired through transcriptions alone. We strongly encourage you to learn these etudes, and use the accompanying "minus-one" play along in order to help facilitate this growth. The effort can be intensive, but the results will be very gratifying.

INTRODUCTION

We should add that there is a second motive for writing this book that goes beyond helping to develop soloing skills in Latin music. It has been apparent for some time that although there are wonderful materials published for both orchestral percussionists and drum set players looking to take auditions for ensembles and/or college programs, there is almost nothing available in that vein for Latin percussionists. Our experience inside the university setting has made it clear that there is a need for resources to not only improve understanding and skills, but to use in audition contexts. The etudes we have written will hopefully be of value to future college students as they prepare to enter the academy as percussion majors, as well as to general percussionists within the Latin genre.

IMPORTANCE OF AFRO-CUBAN FOLKLORIC MUSIC

n order to gain a deeper understanding of the solos we have transcribed in this book, it is important to recognize the folkloric underpinnings of Latin popular music. This music is entirely rooted in the traditional forms of Afro-Cuban culture. As far back as the "son" bands of the 1920s one can hear the *bongoceros* playing ideas taken from the *bonkó enchemiy*á (lead drum) of the *abaku*á drum battery and from the *quinto* structure of rumba. As you work through this book you will find that the more you study Afro-Cuban folkloric music the more you will understand these solos.

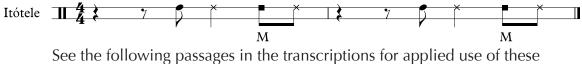
Here are some specific examples of this relationship:

a) An awareness of the middle-*cajón* part in *yambú* from the province of Matanzas, Cuba will enable you to play one of the most standard solo phrases with the appropriate feel and style.



See the following passages in the transcriptions for applied use of these rhythms:

- Tata Guïnes, "Gandinga Mondongo, Sandunga," m. 3 5
- Mongo Santamaria, "Serpentina," m. 6 10
- Manny Oquendo, "Corta El Bonche," m. 26 28
- b) One of the most common *batá* rhythms is known as "Cha-Cha Elekefún." The skills required to play the *itótele* (middle drum) pattern will be a big help in executing another subset of the transcriptions.



rhythms:

- Tata Guïnes, "Descarga Cubana," m. 2 and 4
- Manny Oquendo, "Bailala Pronto," m. 41 42
- c) Within Afro-Cuban folkloric music there are two vital components that directly translate to improvising in popular music: call and response singing, and multi-improvisational layers. Any soloist in this music must be able to converse in an ongoing dialogue with the chorus, and does so while the lead singer is coincidentally creating his own vocal phrases. This provides two

IMPORTANCE OF AFRO-CUBAN FOLKLORIC MUSIC

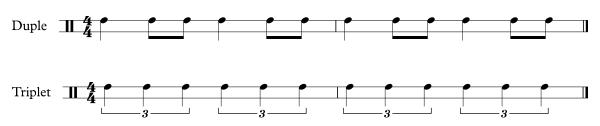
simultaneous layers of improvisation (in much the same way as a saxophonist might play behind a jazz vocalist), and obviously requires a high level of skill in both phrasing and musical awareness.

d) One of the main characteristics of folkloric music is that the line between 4/4 and 12/8 time signatures is often blurred. You will also find this to be a recurring element in the way these artists construct their solos. (See discussion of "Stretched Rhythms" in the "Notational Topics" section.)

"Stretched Rhythms"

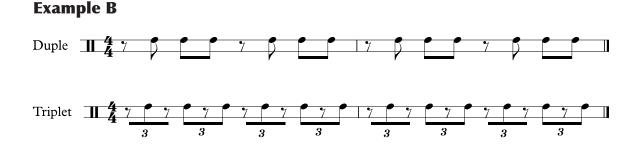
The line between 4/4 and 12/8 time signatures is often blurred in African diasporic music; Latin percussion solos are no exception. It must be understood that although the rhythm section parts of a Latin band are in a "duple" feel, soloists often employ this intentional ambiguity in their phrasing. This definitely contributes to the character and "swing" of their improvisations. The transcriber then has to make a decision: "Do I notate this phrase using duplets or triplets?"

Example A



In performance and to the ear, the rhythm is not entirely even or "straight", and so we refer to these types of figures as "stretched rhythms." As an example see measures 2 – 6 of the Tata Guïnes etude. The metric ambiguity leaves room for interpretation and could very easily be written using triplet notation. However, we have generally chosen to notate this phrase using duplets, but our decision to use duple notation for these passages is not an overly intellectual one: we believe this system is easier to read and understand. It makes more sense to write a duple rhythm, and in performance "stretch it" towards a triplet, rather than to write a triplet and "square it off" towards a duplet.

Here is another example where we have chosen to use duple notation for the same reasons:



You will learn over time to interpret the notation to play the correct feel. We should point out that the concept of stretched rhythms is certainly not unique to Latin music. For over a century the entire Jazz world has understood that the written page needs to be interpreted in order to make the music swing properly. Here is a prime example: