



## *Danzón–Cumbia: Audible Legacies of Cuban Music in Panamanian Popular Music*

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### Abstract

By the early 20th century, Cuban *danzones* took firm hold in the rural communities that dotted Panama's western littoral. In this context, sectional *danzón* compositional forms were combined with the open-ended *cumbia* song-forms to produce what rural Panamanians called "*danzón-cumbias*"—exceedingly popular musical hybrids that by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and on through the present time had come to dominate the sound of Panamanian *cumbia*. In this work, I provide an analysis of the key structural features of the *danzón* as it came to be fully integrated into Panamanian *cumbia* song-forms. I also discuss the impact that *danzón* had on contemporary Panamanian dance music.

**Keywords:** *danzón*, *cumbia*, Panama, Cuba, accordion, música típica

### Resumen

A principios del siglo XX, los *danzones* cubanos se afianzaron en las comunidades rurales ubicadas a lo largo del litoral occidental de Panamá. En este contexto, las formas de composición de *danzón* seccional se combinaron con las formas de canción de *cumbia* de composición abierta para producir lo que en las zonas rurales de Panamá se conoce como "*danzón-cumbias*"—híbridos musicales sumamente populares que desde mediados del siglo XX han dominado el sonido de la *cumbia* panameña. En este trabajo proporciono un análisis de las principales características estructurales del *danzón* a medida que estas se integran a las formas de la *cumbia* panameña. También examino el impacto que tuvo la recepción del *danzón* en la música bailable contemporánea de Panamá.

**Palabras claves:** *danzón*, *cumbia*, Panamá, Cuba, acordeón, música típica

### Introduction

Writing in 1882, a young Belisario Porras, who would go on to be president of the Republic of Panama, offered the following description of a community dance or "*baile*" as it would likely have taken place in his home-province of Los Santos located in the very heart of the country's rural interior: "The *danza* begins and is followed by the *mejorana* amid the tumult of couples. A waltz is followed by a polka and then another waltz until the moment to dance the *punto* comes around..." (Porras 1944:14). Porras's brief description of a *baile* is remarkable in that provides clear anecdotal evidence that rural Panamanians were highly receptive to musical trends currently in vogue not only in the country's urban centers, but also in countries situated oceans away from Panama's Pacific coast and the famed Azuero Peninsula where the town of Las Tablas is located. These trends included diverse genres of dance music, like the polka and foxtrot, which reinforced the growing popularity of independent

couple dancing (as distinguished from group dances such as line dancing) among rural Panamanians as was the case in every part of the Americas.<sup>1</sup>

The singular fact that rural Panamanians living at considerable remove from urban centers were nonetheless hip to and actively embraced musical practices that had taken hold in the country's urban centers would be underscored in striking manner when, during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Santeño musicians and dancers enthusiastically took up Cuba's latest musical export, the *danzón*. While the *danzón* retained many of the core melodic and rhythmic features of its immediate precursors, namely the *contradanza* and *danza*, for contemporary Cuban dancers, it also proved remarkably successful in meeting a growing appetite for syncopated Afro-Cuban dance music. In Panama's Azuero peninsula, the situation was no different. Local musicians, most notably violinists and accordionists, not only performed popular *danzones* in *bailes*, but eagerly wrote their own. And, with these melodies they combined the groove and open-ended forms of the African-rooted music known throughout Panama as *cumbia*.

That this distinctly Panamanian musical hybrid, the aptly called “*danzón-cumbia*,” would find favor among *baile-goers* is significant insofar as it reveals the form and degree of cosmopolitan engagement of rural Panamanians whose lives otherwise differed in every respect from people living in urban areas. Furthermore, the fact that *danzón* was not only embraced by Panamanian musicians living in Panama's Azuero peninsula, but was actively reshaped by these musicians into a form of music so distinctive that it would become associated with that region, is historically significant as it adds one more branch to the *danzón* family tree of mambo, *chachacha*, and (possibly) ragtime or another rhizomatic side shoot similar to that of the *danzón* performed to great acclaim in Veracruz, Mexico. This early 20<sup>th</sup>-century fusion of *danzón* and *cumbia* thus establishes the need for scholars to broaden the geographical and cultural scope of standard *danzón* histories, the very large majority of which focus almost exclusively on developments taking place in Cuba and Mexico, and, to a lesser extent, New Orleans.

In this article, I illustrate some of the ways in which Panamanian musicians from the Azuero peninsula incorporated the Cuban *danzón* into their dance music repertoire. The research for this study dates back to 2006, when I first began interviewing and documenting the performance lives of Panamanian dance-band musicians whose repertoire included *danzón-cumbias* among other musical

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<sup>1</sup> Porras's mention of the “*danza*” stands out in this respect. In his book on the *contradanza*, Peter Manuel (2009) shows that like its counterpart the waltz in Europe, the term “*danza*” was increasingly used to identify the latest practice, by now firmly associated with the European waltz, in which line dancing gave way to dancing in pairs, independent of a larger, group choreography. The significance of this form of coupled dancing is a point Porras makes quite effectively through his use of the evocative turn of phrase “tumult of couples” in describing what he witnessed on a “*baile*” dancefloor.

forms. This ethnographic work was bolstered by archival research into the history of Panamanian popular music and a near-constant search for audio recordings, which typically could be found in radio stations, in private collections, on the internet, and on CDs and CD-ROMs, as well as pin drives typically passed from friend to friend. In addition, I was regularly given photocopies of hand-written scores of some of the most well-known danzón-cumbias, material that offered additional sources to which I could refer, especially in my analysis of the formal features of this music.

I begin this article with a brief overview of danzón's historical development and its subsequent arrival in Panama. The rest is devoted to analyzing the key features of danzón-cumbia. Specifically, I consider this music's compositional form and its defining rhythmic and harmonic characteristics, all of which reveal a rich history of musical mixing and adaptation of local and imported practices. I conclude this article by illustrating the ways in which danzón continues to be a part of Panama's most popular form of dance music today, that is, cumbia or what most Panamanians refer to as "*música típica*" (literally, typical music).

### **Danzón: An Overview**

As a musical form, danzón traces its roots to 17<sup>th</sup>-century European court dances that first made their way to the main ports of entry in the Caribbean and, from there, spread across the region and to other, more remote areas of the French and Spanish colonies. Like so many other forms of music that arrived with the passengers who disembarked from the galleons that crisscrossed the North Atlantic bearing both human beings (enslaved and not) and material goods, these European imports soon underwent a transformative process of regionalization where, as they became incorporated in the musical life of ethnically and culturally heterogeneous community groups, they took on myriad new and distinctive forms.

Examining a form of popular dance music that traces its origins to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and across three continents presents its own particular set of challenges. To begin with, there is the question of transmission which, when limited to the notated score, as so much of this research invariably is, often fails to account for what Peter Manuel poses as the key question of "how pieces were accompanied, interpreted, enriched with improvisation, or extended for dancing" (2009:67). Similarly fraught is the fundamental claim underpinning any understanding of the danzón and its precursors as a "hybrid," "creolized" or "syncretic" form of music, namely that the original sources of specific formal musical elements can be identified with some degree of certainty within what is clearly a highly dynamic social historical process of cultural exchange.

Formidable though these challenges may be, scholars have nonetheless labored to untangle some of the complex social webs that gave rise to this music by viewing it variously as a "complex" of various related genres<sup>2</sup> (Alén Rodríguez 1998) the outcome of a fundamentally interpersonal "creolization process" in which "the formative elements in creolization may themselves be creolized" (Manuel 2009a:32), interconnected within a broader "performance complex...in which musical style is continuously transformed and resignified" (Madrid and Moore

<sup>2</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the decidedly Cuban notion of "complejos genéricos" (genre complexes), see Orozco González 2010 and Gómez Cairo 2010.

2013:22-23), or involving a series of lateral moves that undermine overly linear standardized histories (see Malcomson 2011). In the sketch I provide here, I will be necessarily brief, focusing on the key formal elements of the *danzón* that, through a parallel process of creative innovations, would take root in Panama and account for what I will show is one driving force of the genre's southward expansion.

Tracing its history, we find that the *danzón* grew from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *danza* and the 18<sup>th</sup>-century *contradanza* before it, the two being more or less distinguishable group dances that achieved very widespread popularity in the Caribbean. The *contradanza*, in turn, developed from the European *contradance*, a dance form that first appears in the historical record in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century where it emerged in England as a popular dance in the countryside but by the close of the century was taken up by European middle classes particularly in France and Spain, where it was called *contradanse* and *contradanza*, respectively. It was this later, more socially-elevated genre—which often incorporated complex dance figures that were best learned and practiced in advance—that made its way to the Caribbean ports especially on the islands of Cuba and Hispaniola.

The Caribbean variants of the *contradance*—such as the *danza* and quadrilles of various forms—offer some of the clearest musical expressions of a syncretic process in which an identifiably Western European musical tradition would become fused with the aesthetic preferences, instruments, and performance techniques of West African people and their descendants who came to populate almost every island of the Caribbean as well as the principal mainland port cities of the Caribbean basin area. Leaving aside its choreography and focusing on its musical characteristics, *contradance* features relatively fixed and highly repetitive compositional forms that had first achieved a measure of popularity in Europe and were then maintained with a degree of uniformity in the Caribbean. In the case of the *danzón*'s more immediate precursor, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century *danza* repertoire largely favored 2/4 meters and the use of a recurring AABB form of 16 bars of original music (32 bars including the repetitions) that would be played over and over during the course of a performance.<sup>3</sup> The enduring impact of Afro-Caribbean musical sensibilities on the *contradance* extends primarily to areas of rhythm and in particular the widespread use of short rhythmic figures or “cells” that give this music its distinctly syncopated character. Among the most commonly-occurring rhythmic cells are the *habanera* (3-1-2-2),<sup>4</sup> *amphibrach* (1-2-1-2-2), *tresillo* (3-3-2), and, by the 1870s, *cinquillo* (2-1-2-1-2). Combined, these elements of form and rhythm offer a general picture of *danzas*'s hybrid character, the complexity of which we have increasingly come to appreciate with the passage of time and the sharpening of analytical focus.

The *danzón* emerged in Cuba in the end of the 1870s where it became the island's newest and most widely-practiced form of independent couples dance. Among the features that most distinguished it from its immediate precursor, the *danza*, is its extended rondo-style form, incorporation of tonal modulations, and pervasive use of the *cinquillo* rhythm both in the melodies of the pieces and as an *ostinato* played in the accompaniment. In terms of its form, the more

<sup>3</sup> See Manuel 2009:77.

<sup>4</sup> In this rhythmic notation shorthand, the accent occurs on the “1” of every grouping (e.g., 3-1-2-2 = one-two-three, one, one-two, one-two).

expansive *danzón* (literally “big danza”) expanded the two-part *danza* form to multi-sectional pieces made up of contrasting melodies that often drew from preexisting popular repertoire.<sup>5</sup> Retaining something of the repetitive character of its predecessor, *danzones* alternated the A section with a series of new melodies, thus producing a type of rondo form that followed a pattern of ABAC and so forth. As one section moved to the next, it was not uncommon for composers to create additional contrasts between the individual sections by including modulations to different keys, most commonly to the relative and tonic major/minor. Rhythmically, Cuban *danzones* featured many of the rhythmic cells found in the earlier *contradanza* even as they placed unprecedented emphasis on the newer *cinquillo* rhythm, which was frequently expanded to a two-bar ostinato of 2-1-2-1-2-2-2-2-2. So pervasive was the *cinquillo* that, as Hettie Malcomson observes, it became “the characteristic marker *par excellence* of *danzón*” (2011:267). No longer limited to what Manuel describes as an “Afro-Caribbean tinge that had subtly enlivened the *danza*,” in a *danzón*, the *cinquillo* (especially in its two-bar form) now took on new purpose as a “ubiquitous recurring ostinato” played by the percussive accompaniment provided by one or two small timpani (called *timbales*) and a scraped gourd called a *güiro* (Manuel 2009b:93).<sup>6</sup> As we will see, all these features of the classic *danzón* would be taken up and, in most cases, modified by rural Panamanian musicians.

As the 19<sup>th</sup> gave way to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *danzón* grew in popularity all while taking on ever more diverse and exciting musical features, some of which would go on to profoundly shape the course of popular dance both within Cuban and abroad. The by-now-familiar practice of fusing complementary musical practices became one of the primary drivers of musical change. While some fusions were subtle, such as the incorporation of the “*cascara*” (shell) technique of playing on the side of the *timbales*—a alteration that is today a mainstay of salsa *timbal* drumming<sup>7</sup>—others were somewhat more straightforward. In a turn that would prove consequential to the evolution of *chachacha* and *mambo*, beginning around the 1910s, popular bandleaders started adding one more section of contrasting music at the end of their *danzones*. More often than not, this section incorporated much-liked dancefloor fare including the increasingly popular *son* from Cuba’s eastern provinces whose open-ended and vamp-based “*montunos*” offered the perfect vehicle for improvisation all while injecting renewed enthusiasm into the dancers on the floor. José Urfé’s 1910 recording of “*El bombín de Barreto*,” for instance, is one early example of this fusion and features an ABACAD form with the repeated two-bar *cinquillo*-free *montuno* occurring on the closing D section. Called “*danzones de nuevo ritmo*” (*danzones of a new rhythm*), it was not long after this that the final sections of most *danzones* featured *montunos*, which, by the 1940s, would increase in importance to become the main section of a performance even as the *danzón* genre itself experienced an irreversible decline in popularity.<sup>8</sup>

As *danzones* evolved, so did their geographical reach. In addition to Cuba, the genre took root in other parts of the Caribbean basin. Undoubtedly, the most spectacular of these transplants

<sup>5</sup> See Madrid and Moore 2013:42.

<sup>6</sup> See also Madrid and Moore 2013:4

<sup>7</sup> See Madrid and Moore 2013:55.

<sup>8</sup> See Madrid and Moore 2013:154.



was witnessed in the port city of Veracruz, Mexico, where by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, dancing danzón became a principal *veracruzano* pastime. In New Orleans, the presence of Cuban and Mexican musicians and the popularity of Latin American musical idioms all offer compelling evidence of a history of sustained cultural exchange between American ragtime and jazz musicians and their danzón counterparts to the south. As Cuba was the genre's undisputed birthplace, it is unsurprising that the majority of danzón scholars should focus on Cuba and, to a lesser extent, Mexico, where danzón retains an enduring and vibrant presence. With few exceptions, including Madrid and Moore's chapter exploring the New Orleans-Cuba danzón nexus, research on the performance and reception of danzón beyond these two geographical areas is hard to find. It is with the aim of filling this lacuna that I now offer an overview of danzón's southward journey to Panama and its spread into the more remote reaches of the country's rural interior.

### A Brief History of Danzón in the Azuero Peninsula

Panama's fame and function as a land of international transit predates the construction of the Panama Canal in 1914. Prior to the arrival of the seafaring Spaniards in 1501, the isthmian land bridge that today we call Panama had long facilitated the movement of goods and people between the northern and southern hemispheres. With the Spanish, however, came the passionate pursuit of a corridor that would link the world's greatest oceans and, in the process, convert the S-shaped isthmus into a crucial point of transit between the two.

It is, therefore, not unreasonable to expect that musical genres that had come to be widely popular in other parts of the hemisphere would find their way to Panama's urban centers, Aspinwall (present-day Colón) on the Atlantic and Panama City at the Pacific side of the trans-isthmian, interoceanic route and, from there, to other more remote parts of the country. The Cuban danzón was one such genre and its rapid embrace by Panamanian musicians and dancers reflects the influence of Cuban music and, very likely, the work of Cuban musicians in the nation's capital. Writing about the musical life of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Panama City, Jaime Ingram observes that among the "First musical personalities in Panama," several Cuban musicians stood out as influential composers and band directors who contributed to the creation and performance of a wide range of musical forms including "popular dances" of the period (Ingram 2004:298, 299). And if we turn again to Belisario Porras's 1882 essay—written during the period which Ingram describes above—we find that the author notes that within the "midland interior of the isthmus," the heart of the territory from whence would come danzón-cumbia, rural villagers were keen to couple up on crowded dancefloors and dance from sunset to sunrise to the popular music of the day, including polkas, waltzes, and *danzas* (Porras 1944:10, 14). Meanwhile, surveying the scene nearly half a century later when danzón was still very much a part of Cuban musical life, the self-described "folkloric attaché" and leading authority on Panamanian music at the time, Narciso Garay, noted that Cuban musical forms had been taken up not only in the Azuero Peninsula, but in other rural areas of the country (1999:47). Fearing a loss of what he regarded as quintessential Panamanian traditional culture, Garay was quick to view this development with dismay as an encroachment of urban culture on rural areas. For example, Garay notes that young indigenous people educated in the nation's capital had taken to "the fox-trot [and] the Cuban *danzón*" at the expense of traditional forms (*italics in the original*, 1999:40, 41).

While more revealing research on danzón's entry into Panama remains to be carried out in the historical archives, the specifics of danzón-cumbia's musical characteristics—namely, its sound and the improvisatory elements—are relatively accessible and easy to observe. This is largely due to the fact that danzón-cumbia is a living oral tradition of considerable vibrancy. For many Panamanians, danzón-cumbia is part of a constellation of celebrated Azuerense “folkloric” practices that have acquired unparalleled status as the country's most representative musical forms. Today, old and young violinists and accordionists alike learn some of the most well-known danzón-cumbias as part of the repertoire they must memorize and play flawlessly in order to participate—often in front of national television cameras—in one or another of Panama's annual folkloric competitions. Similarly, folkloric dance troupes (called *conjuntos típicos* or *conjuntos folclóricos*) frequently develop their own choreographies to danzón-cumbias as part of their presentational material.

While most Panamanians would likely not immediately associate what today is the dated sound of danzón-cumbia with the slick electro-acoustic *música típica* performed in the country's thriving commercial baile circuit, interviews with older musicians reveal that it was precisely within the baile context that danzón-cumbia first arose. Long the height of excitement of rural social life, during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the baile was the place where people living at some remove from one another could get together, drink, and dance the night away to some of the hottest dance music of the period. Providing the music for these dances were versatile *conjuntos*, ensembles that featured the European violin or a locally-made *rabel* (a violin-like instrument of medieval Spanish origin) and a conical drum called a *tambor* as well as either a pair of hand-held shakers called *maracas*, a scraped idiophone called a *güiro*, or a triangle to fill in the rhythm. In their function as purveyors of contemporary dance music, *conjuntos* offered all manner of dance genres, including polkas, fox trots, waltzes, *pasillos*, and especially cumbias—a music of clear African derivation that combined exciting interlocking grooves and modal, vamp-based harmony with open-ended forms that featured pithy call and response refrains.

While today non-Panamanians might associate cumbia with a form of Colombian music cultivated by Indigenous and African-descendent people living along the country's Caribbean coast and, in particular, within the Magdalena River Valley, to my knowledge, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that Panamanian cumbias trace their origins to this source. Rather, Panama has long been home to a number of regionally distinct cumbia traditions, some of which date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and are widely regarded by Panamanians to be a cultural expression and product of their country.<sup>9</sup> In Panama, cumbias were originally the musical creation of people who traced their ancestry to West Africans who were forcibly brought to the isthmus to work as enslaved labor

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<sup>9</sup> The formal differences between Panamanian and Colombian cumbias, as well as what historical connections these musical forms may share, is under-researched. Perhaps the most thorough outline of the formal features that Panamanians regard as key to understanding the many forms of cumbia that took hold on the isthmus and which Panamanians generally regard as having their origins in this region can be found in Pitre Vásquez 2008. Panamanian popular cumbia or “*música típica*” is examined in considerable historical and musical detail in Bellaviti 2020. The reader should also take note that while only a very limited amount of research has been done on the earliest expressions of cumbia in the territory that makes up present-day Panama, the term itself and aspects of the music and dance that we associate with it appear in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century oral histories describing events of the previous century and documents dating to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among the most widely-cited sources that offer substantive evidence of cumbia's 19<sup>th</sup>-century origins in Panama are Jorge Conte Porras 1985, Obarrio de Mallet 1915, Garay 1999 (originally published in 1930).

on farms, in mines, and as porters along the interoceanic thoroughfare. The musical legacy of this first generation of African arrivals and their descendants—who today collectively refer to themselves with pride as “*negros coloniales*” (colonial blacks)—is observable in cumbia’s call and response singing, group dances that are arranged in a circle formation that moves in a counter-clockwise direction, three-drum ensembles, and interlocking rhythms, all of which are features that almost certainly have their origins in West African music and dance practices.<sup>10</sup>

Conjunto violinists are credited by Panamanian folklorists and especially older Azuerense musicians as the individuals most responsible for adapting Panamanian cumbia and Cuban *danzón* to a setting in which couple dancing was the norm. In the context of a *baile*, conjunto violinists wrote *danzones* that were played to the accompaniment of a cumbia rhythm and that segued directly into a more characteristic open-ended cumbia form. In this latter respect, Panamanian musicians adopted exactly the same approach pioneered by their Cuban counterparts who had taken to appending a *son montuno* section to the end of their compositions. In adapting cumbia to meet the formal and musical expectations of *baile* participants, conjunto violinists were responsible for facilitating a number of significant changes to the sound of this new form of cumbia. Whether performing a cumbia-styled rhythm in support of a *danzón* melody or playing a cumbia as a composition in its own right, conjunto violinists had to contend with the fact that their music was primarily an instrumental one. Thus, in the absence of a chorus of singers—which, in a traditional context, would have involved many of the participants with the possible exception of the dancers who encircled the drummers—conjunto violinists sometimes abandoned cumbia’s traditional call and response format. In its place, they played—or at times sang—a two- or four-bar refrain that could be repeated indefinitely as suited the moment.

By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it became clear that the interest in a Cuban-sounding cumbia shown by *baile*-goers was by no means a passing fad as conjuntos steadily took on the characteristics of Cuban dance bands. Probably as early as the late 1930s, conjunto violinists added to their ensembles the small variant of the timbales—which in Cuba went by the name *bongo de palo*, *paila*, and *timbalito*, and in Panama were called “timbales”—and shortly afterwards, one and then two conga drums. Clearly modelled after the percussion section of Cuba’s premier dance band, Sonora Matancera, these drums, which in Panama were built by local artisans, allowed for an increasing integration of Cuban music within the Panamanian *baile* setting. In particular, the inclusion of the timbales allowed the conjuntos to emphasize the binary structure of the *danzón*-cumbia by having the drummer play the characteristic cross-stick drumming pattern called the “*baqueteo*” during the opening “*verse*” section of a song and then, like his Cuban counterparts, switching to a cowbell pattern during the closing “*refrain*” or, as it came to be called, “*rumba*” sections. This pioneering adaptation would become a permanent part of the conjunto sound to the extent that to this day, conjunto musicians typically refer to the opening *verse*-half of a song simply as the “*baqueteo*” and the closing refrain as the “*rumba*.”

By the late-1950s, the *baile* and the conjunto began to undergo substantial changes and the *danzón*-cumbia receded in importance as a distinct sub-genre within what had become a principally cumbia-based repertoire. During this period, the violin was universally replaced by the diatonic

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on Afro-Panamanian musical culture and its relation to politics of race and ethnicity in Panama, see Fortune 1973; Smith 1976, 1994, and 1998; Guerrón-Montero 2006; Szok 2012; and Bellaviti 2018 and 2020.



(push-pull) button accordion as the lead instrument of the conjunto, a change in instrumentation that corresponded to a change in repertoire. Older instrumental genres favored by violinists, such as pasillos, polkas, and fox trots, were replaced by modified cumbias that easily incorporated select Cuban and Colombian genres such as son and porro. And as their new version of cumbia or, as it was more commonly known, “música típica” grew in popularity, individual conjuntos were quick to take advantage of more advanced technology to record the songs that had the potential to appeal to as wide an audience as possible.

While danzón-cumbias constituted a very small percentage of the recordings made by accordion conjuntos beginning in the 1950s, these recordings are nonetheless invaluable as key resources to understand how the music was played before it appeared on vinyl records. In the case of the Cuban contradanza and danzón, the music comes to us through a relatively rich repository of published sheet music, which allows us to appreciate the formal structure and harmonic and melodic language of this repertoire. In Panama’s Azuero peninsula, however, this was not the case. Nearly all danzón composers, almost all of them violinists, created pieces that were intended to be performed on the baile dancefloor. And while there are reports that some of these musicians did, in fact, create scores of their pieces, to my knowledge none of these scores was ever published or otherwise actively disseminated. Thus, the sources of danzón-cumbia pieces that are available to us today and are the subject of this study are those that have been passed down thanks to a living oral tradition and, in some cases, are also preserved on commercial recordings. The fact that Panamanian danzón-cumbia is an unbroken living tradition for which we have an archive of recordings that extend from the 1950s to the present time makes it an important case study particularly because it allows us to compare actual recorded performances rather than rely entirely on written compositions. As I show in the following section, while danzón is often appreciated by scholars and aficionados for its formal clarity and “rondo” song structure—a feature that is eminently visible in popular Cuban danzones that were preserved in the form of commercial sheet music—in practice, the Panamanian recordings reveal that these musicians took considerable liberties in adapting their danzones to meet the demands of a dynamic social dance practice.<sup>11</sup>

### Danzón-Cumbia Analysis

Having provided an outline of danzón in terms of its historical development and key musical features, I will now devote the rest of this article to an examination of the key features of danzón-cumbia, even as I pay close attention to those formal characteristics that it shares with the broader hemispheric danzón tradition and the changes and adaptations that shaped danzón in the Azuero Peninsula. In this respect, several musical features stand out as especially relevant to our understanding of how danzón-cumbia holds together as a hybrid musical form in the overlapping spheres of the transnational danzón tradition and Panamanian dancefloor cumbia or música típica. These key aspects of the music include its sectional form and larger binary (verse-refrain) song form, use of the cinquillo rhythmic cell and underlying rhythmic accompaniment, and harmonic material.

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<sup>11</sup> The reader may wish to compare the present case study with one described by Juan Fernando Velásquez (forthcoming) where, during late 19th and early 20th centuries, Colombian bandleaders regularly adapted commercially-available sheet music to suit their performance needs.

To piece together how danzón-cumbia works, how it is most often played, and what it sounds like, my examination focuses on 27 commercial recordings of 15 different danzón-cumbias that span a period from the 1950s to the 1990s. A list of the recordings that form the basis for my analysis along with a tabulated outline of their individual structural features is provided in Table 1. In choosing these sample pieces, I have been intentionally selective, focusing only on available commercial recordings produced by conjuntos that catered to baile-going listeners. In so doing, my intention is to gain an understanding of this tradition as it developed specifically in a social dance setting rather than, for example, on the concert stage, in stylized folkloric presentations, or, more recently, among típico enthusiasts keen on uploading their rendition of well-known, classic pieces to popular Internet streaming platforms. With their often three- to five-minute running times and total absence of the violin, commercial recordings can only offer a partial view into the way this music would have been performed on a baile dancefloor prior to the 1950s. We have to guess at the missing details, which I do based on extended formal and informal conversations with knowledgeable musicians and in-person observations of live performances by contemporary conjuntos, key insights that give us a good idea of how danzón-cumbias performed for the benefit of dancers might have differed from their recorded versions.

### **Compositional Form**

When it comes to song form, danzón-cumbias are, almost by definition, organized around a binary form that begins with the opening “danzón” and concludes with a “cumbia.” In this respect, the overall form of the piece is one that moves from a generally “fixed” series of verses to an “open” series of refrains. In this context, the danzón and cumbia are respectively the *pre-composed* and *open-ended* halves of a piece that is, in its overall structure, thoroughly sectional.

Beginning with the danzón half of a piece, we find that nearly all songs are made up of at least two, and often three contrasting sections. In this formal arrangement, the second or “B” section of a song tends to be the longest single melodic unit of the danzón, generally, but not always, reaching 16 bars or more. What follows the “B” section is somewhat more variable. In the case of the recordings listed on Table 1, for example, nearly half employ no more than a basic two-section “AB” danzón that segues directly into a cumbia. Overall, however, there is a discernible tendency for the “B” section to be followed by a reprisal of the “A” section in the “rondo” fashion typical of most Caribbean danzones. Several songs listed in Table 1 feature this basic ABA or the more extended ABAC forms, a practice that I suspect would be better represented were this study not limited to commercial recordings of fixed duration.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, we see a selective use of the rondo form when we compare Rogelio “Gelo” Córdoba’s 45-rpm recording of “La flor de lilolá” to Alfredo Escudero’s more expansive live recording of the same song, which features an ABC and ABAC danzón form, respectively, while similar formal variations between musicians can also be observed in each of the two renditions of “Las flores del camino” and “La talanquera.”

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<sup>12</sup> In this context, some musicians may have cut out sections of the danzón in order to devote more time to the cumbia refrains that followed and vice versa. Pushing back against this tendency toward variation are the many folk competitions that take place in Panama, in which the skill of a performer is judged among other things on his or her ability to “accurately” reproduce a given piece according to the criteria of the experts, folklorists all of them.

Song Title	Composer	Performer	Form		Tonal centers
			Danzón (closed)	Cumbia (open)	
"Abreme la puerta que yo me voy"	Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez	Dorindo Cárdenas (w/o bass)	$\overline{i \quad \underline{vi} \quad i}$ A B C  :8: :16: 1  8	$\overline{\underline{vi}}$ D E F G  :4: :8: :4:  :2:	relative major/minor
"Doctor Arroyo"	Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez	Dorindo Cárdenas (w/bass)	$\overline{vi}$ A B A  :8: :20: 1  8	$\overline{i}$ C D E F G  :4: :4:  :2:  :4:  :2:	relative major/minor
"La capisucia"	Eráclides Amaya Sáenz	Eráclides Amaya Sáenz (w/bass)	$\overline{i \quad \underline{i} \quad i}$ A <sup>3</sup> B <sup>3</sup> A C <sup>3</sup>  :18: :18: 18  16:	$\overline{i}$ D E F  :8:  :8: :2:	tonic major/minor
"Edicta no me quiere"	Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez	Dorindo Cárdenas (w/o bass)	$\overline{i}$ A B A  :8: :16: 8:	$\overline{i^{b7} i}$ C D E F E G H  :4: 8: 4: :4: :4:  :2: :2:	tonic major/minor
"Edicta no me quiere"	Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez	Isidro "Chilo" Pitty (w/bass)	$\overline{i}$ A B A  :8: :16: 8:	$\overline{i^{b7} i}$ C D E F E G H  :4: 8: 4: :4: :4:  :2: :2:	tonic major/minor
"La Espigadilla"	Rogelio "Gelo" Córdoba	Rogelio "Gelo" Córdoba (w/o bass)	$\overline{i}$ A B (repeat) [a b a]  :8: 8/8/8		major
"La flor de lilolá"	Toñito Sáez [sic]	Rogelio "Gelo" Córdoba (w/o bass)	$\overline{i}$ A B C  :8: :8: 1  8: 1	$\overline{D E F}$  :4: :4: :2:	major
"La flor de lilolá"	Toñito Sáez [sic]	Alfredo Escudero (live, w/bass)	$\overline{i}$ A <sup>3</sup> B A C  :8: :8: :8: :8:	$\overline{D E}$   $\overline{F}$  :4: :4:  :2:	major
"Las flores del camino"	Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez	Oswaldo Ayala (w/bass)	$\overline{i \quad \underline{i} \quad i}$ A B C A  :4: 4  15: :9: :4: 4	$\overline{i}$ D E  :4:  :4:	tonic major/minor
"Las flores del camino"	Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez	Victorio Vergara (w/o bass)	$\overline{i^{(6)} i}$ A B C  :4: 13  9:	$\overline{i}$ D E  :4:  :2:	tonic major/minor
"La hierba buena"	Braulio Escolástico "Colaco" Cortez	Lucy Jaén with Conjunto Aires Tableño (no timbales)	$\overline{i \quad i}$ A <sup>3</sup> B <sup>3</sup>  :8: :8:	$\overline{C}$   $\overline{D}$  :4:  :4:	tonic major/minor
"La hierba buena"	Braulio Escolástico "Colaco" Cortez	Victorio Vergara (w/bass)	$\overline{i \quad i}$ A B  :8: :8:	$\overline{C}$   $\overline{D}$  :4:  :4:	tonic major/minor
"La linda Ballesteros"	José de la Rosa Cedeño, Abraham Vergara	Dorindo Cárdenas (w/o bass)	$\overline{i \quad \underline{i} \quad i}$ A B A  :13: 16  13:	$\overline{C}$   $\overline{D E D}$  :4:  :4: :4: :4:	tonic major/minor
"La linda Ballesteros"	José de la Rosa Cedeño, Abraham Vergara	Dorindo Cárdenas (w/bass)	$\overline{i \quad \underline{i} \quad i}$ A B A  13  16  13	$\overline{C}$   $\overline{D E D}$  :4:  :4: :4:	tonic major/minor
"La linda Ballesteros"	José de la Rosa Cedeño, Abraham Vergara	Fito Espino (w/o bass)	$\overline{i \quad \underline{i} \quad i}$ A B A  :13: 16  13:	$\overline{C}$   $\overline{D E D}$  :4:  :4: :4: :4:	tonic major/minor
"La linda Ballesteros"	José de la Rosa Cedeño, Abraham Vergara	Oswaldo Ayala (1982)	$\overline{i \quad \underline{i} \quad i}$ A B A  :13: :16: 13	$\overline{C}$   $\overline{D E}$  :4: :4:  (repeat)	tonic major/minor
"Me voy de mi tierra"	Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez	Dorindo Cárdenas (w/o bass)	$\overline{i \quad \underline{i}}$ A B C <sup>3</sup>  :8: 10  10:	$\overline{D}$  :4:	tonic major/minor
"Me voy de mi tierra"	Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez	Chilo Pitty (w/bass)	$\overline{i \quad \underline{i}}$ A B C <sup>3</sup>  :8: 10  10:	$\overline{D}$  :4:	tonic major/minor
"Pueblo Nuevo"	Artemio Córdova	Alfredo Escudero (w/bass)	$\overline{i}$ Int. A  :4: :16:	$\overline{C}$   $\overline{D}$  :4:  :4:	major
"Pueblo Nuevo"	Artemio Córdova	Alfredo Escudero (w/bass)	$\overline{i}$ Int. A  :4: :16:	$\overline{C}$   $\overline{D}$  :4:  :4:	major
"Recuerdo de La Laguna"	José de la Rosa Cedeño	Alfredo Escudero (w/o bass)	$\overline{i}$ A <sup>3</sup> B  :8: :16:	$\overline{C}$   $\overline{D}$  :4:  :4:	minor
"Los sentimientos del alma"	Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez	Dorindo Cárdenas (w/o bass)	$\overline{i}$   $\overline{i^{b7}}$ A B A  :10: :12: 10 1	$\overline{C}$   $\overline{D E}$  :4:  :4: :4:	tonic major/minor
"Los sentimientos del alma"	Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez	Fito Espino (w/o bass)	$\overline{vi}$   $\overline{i}$ A <sup>3</sup> B A  :10: :12: 10 1	$\overline{C}$   $\overline{D E}$  :4:  :6: :4:	relative major/minor
"Los sentimientos del alma"	Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez	Oswaldo Ayala (w/bass)	$\overline{vi}$ A <sup>3</sup> B A  :10: :12: 10 1	$\overline{C}$   $\overline{D}$  :4:  :4:	relative major/minor
"Soy de mi negra"	Francisco "Chico Purio" Ramírez	Dorindo Cárdenas (w/bass)	$\overline{vi}$ A B  :8: :16:	$\overline{i}$ C D C  :4: :4: :4:	relative major/minor
"La talanquera"	Clímaco Batista Díaz	Alfredo Escudero (live, w/bass)	$\overline{i}$ A B A  :16: 1  3  16	$\overline{i}$ C   $\overline{D}$   $\overline{C}$  :4:  :4:  :4:	tonic major/minor
"La talanquera"	Clímaco Batista Díaz	Carlos Cleghorn (w/bass)	$\overline{i}$ A B  :16: 1  3:2:	$\overline{i}$ C D  :4: :4:  :4:	tonic major/minor

Table 1: Formal variation between danzón-cumbia compositions and performances.

The length of the individual sections that make up a *danzón* is a matter of some interest to aficionados of the genre. Stating an opinion that was also expressed to me on various occasions by other musicians, Oscar Carrasco writes that Azuerense *danzones* are “technically” made up of 16-bar sections, which is to say that within this tradition, theory and practice mostly but not always coincide. *Danzón-cumbia* composer Eraclides Amaya gives more emphasis to the theory side of the discussion telling me on several occasions that a proper *danzón-cumbia* should feature at least one section of 16-bars or more, indeed, as is the case of the C section of his composition “La capisucia” (see Table 1).<sup>13</sup> Observing the length of the individual sections of each *danzón*-half the recordings listed on Table 1, however, we can see that while 16-bars sections are relatively plentiful, there is considerable variation as well. Not only are many of the individual sections of each *danzón* song segment less than 16 bars in length, but several of these sections have an odd number of bars, such as, for example, the 13-bar A section of “La linda Ballesteros” among other songs. I see this structural variability to be a consequence of the fact that the *danzón-cumbia* is overwhelmingly an oral tradition and, as such, never underwent the process of formal standardization that is often a part of a written tradition. Today as in the past, *danzón-cumbia* musicians can and do take liberties in performing standard repertoire, as is the case in Osvaldo Ayala’s 15-bar expansion of the normally 13-bar B section of “Las flores del camino.”

In contrast to the more extended and varied lengths of the sections that make up the opening *danzón* half of a *danzón-cumbia*, the closing *cumbia* half is made up of a series of comparatively uniformly short refrains, each of which are repeated multiple times. Like their traditional counterparts, these *cumbia* refrains are organized around a general call and response structure in which the accordionist (or violinist) may play the initial refrain which is followed by a response by the single female vocalist of a standard conjunto, that is, the *salomera*, who sings in a highly melismatic and partially yodeled style known as “*saloma*.” An example of this type of antiphonal exchange is provided in Example 1, which is an excerpt of the first 8 bars of Section C of the *danzón-cumbia* “La hierba buena” performed by accordionist Victorio Vergara and *salomera* Lucy Quintero. In this example, Quintero’s “response” is a loose outline of the melody played on the accordion. In this genre in which vocalists are not the predominant voice of the ensemble, there

<sup>13</sup> Most of the information indicated on Table 1 is relatively self-evident. Some of my markings, however, are necessarily idiosyncratic and thus require some explanation. In the “Form” column, each section is given an alphabet label (e.g., A) with the corresponding numbers of bars indicated directly below. The individual bar counts and repetitions are demarcated with vertical lines and colons bookending each number (e.g., |8| or |:8:|). Should a section repeat more than once, then the total number of times the section is played appears as superscript to the corresponding letter number (e.g., A<sup>3</sup>). Additionally, I have noted the occasional appearance of closed-ended sections during the “open-ended” *cumbia* part of the song by highlighting the corresponding alphabet label in bold type (e.g., **D**). The “Form” column also indicates the tonal centers of each section. These appear as roman numerals and are located directly above their corresponding section/alphabet labels. Major keys are shown as “I,” and tonic minor and relative minor as “i” and “iv,” respectively. The duration of an individual tonal center is indicated by a low line (e.g., i\_\_ ). Unusual modifications to diatonic major and (natural) minor scales and harmony is shown as a superscript to the corresponding roman numeral (e.g., I<sup>b7</sup> means that the 7<sup>th</sup> degree of the major scale is consistently flattened). Finally, the beginning of the “*rumba*” part(s) of a song is indicated by a broken/dashed column line. Finally, it bears mentioning that Table 1 does not indicate instances in which a composition is played over in its entirety or near entirety, which was a common practice on early recordings. One additional point must also be made regarding the fact that *música típica* recordings do not include dates and for that reason it is difficult to place them within a historical timeline. To mitigate this problem, I have taken note of recordings that do not include an electric bass as this is a reliable indication that the recording was made sometime prior to 1972 given that this is the year that most conjuntos began to incorporate the electric bass in their lineup and feature it on their recordings.

emerged numerous alternatives to this basic call and response paradigm. For example, in instances where the refrain is totally instrumental, the accordionist will simply play the melody over and over with or without alteration before moving on to the next section. Alternatively, once conjuntos had access to mics and sound systems it was not uncommon to also feature one or more sung refrains involving (male) members of the conjunto singing in chorus along with the accordion and alternating in a call and response fashion with the (female) salomera. Finally, there are some pieces that have no identifiable “cumbia” half, such as Rogelio “Gelo” Córdoba’s recording of “La Espigadilla.” While not common, these fixed-form pieces highlight the fact that the label “danzón-cumbia” does not refer exclusively to a pairing of two contrasting (open- and close-ended) song forms, but also denote the practice of performing danzones to cumbia accompaniment.

**Example 1:** first 8 bars of Section C of “La hierba buena” as recorded by Victorio Vergara (featuring Lucy Quintero on saloma).

### Rhythmic features

Danzón-cumbias include rhythmic elements in both their melodies and accompaniment patterns that can be tied to their two main source traditions: Cuban danzón and Panamanian cumbia. While the project of identifying the sources of rhythmic practices can be approached from multiple perspectives and degrees of abstraction, I will be succinct, focusing my discussion on the pervasive use of the *cinquillo* rhythmic cell in Azuerense danzón melodies and the underlying cumbia grooves that propelled these melodies onto the baile dancefloor.

In his outline of the key formal elements of danzón-cumbia, Carrasco singles out the *cinquillo* pattern as an “expressive force” in the music (Carrasco 2015). Carrasco’s point, presented here as a statement of fact, would likely strike most aficionados of the genre as more-or-less self-evident. This is because the *cinquillo* rhythmic cell is present in almost every danzón-cumbia—“La talanquera” being one exception to this rule—and appears to be the only consistently recurring rhythmic cell in the Azuerense danzón tradition, where it generally appears numerous times during the danzón half of a composition and generally disappears once the cumbia refrains set in.<sup>14</sup> In this

<sup>14</sup> Carrasco noted that as a “expressive pattern,” the *cinquillo* can also be found “in other cumbia variants, including, for example, Hernán Vergara’s composition ‘Mi amor por ella,’” which is not a danzón-cumbia (personal communication, September 2021).



context, the cinquillo rhythm is deliberately stated or, less commonly, treated to some form of embellishment as shown in Example 2. The significance of the cinquillo as a marker of a “danzón” tradition, Azuerense or otherwise, is only heightened by the fact that it is a central element of the broader Caribbean tradition where it is featured in both danzón melodies and their accompaniment.



**Example 2:** Last four bars of the first iteration of Section A of “La linda Ballesteros” as performed by Dorindo Cárdenas.

It is in the domain of accompaniment, however, that Azuerense danzón-cumbia differs rather strikingly from its Caribbean danzón counterparts. Providing that alternate interpretation of its name, danzón-cumbias are characterized as danzón melodies played over a cumbia accompaniment. Adding an additional layer to the rich strata that is this music’s hybrid development, Panamanian dancefloor cumbia was not solely Azuerense in its sound, and from the 1940s onward drew heavily on Cuban son and guaracha. Perhaps the greatest impact that Cuban music has had not only on danzón-cumbia, but the entire cumbia-inspired conjunto tradition that Panamanians call *música típica*, is the introduction of an additional binary framework that is built into the rhythmic accompaniment of any composition. By this I mean the ubiquitous *baqueteo* and *rumba* grooves that came to divide almost every song that conjuntos performed into a quieter, understated part and a louder, climactic part, each with its own particular musical characteristics and dance conventions. Therefore, to understand how danzón-cumbia works not just as a compositional form, but as part of a broader and exceedingly vibrant dance practice in which dancers expect an emphatic dynamic shift in the energy of every song, it is essential to take the *baqueteo-rumba* transition into consideration.

Discussing this rhythmic and dynamic transition, Amaya noted during one of our conversations that the *baqueteo* is sometimes referred to by musicians as the “*parte lisa*” (smooth part) of a song. The contrast, he continued, is provided by the “*rumba*.” While the term “*rumba*” has several connotations—including “partying it up” as Amaya put it—for many Panamanians, Amaya explained, “it is intimately related to the use of the cowbell in Panamanian *música típica*.” Amaya’s claim that within the Panamanian conjunto tradition, the cowbell provides the basis for an important formal change in the rhythmic feel and energy of a song is well taken. Many musicians I have interviewed have expressed precisely the same view, noting, as they do, that *música típica* songs have a predictable arc in that they begin “*suave*” (soft) and then suddenly transition to a perceptively louder, slightly faster, and all-round more “*alegre*” (exciting) “*patron*” (rhythmic pattern or groove). This transition is not only audible in the moment in a recorded or live performance in which the *timbalero* (timbale drummer) switches from the *baqueteo* pattern to the cowbell, but also plays out dramatically on the dancefloor as well. Moving arm-in-arm in a steady counterclockwise direction on crowded dancefloors packed with hundreds—frequently thousands—of couples, *típico* dancers today will suddenly execute a series of tight spins before holding each other even tighter at the

moment the timbalero executes the series of drum fills that precede the onset of the cowbell-heavy rumba groove.<sup>15</sup>

While the baqueteo-rumba transition is unquestionably an important part of the *música típica* genre that has come to include the *danzón-cumbia* tradition, its connection to the demonstrably older *danzón-cumbia* tradition is less evident and calls for more careful consideration. In our discussion of the relevance of the shift to the rumba in the *danzón-cumbia* recordings, Amaya took care to point out that when it came to the music performed by violins, as in “folkloric music with *tambor* [conical hand drum] and *caja* [snare drum], this shift doesn’t really happen.” He noted that this music was played “almost with the same rhythm throughout.” As for the transition from one groove to another, Amaya was explicit that this is a modern development, stating: “this has to do only and specifically with the use of the timbal and the bell.”<sup>16</sup> The fact that Amaya would find it necessary to make this point underscores the fact that today one can readily observe what Panamanians regard as “folkloric” ensembles—groups that by custom overwhelmingly eschew what their members regard as non-Panamanian/foreign drums such as timbales and congas—incorporating a rumba-like rhythm at the end of *danzón-cumbias* and other standard repertoire. Absent counter evidence, it seems very likely that this development occurred when conjuntos first added the timbale drums and a cowbell to their instrumentation sometime in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In this respect, the incorporation of contrasting grooves in the *danzón-cumbia* song form constituted the latest of a series of creative innovations introduced by conjunto musicians to make this music more appealing to rural Azuerense dancers. This adaptation of Cuban musical instruments and sensibilities by Azuerense musicians is yet again a continuation of a longer musical evolutionary process of fusing local musical traditions with the latest international imports of the day, sometimes with unexpected outcomes.

When we consider where the baqueteo-rumba transition occurs in a typical *danzón-cumbia*, an interesting contrast between the Azuerense tradition and its Cuban counterparts is readily discernible. Unlike the Cuban “*danzones de nuevo ritmo*” hybrids in which a change in the accompaniment occurs when the *danzón* transitions to the *montuno* section, in a performance of many *danzón-cumbias*, the rumba arrives significantly after the start of the *cumbia* half of a song. This feature of the Panamanian tradition is clearly represented in the recordings included on Table 1 where the onset of the rumba (demarcated by a broken vertical line) usually begins one or two sections after the transition into the *cumbia* half of the song. Amaya believes that this lack of alignment between the start of the *cumbia* and the switch to the rumba groove is likely a consequence of a historical process in which the already-established *danzón-cumbia* song form had to suddenly be adapted to suit an evolving dance music practice. “To the point that many pieces were transferred from the violin to the accordion,” Amaya explained,

[the accordionists] had to identify some part at the end of the song that could work as a rumba. In many pieces written for the violin, the accordionist who came up with the arrangement for the recording had to add a section to the piece so that it would include a rumba, precisely because in the violin tradition, this did not happen. (Personal conversation, October 2020)

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed discussion of *música típica* instrumentation, song forms, and dancefloor conventions, see Bellaviti 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Personal conversation, October 2020.

In addition to the theory that accordionists added rumba sections, it is possible that they also adapted and even omitted existing sections of a piece in order to work in what had become the expected shift from a baqueteo to a rumba groove.

Without additional research that would provide a better understanding of the practices of violin conjuntos, it is difficult to say exactly which changes were instituted by the accordion conjuntos and which were carryovers from the violin tradition. What is clear, however, is that the inclusion and continuation of an additional binary division in the sectional danzón-cumbia form represented just one more stage in a developmental process that allowed it to maintain its continued popularity on Panamanian dancefloors long after the danzón genre experienced a decline almost everywhere else in the hemisphere.

### **Harmonic Features**

Changing rhythmic practices were not the only challenges the newly-formed accordion conjuntos had to contend with when performing standard repertoire for contemporary dancers. Melodies developed for the tonally versatile violin had to be adapted to suit the limitations of a mostly diatonic instrument that, in the case of the three-row button accordion, was limited to three major keys and their relative (natural) minor keys. In order to perform baile repertoire that featured departures from a single diatonic key, accordionists had to get creative. And nowhere was this creativity on greater display than when an accordionist set out to play a danzón.

Unlike cumbia, which is organized around relatively short melodies that are based on a recurring harmonic progression or vamp, danzones typically feature extended harmonic progressions and tonal modulations between individual sections. These general harmonic attributes, in fact, are common characteristics of the broader danzón tradition that took root in the Azuero Peninsula. When it comes to the danzones written by Panamanian violinists, most include harmonic progressions that move between the tonic (i/I), dominant (V), and subdominant (iv/IV) chords. While the three-row button accordion with its three corresponding major and relative minor keys that are each arranged a fourth apart may offer its player plenty of non-diatonic notes to realize tonally ornate melodies—including, for example, the expected raised seventh in songs played in a minor key—this reservoir of (key-specific) tonal options decreases significantly when a song modulates from one key to another, which is what danzones often do.

Like danzones elsewhere, Azuerense danzón-cumbias generally include a modulation either between relative major (I) and relative minor keys (iv) or tonic major (I) and tonic minor (i) keys—a practice that is amply reflected in the recordings listed on Table 1. Of these two approaches to modulation, the latter presented the greater challenge precisely because the two more distantly related tonic major and tonic minor keys have fewer pitches in common and thus, when combined, require a greater number of accidentals between them. In some cases, the pitches required simply exceeded those that were available on the standard three-row button accordion of the period. To deal with the tonal limitations of their instruments, accordionists did their best to approximate the melody typically by playing the closest pitch available. In their individual recordings of “La linda Ballesteros,” for example, Dorindo Cárdenas and Fito Espino consistently play natural 7ths (F<sup>n</sup>) in place of raised 7ths (F<sup>#</sup>) in the A section of this song. Most accordionists I spoke with, including Cárdenas’ son, Adonis, credit this melodic alteration to the fact that the three-row accordion used

by these musicians did not have the required raised 7<sup>th</sup> in the low end of the instrument's register. And if the accordionists had chosen to play the melody on another "row" of the accordion it would have compromised their ability to play the melody of the "B" section of the piece which is in the tonic major key. The fact that Cárdenas manages to play an Eb in the first bar of the song, however, is clear evidence that some modification to the instrument had been made, probably with the help of a local accordion tuner. At some point in the 1970s, Cárdenas would eventually rectify the situation by recording this danzón-cumbia with the raised 7<sup>th</sup> intact, a feat he managed thanks to alterations to the three-row accordion which substituted several of the standard diatonic pitches for commonly desired accidentals. An excerpt of both versions is shown in Example 3 where the later recording is transposed up a whole tone to facilitate comparison. Another solution to the problem of missing or limited note options was to simply avoid a tricky "tonic" modulation altogether and instead transpose the melody to the more accessible "relative" key, as Espino and Ayala do, for example, in their individual recordings of "Los sentimientos del alma"—see Table 1.

**Example 3:** First four bars of Section A of "La linda Ballesteros" as performed by Dorindo Cárdenas in the 1960s and 1970s.

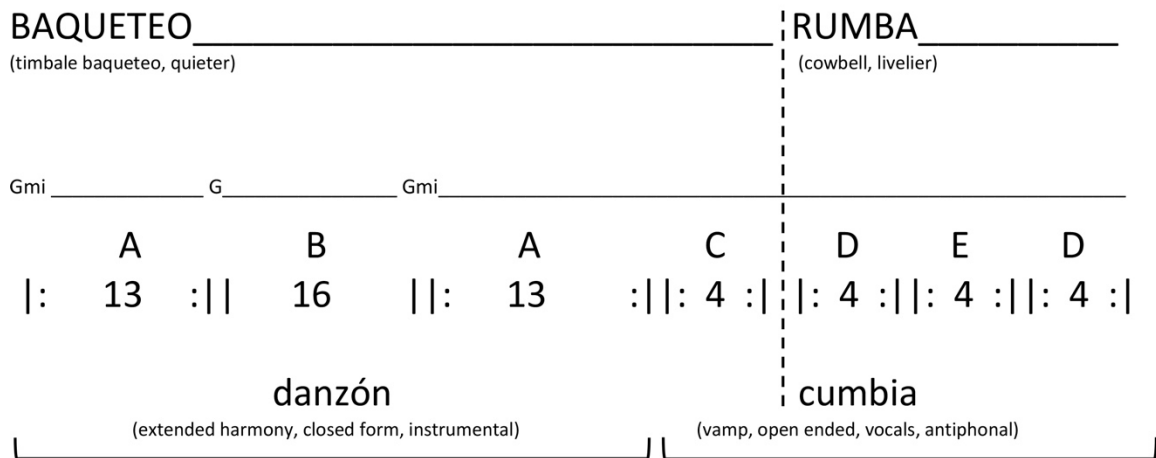
Like the rhythmic adaptations discussed above, the tonal modulations of danzón-cumbias and the modifications implemented by conjunto accordionists are further instances of a transformational process of the transnational danzón set in motion in one corner of the hemisphere in response to changing tastes and trends among social dancers. As I will show in this final section, the echoes of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century danzón-cumbia reverberate to this day and can be discerned in the songs played by some of the most popular música típica conjuntos of the present century.

### ***The Danzón-Cumbia Performance Complex, Yesterday and Today***

Taking into account the various formal elements described above, it is possible to provide a general template of danzón-cumbia's compositional form, underlying rhythmic accompaniment, and tonal and harmonic attributes, all of which serve as a useful framework for understanding how danzón-cumbia works and recognizing its enduring impact on contemporary música típica repertoire. To that end, in this final section I sketch out the formal structure of both a well-known danzón-cumbia and an example of a contemporary música típica song. In comparing the forms of the older and newer repertoire, I wish to show that while present-day música típica repertoire is generally not regarded by conjunto musicians to be a holdover of the danzón-cumbia tradition—for, indeed, there is very little consensus in general on the history and origins of contemporary song forms—the striking structural parallels between the two are nonetheless ample enough to suggest a pattern of influence which is itself a testament of danzón's enduring legacy as it took hold outside of the Caribbean basin area.

For illustrative purposes, I have chosen Dorindo Cárdenas’s recording of “La linda Ballesteros” as an example of a “standard” danzón-cumbia. As we can see in the formal outline shown in Example 4, this song has many of the features that have come to characterize danzón-cumbia practice. As might be expected, its opening “danzón” is made up of relatively long melodic units of finite duration with a recurring “A” section and a tonic major/minor modulation. Its closing “cumbia” offers the anticipated contrast as it is comprised of a series of relatively short 4-bar vamps that are repeated in an open-ended fashion. Cárdenas’s performance is also typical insofar as it includes the characteristic transition from the baqueteo to the rumba groove with the latter of the two coming a full section after the beginning of the cumbia half of the song in the typical danzón-cumbia fashion of the time.

### La linda Ballesteros



**Example 4:** “La linda Ballesteros” (Dorindo Cárdenas, 1960s).

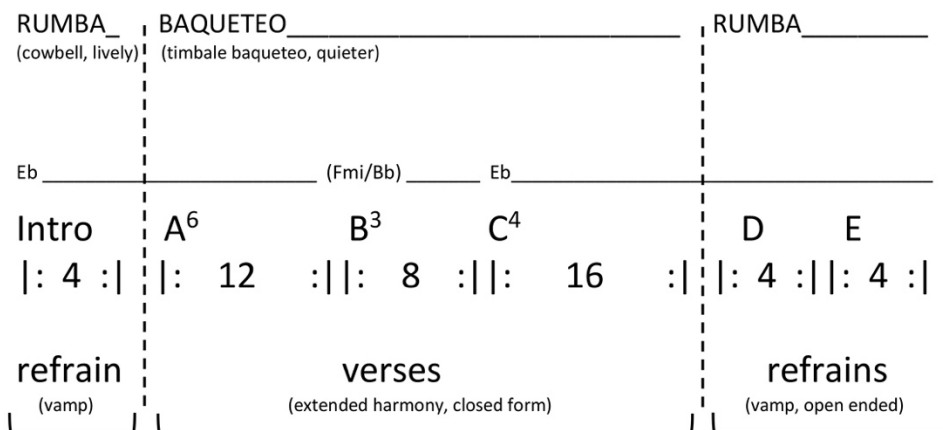
For contemporary música típica fans, danzón-cumbias—be they “La linda Ballesteros” or more recent compositions—are generally regarded as an older somewhat dated sound with deep roots in traditional practice. Contemporary danzón-cumbia composers such as Eraclides Amaya take great pleasure in their specialized knowledge and commitment to preserving what is all but a relic of a period of música típica’s history that today seems to belong solidly in the past. The nostalgia that some musicians feel for the fading danzón-cumbia is, of course, accentuated by its seeming incompatibility with contemporary música típica practice. This is because in many ways, contemporary música típica repertoire sounds quite different from danzón-cumbias. Reflecting their unrelenting pursuit of new sounds in order to draw the approval of an increasingly cosmopolitan dancing public, the writers of today’s hit songs draw on a wide range of influences, most common among them slow-paced *balada*-style melodies that are set to ever more richly-textured hybrid grooves that incorporate everything from salsa, Colombian *vallenato*, Dominican *merengue*, and reggaetón. And yet, despite their audible and readily perceivable differences, the newer repertoire has a good deal in common with early-to-mid-century danzón-cumbia.

To illustrate these commonalities, I will refer to the outline of the song “Pobre tonto enamorado” shown in Example 5. This song became a hit for one of Panama’s top conjuntos, Los



Plumas Negras, in 2006 and is written by Jorge Jaén, today a well-known songwriter, and at the time a young up-and-comer eager to break into the scene. With respect to the formal features that I have focused on in this essay, “Pobre tonto enamorado” is a good example of contemporary música típica songwriting. Like danzón-cumbia, contemporary música típica songs are arranged around a clearly demarcated binary framework that begins with a series of close-ended sections and transitions to a series of open-ended sections. Close-ended sections are comprised of generally longer melodic units of fixed repetition. In contrast, the open-ended sections are made up of comparably shorter melodic units of two or four (sometimes eight) bars. Lacking any apparent need for a fixed standardized language to refer to the sections of a song, musicians may refer to closed-ended half of a composition as the “verso” (verse) or “estrofa” (strophe) and the open-ended half as the “estribillo” (refrain) or “coro” (chorus). It is also not uncommon for musicians to refer to the sections I demarcate for purposes of analytical clarity as “verse” and “refrain” as the “baqueteo” and “rumba,” respectively, due to the fact that today, these binary forms and binary rhythms tend to align, as is the case in “Pobre tonto enamorado.” With the exception of the opening refrain that functions as the introduction of the piece, which is a common enough practice today, this song is organized around this basic binary form that clearly has its parallel in danzón-cumbia.

### Pobre tonto enamorado



Example 5: “Pobre tonto enamorado” (Los Plumas Negras, 2006).

More than their binary song forms, which are representative of a number of loosely related musical forms in the Americas (such as Cuban son and salsa), it is the overall sectional character of contemporary música típica repertoire that binds it most closely to the danzón tradition. Like the violinists who wrote danzón-cumbias, today’s songwriters generally eschew the strophic verse (as in same melody, different lyrics) format in preference for a series of different and usually contrasting melodies. This compositional pattern is mainly true of “Pobre tonto enamorado,” which does have some strophic elements. Specifically, section “A” features a 12-bar melody that is played six times, first instrumentally, then sung twice with different lyrics in strophic form, and then the whole 36-bar sequence repeats in the same manner. Section “B” follows the same repetitive strophic pattern, beginning with an 8-bar instrumental rendition of the melody that is then sung twice with different lyrics. The C section does not include any strophic elements at all as it alternates between the same

instrumental and vocal melody. The contrast that is achieved between these three melodies which follow one after the other is further amplified by the harmonic contrast between section “B” and its adjacent sections. Unlike the other two sections of the verse, the B section avoids the tonic chord (Eb) altogether and instead emphasizes the supertonic (F minor) and dominant (Bb major) chords. This noticeable shift in harmonic emphasis creates a sense that the song has modulated to a minor-key, which provides a degree of tonal contrast reminiscent of a *danzón*.

In summary, “Pobre tonto enamorado” is a good example of the way in which a highly sectional compositional form has been adapted to include the sort of lyrical variation we might expect from song forms that are strophic in their organization, such as *baladas* and many *salsa* songs. On the whole, however, this song, like the majority of *música típica* songs, moves through a sequence of discrete melodic and harmonic units in exactly the same way that a *danzón-cumbia* would. These continuities, I believe, are the result of the fact that as a genre, *música típica* incorporated the *danzón* quite early in its development and, through a series of creative interventions, maintained that tradition as a form of popular and commercial music over the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Absent additional substantive research, at this point it is difficult to say with certainty that the *música típica* compositions of today are, in fact, more or less direct descendants of the *danzón*. That said, however, this initial study of a sampling of the recorded output of popular accordion conjuntos does support the hypothesis that as a compositional form, *música típica* is an extension of the *danzón* tradition and probably the only one of its kind to be regarded by contemporary audiences as a form of cutting-edge dance music, indeed, the quintessential popular music of its country.

### **Conclusion**

In this article, I provided an outline of the history and formal characteristics of Panamanian *danzón-cumbia*. To do this, I relied on a rich body of research on circum-Caribbean and especially Cuban *danzón* practices to identify specific formal aspects of this music that rural Azuerense musicians likely adopted and adapted in order to meet the expectations of an increasingly cosmopolitan baile-going public. As we have seen, *danzón-cumbias* have a highly sectional rondo-like melodic organization, include a two-part fixed and open-ended compositional form, and make ample use of the *cinquillo* rhythm and tonal modulations—all of which are features of the broader *danzón* tradition. At the same time, Azuerense musicians were instrumental in introducing a number of key modifications to the music, including adding an open-ended *cumbia* at the end of a *danzón* while performing the entire composition to a *cumbia*-based rhythmic accompaniment that, in time, would also come to incorporate the two-part Cuban-inspired “*baqueteo*” and “*rumba*” grooves. Additional changes to *danzón-cumbia* came about with the shift from the violin to the button accordion which presented several harmonic and melodic challenges to the mainly diatonic instrument. These challenges were met in several ways, including by adjusting the melody, substituting a tonic major/minor modulation for its relative minor/major equivalent, and/or modifying the reeds of the accordion so that it could be made to play the requisite accidentals. I concluded this study by showing how this process of reworking the basic *danzón-cumbia* to meet the needs of baile enthusiasts continues to the present moment and can likely be heard in the two-part sectional forms of even the most cutting-edge *música típica* repertoire of today.

As a compositional form and performance practice that developed within the interconnected worlds of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Panamanian dancefloor *cumbia* and the Cuban *danzón* tradition, *danzón-*

cumbia offers a compelling case study of how musical genres transform, proliferate, and propagate as they move across geographical boundaries, between overlapping cultural spheres, and through time. Having examined this process principally through the relatively narrow scope of an analysis of key formal features of two related musical traditions, this study inevitably leaves some important questions unanswered. To my mind, chief among these relates to our understanding of the circumstances in which danzón first made its way to Panama and the reception it received from audiences in both urban and rural areas of the country. By the same token, the flourishing of danzón across the Azuero Peninsula raises the question of how this genre moved throughout the country and to what extent its embrace by conjunto musicians was an isolated regional or, alternatively, a more widely occurring national phenomenon. We can also pose those same questions with respect to the territories beyond and especially to the south of what is generally regarded as the danzón's main sphere of influence, that is, the Spanish-speaking islands and the northerly mainland port cities of the Caribbean basin. Indeed, at present we know little about danzón's hemispheric reach and even less about the role it played in the development of new hybrid musical forms. My hope is that the history and formal features of the danzón-cumbia tradition explored in this article will bring us closer to a better understanding and appreciation of its journey from one Caribbean site to another and the manner in which it was transformed in the process.

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