

# Clave and Beyond:

## Developing Latin American Rhythmic Vocabulary for the Mallet Player

By Victor Mendoza



VICTOR MENDOZA AND FRIENDS  
Late Night Performance . Friday @ 10:00 P.M.

Terms like *Salsa* and *World Music* were coined for marketing purposes. In some ways this was helpful for the consumer, but in other ways it has been very confusing for musicians wanting to study the styles. I grew up listening to music from Spain, Cuba, Mexico, Argentina, and Brazil, and later, I got into Middle Eastern and South Indian music via a wonderful teacher named John Grant who was an important influence in my musical formation. My father, besides being a highly accomplished classical and flamenco guitarist, has always had an interest in music from other cultures. So, basically, besides learning the music “by ear,” I learned to listen. All those nights playing maracas with my father on endless boleros and hanging out with great flamenco artists are some of my fondest childhood memories.

### TIME FEEL

Something that good musicians have in common is solid *time feel*. Something that great musicians have in common is solid *time feel* plus great *rhythmic facility*, regardless of the music that they play. This particular facility comes from spending years in front of their instrument and checking out all types of music, as well as studying and playing it. Any musician with rhythmic facility learns highly syncopated music faster. This translates to the interpretation of all types of music—in our case, Pan American music, which includes everything from *danzón* from Cuba to *choriños* from Brazil to *chacarera* from Argentina, and so on.

Reacting to rhythm is one thing; creating and interpreting it takes it to another level. A musician who can simply repeat rhythmic

phrases cannot necessarily develop them. This is where knowing some general rules can be of benefit to the musician.

### AUTHENTIC PHRASING

One important point I should make is that

sions, which may lack the depth, intensity, and rhythmic sophistication of the style. With the tight schedule that most students and musicians have, it’s more practical to spend more time with *authentic* material, giving you a truer point of reference.

When learning a language, starting from the rules does not help. Neither does learning unrelated words, which is like putting back together a dissected frog without ever having seen one! To be understood in a particular language, you want to speak using phrases common to the language. Following are some pointers that might help you get started with a couple of rhythmic concepts for music from Cuba and Argentina. I hope this helps you to expand your vocabulary and repertoire.

### ARTICULATION

Playing the rhythmic figure isn’t enough. You have to use the correct articulation to make it sound right. This will give more definition and clarity to your lines, and helps clarify the style of the phrase. When you have a series of three or more notes in succession, you should shape the contour of your melodic lines. You will notice the difference when you sing the lines and are able to reproduce them on a mallet instrument.

### RHYTHMIC DEFINITION

First, practice only the rhythm of your melodic line with the metronome to be sure you are playing it correctly. After that, play the melody without the metronome and search for the “groove” within the melody.

Phrasing notes that fall on the upbeats in a *samba* feels different than in a *mambo*, in which they feel more laid back. Also, don’t forget to



you must go to the source: Check out the true composers and great interpreters of the style, and not just some modern “watered-down” ver-

pay attention to articulation. The bass lines, which function differently, also affect this: the *tumbao* consistently anticipates the harmony while the samba bass lines generally land on the beat. Silly as it may sound, something as simple as steady time may be the answer to making a line “groove,” so eventually turn off the metronome.

Tip: Record a metronome beat with one measure on and one measure off. Then try two measures with the beat on and two measure with the beat off, and so on. This will keep you honest with the tempos.

After this process comes the best part, which is playing only with the bass line and some kind of rhythmic pattern, such as the clave. As you feel more comfortable with the bass line, you can take some liberties and will be able to create tension-release effect. This is something that singers in Cuba and Puerto Rico have done for ages. This is very challenging and it can make your lines *sing* on marimba or vibes.

### TEMPO AND GROOVES

Steady time is obviously important, so we need to study grooves in different tempos. I've noticed that some drummers who sound great playing swing, tend to speed up or slow down to a “comfort-zone” as soon as they play Afro-Cuban music—or vice-versa. My theory is that it takes some time to get used to, or adjust to, a *tumbao* which, by anticipating the chord changes, gives the sense that the time is one beat earlier.

The great tango singer Roberto Goyeneche sometimes resolved a phrase out of time, which gives more emphasis to the lyrics, and yet, it feels so natural. A good example of this is *Vuelvo al Sur* with Astor Piazzolla; even if you do not know Spanish, you might appreciate the depth of the emotional expression.

### AFRO-CUBAN MUSIC

Latin jazz is in constant change and development, and musicians naturally are always trying different things, which keeps it from going stale.

### PULSE

The *clave* should not be a mystery, nor should it be overlooked, since this is the basis for this music. There are two claves used in Afro-Cuban music: *rumba*, which you tend to hear mostly on religious music from the Yoruba religion and in folkloric or secular Cuban music (listen to *Muñequitos de Matanzas*). The other clave is the *son clave*, also known as *mambo clave*, which you commonly hear in *Salsa* with such groups as *El Gran Combo* from Puerto Rico. There are several dance styles that work great on marimba, such as *güajira* and *danzón*, so take time to check this out.

### CLAVE

Playing in *clave* does not mean playing the

#### Assistant Professor of Music, Percussion - Chapman University, Faculty Position.

Description: This is a full-time, tenure-track position that will begin in August 2009. This faculty member will, in collaboration with the Director of Instrumental Studies, manage recruitment efforts within the percussion area, teach applied lessons, percussion pedagogy and percussion methods courses, supervise percussion masterclasses, direct the percussion ensemble, and coordinate percussion sections for all major ensembles. The successful candidate will also be qualified to teach in one or more of the following areas: improvisation, ethnomusicology and world music performance. Involvement in conservatory and university committees is expected. Qualifications: Doctorate is preferred; Master's degree in percussion performance is required. Demonstrated excellence as a performer at the national and international level is essential. Proven record of successful teaching at the university level is expected. Expectations: The successful candidate will be expected to assume an active leadership role in the recruitment and retention of qualified percussion students. A thorough knowledge and understanding of the preparation of conservatory-level undergraduate musicians is vital. The Conservatory of Music is part of the College of Performing Arts and consists of fifteen full-time faculty members and approximately fifty-two adjunct instructors. With an established reputation for both academic and performance excellence, the Conservatory of Music has approximately 220 music majors, with many non-majors also participating in its programs. Qualified candidates should submit a cover letter, résumé, three letters of recommendation and three professional references (including telephone numbers and email addresses), a CD/DVD recording of a live and unedited performance, and a DVD recording of a lesson and/or masterclass to: Dr. Sean Heim and Dr. Shaun Naidoo, Co-Chairs, Search Committee – Assistant Professor of Music, Percussion, Conservatory of Music, Chapman University, One University Drive, Orange, California 92866. Submission deadline is November 14, 2008.

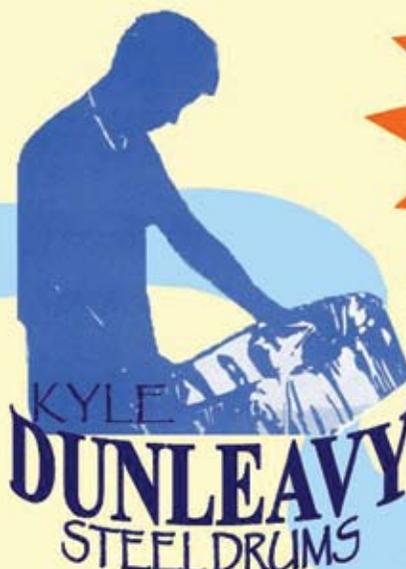


[www.kdsteeldrums.com](http://www.kdsteeldrums.com)

Visit Us At PASIC 2008

Booth # 530

CHECK OUT OUR  
PERFORMANCE  
PACKAGES STARTING  
AT \$2195! EVERYTHING  
YOU NEED FOR ONE  
GREAT PRICE!



actual clave rhythm. For melodic instruments, playing in clave means playing phrases and accompaniments derived from the two-bar rhythm, such as *montunos*.

In Latin jazz, when improvising, or when writing a composition, you do not have to be so strict and play or write every phrase in clave, but you should try to end your phrases with it, since it resolves more naturally, and the rhythm section will resolve with you as well. However, once the tune gets to the mambo section, you'd better play in clave! Otherwise, your lines will sound weak, since this is the point where the rhythm section starts to burn!

Try to expand your phrases to at least four measures in order to avoid sounding "choppy." Being that the clave pattern is a two-bar phrase, it's very easy to fall into a "fragmented" type of phrasing. The direction of the clave is dictated by the melody: generally speaking, you will find more anticipations on the "3" side of the clave and downbeats on the "2" side. This applies to accompaniment patterns as well.

#### PRACTICE APPROACH

Example 1 shows a melodic line from one of the examples from my DVD. This example

is built on a typical I-IV-V7-IV chord progression. Try this with another friend on marimba and vibes, or a bass player.

1. Clap the clave while singing the *cáscara* pattern.

2. Now clap the clave and sing the *tumbao*, or bass line pattern. The goal is to get to the point of feeling comfortable with the pulse derived from the clave, and that takes time. Patience is a virtue; taking your time is an issue!

3. Sing the rhythm of the melody while clapping the clave.

4. Play the melody on vibes or marimba while your friend plays the bass line. Improve varying the lines slowly. For variation, change the pitches or vary the rhythm, keeping in mind the "general rules" mentioned above.

Correct articulation will give you more clarity and definition, especially when you play with other percussion instruments. A rhythm that sounds great with the right articulation can sound really "cheesy" if accents are placed incorrectly. When you start improvising, fight the urge to play "scalar," which, besides lacking interest, fools you into thinking that that's all there is to it. Better yet, move the chord tones or the guide tones (3rd and 7th of the chord).

Obviously, this becomes more complex when you get into jazz changes, as in Example 2.

Another point is, when playing a genuine Cuban melodic line, the clave is suggested within the rhythm of the melody.

#### ARGENTINEAN CHACARERA

Latin jazz continues to evolve, and the nature is to experiment and try new or different things to break the monotony of something already done.

In terms of 6/8 time, musicians automatically think *bembé*. When inexperienced players compose or improvise on this groove, they tend to begin and end their phrases consistently on downbeats. This lacks interest, flow and *afinque* (groove). It's better to play off the beat, as in Example 3.

Example 4 is an example of this rhythm in the B section of my tune "Sin Saber Porque" (Latin Real Book, Sher Music; *This is Why* CD).

In addition to this dance form, there are many beautiful rhythms in 6/8 from all over South America, each with its own distinctive phrasing, such as the *marinera* from Peru, *zoropo* from Venezuela, and the seductive *chacarera* from Argentina. The beauty of all these

Example 1

2-3 CLAVE  
CA'SCARA PATTERN  
CLAVE  
FILL.....  
Dmin Gmin A7 Gmin Dmin Gmin A7 Gmin Dmin  
"TUMBAO"

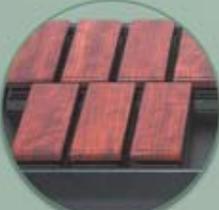
Example 2

2-3 CLAVE  
Emin7 A7(b9) Dmin7 G7

Example 3

**BEMBE' BELL PATTERN**

**BASS LINE**



Now being used by orchestras such as the BBC Philharmonic, the new Xylosynth XS6 has many people excited with it's midi percussion possibilities.

With the new optional lower cost Birch Laminate keys, the performance and practicality of the XS6 are now within the grasp of players and programmers from all backgrounds. The cushioned wood keys along with highly reliable piezo technology give great dynamics and instant response, up to 33 notes per second per key and less than 3 millisecond latency.

▲ Solid Bubinga or Birch Laminate ▼

The Xylosynth is available in 2, 3 and 4 octaves in C-C or F-F layout, a with the 4 octave ingeniously folding in half.

The portability (3 octave weighs just 10.4kgs) and easy setup make the Xylosynth accessible to a wide variety of users from the dark of a theatre pit to outside in the sunshine, from touring professionals to high schools. Most importantly though, it's a pleasure to play.








# XYLOSYNTH

Wernick Musical Instruments, 2a Twycross St, Leicester LE2 0DU, UK Tel: (+44) 116 255 6225

Hand made in Great Britain 

'Xylosynth' is a trademark of Wernick Musical Instruments

[www.wernick.net](http://www.wernick.net)

# SIN SABER PORQUE'

VICTOR MENDOZA

ARRANGED BY: V. MENDOZA/DANILO PEREZ

The musical score for 'Sin Saber Porque' is presented in three staves. The top staff is the treble clef melody, the middle staff is the bass clef accompaniment, and the bottom staff is a rhythmic pattern for a percussion instrument. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 12/8. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes with some ties. The bass line features a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The rhythmic pattern in the bottom staff is a complex syncopated rhythm using eighth and sixteenth notes. Chords are indicated below the bass staff: Ab Maj7/Bb, Bb sus4, Ab Maj7/Bb, and Bb sus4.

**LYNN UNIVERSITY**  
BOCA RATON, FLORIDA

**CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC**  
*When talent meets inspiration, the results are extraordinary.*

We proudly announce the appointment of  
**Edward Atkatz**  
as Distinguished Artist in Residence, Percussion

**OFFERING**

- Bachelor of Music in Performance
- Bachelor of Arts in Music
- Bachelor of Music in Composition
- Master of Music in Performance
- Master of Music in Composition
- Professional Performance Certificate

3601 N. Military Trail, Boca Raton,  
Florida 33431  
www.lynn.edu/music  
800-888-LYNN (U.S. only)  
561-237-7900 (outside U.S.)

Lynn University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, gender, religion, nationality, ethnic origin, disability and/or age in administration of its educational and admission policies, scholarship and loan programs, athletic and/or other school-administered programs.

rhythms is that each one has its own unique bass lines and beautifully syncopated melodies, which make the marimba and vibraphone ideal instruments for this music. I suggest you check out compositions by Argentinean composer Guillo Espel as recorded by marimbist Angel Frette.

Example 5 is a melodic sample based on *chacarera* from my tune "Chacalonga." This was recorded with the Buenos Aires Philharmonic and is soon to be released. Also a small group version is on my *Black Bean Blues* CD. You will find examples on my Web page: [www.victor-mendoza.com](http://www.victor-mendoza.com).

Notice that the pulse of the bass lines move between 6/8 and 3/4, and the phrases combine 2 over 3 and 4 over 3.

I hope you find this information useful and it helps make your music-making process a sweet one!

**Victor Mendoza** is a Professor at the Berklee College of Music. His latest project includes a soon-to-be-released recording with the Buenos Aires Philharmonic.

# CHACARERA

Musical notation showing the Chacarera rhythm. The top staff is in treble clef with a 12/8 time signature, containing four dotted quarter notes. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a 12/8 time signature, containing a sequence of eighth notes: quarter rest, eighth note, eighth note with accent, quarter rest, eighth note, eighth note with accent.

CHACARERA COMBINES 12/8 RHYTHMS OVER A 6/4 PULSE

BASIC BASS PULSE

## SAMPLE 1 FROM "CHACALONGA"

©MENDOZAMUSIC BMV/SQAE

Musical notation for Sample 1 from "Chacalonga". The top staff is labeled "(MELODY)" and the bottom staff is labeled "(BASS)". Both are in 12/8 time. The melody features eighth notes with accents and slurs, including a triplet. The bass line consists of eighth notes with accents and slurs. A circled 8 is at the start of the bass line.

(MEASURE 21)

Continuation of the musical notation for Sample 1 from "Chacalonga". The top staff continues the melody with a triplet of eighth notes. The bottom staff continues the bass line with eighth notes and slurs. A circled 8 is at the start of the bass line.

## SAMPLE 2 FROM "CHACALONGA"

Musical notation for Sample 2 from "Chacalonga". The top staff is in treble clef and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature has two flats. The melody consists of eighth notes with slurs and accents. The bass line consists of eighth notes with slurs and accents. A circled 8 is at the start of the bass line.

(MEASURE 194)

Continuation of the musical notation for Sample 2 from "Chacalonga". The top staff continues the melody with eighth notes and slurs. The bottom staff continues the bass line with eighth notes and slurs. A circled 8 is at the start of the bass line.