

Puerto Rican Traditional Music Genres
Professional Development Institute 2020
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We want to offer the Arts Education Peer Group resources to learn more about traditional Puerto Rican music. [William Cepeda](#) will be joining us at the PDI with his Afro- Rican Jazz, a subgenre he coined to refer to the hybrid he created with different folk genres.

The Taínos were the island's indigenous population. Then, in 1520 there began a period of transculturation that lasted for almost three centuries. First, colonizers arrived from Spain, then Africans were brought to the island as slaves. A new culture developed with elements of the original culture, but in a different form, creating what is known today as "Puerto Rican." Puerto Rican music - bomba, jíbara music, plena and danza are also a product of this transculturation.

Taíno

The little information we have about Taínos cultural practices comes from 16th century historians and interpretation based on archaeological research. Taínos celebrated rituals with songs and dances called *areytos*. In these *areytos*, they used a drum made out of a hollowed out trunk that resonated, called a *mayaguacan*, and instruments made out of gourds filled with stones or seeds that rattled, called *maracas*. There is also a reference to a scraper instrument that was called a *guajey*, possibly the precursor of what we now know today as the güiro. And, they also used the conch shell that they called *el guamo*, to call each other or to communicate with each other from long distances.

An example of William Cepeda playing the [conch shell](#).

Bomba

Bomba was brought to Puerto Rico by people from Africa. But the origin of bomba cannot be placed in the context of a specific Puerto Rican town. Each regional tradition possesses local characteristics that are very specific, that differentiate them or make them similar to the other bomba traditions. While all bomba traditions have song, drums, dancing and percussion instruments, but they may differentiate in the use of the percussion instruments or the distribution of the instruments.

In all bomba traditions, there are two main drums, called *barriles* de bomba. The barril with a sharper pitched sound is called the primo and it is used for the repiques or improvisations that develop rhythms during a dialog with one dancer, in front of the drum. The lower pitched drum, the *buleador*, maintains the constant rhythm, with the cua(made up of two sticks) and one maraca keeping the tempo.

In bomba there exist rhythmic patterns —that are called toques, sones or seises— that make up particular styles and determine the particular ways to dance to the music. Repetitive patterns and improvised variable sequences are combined to bomba's rhythmic base. The result of this complex combination of various rhythmic patterns played simultaneously is what is known as "polyrhythm." The lyrics to bomba songs have simple lyrics that a soloist, called an "inspirador," sings and a chorus repeats.

You can learn more about Bomba in this [video](#).

Plena

Plena was created in Puerto Rico in the beginning of the 20th century. The rhythmic aspect shows our African heritage while the lyrics show our Spanish heritage. At first plena developed in a working class neighborhood, in the barrio of San Antón in Ponce. Plena is sung by a soloist, improvising simple lyrics, and a choir that sing the chorus. Plena is often compared to the neighborhood newspaper because plena themes are usually about things that have happened in the community like “Cortaron a Elena” and “Temporal.”

The *pandero* is the defining instrument of plena. The pandero arrived in Puerto Rico as part of the Africanization of the Andaluz heritage in the Caribbean, and probably comes from the Arab Berber, with influences of the African pandereta and African tuning. The three pandero hand-held framed drums of different sizes and pitches, the *requinto*, the *seguidor*, and the *punteador*, are played at the same time, producing a driving melodic rhythm. Improvisations are played by the highest pitched drum, the requinto. Other instruments, such as the güiro, are added.

An example of Plena in this [video](#).

Danza

Danza is the first genre of urban music with a national character. This Puerto Rican genre is most closely associated with European classical and salon music. It was the domain of the elite until the later part of the 19 century, when it was adopted and adapted by people at all levels of society and became widely popular. The instruments used for danza are the piano, wind instruments, string instruments and percussion.

The first part of the danza, called the *paseo*, usually consisted of 8 measures and lacked a rhythmic base but served as a tonal introduction. The second part, which was called the merengue was extended from its original 16 measures to 34, in 1854, and up to 130 later on. Other parts began to appear and a new musical genre began to take shape.

You can see an example of a Danza in this [video](#).

Jíbaro Music (Décima, Aguinaldo, Seis)

Décima- This folk music genre originated in Southern Spain is probably the earliest example of the fusion of native rhythms to the lyrics and melodies of Spanish music. All the songs are sung and the frequent use of ten improvised couplets of eight syllables each, called décimas. This is derived from the poetic form common in 16th century Spain. An example of a [Décima](#).

Aguinaldo- The 'aguinaldo' or Christmas offering is based on an old form of Spanish Christmas carol. Aguinaldos are traditional Christmas tunes, many of which are also known in other parts of Latin America. In Puerto Rico, the Christmas season would be the time for what is called parrandas in which a group consisting of family, friends or neighbors would sing and play these Christmas carols. An example of [Aguinaldo](#).

Seis- The seis has its roots in the musical genres that came to Puerto Rico in the latter part of the 17th century from southern Spain. The 'seis', which literally means 'six' is, in fact, a great number of different melodic motifs each of which can then be used as the basis for sung poetic improvisation. The melodies and harmonies are simple and accompanied by a cuatro, guitar, and the indigenous instrument, the güiro. An example of [Seis](#).

Reference: http://www.musicofpuertorico.com/index.php/genre_music/