

Merengue Venezolano

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The *merengue venezolano* is a twentieth-century dance music from Venezuela, with a characteristic attractive rhythm. It is a completely different genre from the *merengue* of the Dominican Republic in the way of its tempo, rhythm, instruments, culture and historical development. *Merengue venezolano* is also known by two other names: *merengue caraqueño*, relating its origin to the capital city Caracas, and *merengue rucaneao*, in which a reference to *Rúcano*, a mix for a popular jelly dessert, is used as a simile for the sensual pelvic movements of its dance. The *merengue* came into fashion in Venezuela during the period from the 1920s until the 1940s, the final years of a rural, backward country dominated by the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez, who died in 1935. The country's economics had changed gradually from an agricultural-based industry to those of a modern nation, becoming in this time the world's second largest oil exporter. At first, the music of *merengue* was closely associated with the *mabiles*, popular drinking and dancing places in Caracas, and with the capital's Carnival celebrations in street parades and plazas. Later in the 1940s, it was absorbed into the dance halls of the higher classes through the adoption by the famous dance orchestra of Luis Alfonso Larrain, founded in 1939, and also became part of the repertoire of popular smaller groups such as the Cantores del Trópico, led by the guitarrist-singer-composer Antonio Lauro (who composed 'Merengue para guitarra') and of composers such as Eduardo Serrano. Traditional hybrid ensembles of then and now who dedicate their program to arrangements of Venezuelan folk music – ensembles such as *estudiantinas*,

orquestas típicas and *bandas marciales* - always include *merengues* in their repertoire. These music groups consist of Venezuelan folk instruments (*cuatro*, guitar, mandolin, mandolas, maracas, percussion), mixed with symphonic instruments (strings, woodwinds, brass, saxophones) in different configurations. Twenty-first century *estudiantinas* are mostly situated in the educational circuits, whereas the *orquestas típicas* and *bandas marciales* are usually subsidized by the local governments.

Historical Outline

The origins of *merengue venezolano* are disputed. According to Ramón y Rivera, it is a music-type descended from the *danza cubana*, known up until the 1920s as *tango-merengue* (Ramón y Rivera 1976, 95), but it was named thereafter *guasa* or *merengue* without distinction (Ramón y Rivera 1969, 190). This author traces the first appearances of the *danza merengue* to the scores of compositions included in the *Seminario El Zancudo*, such as ‘La Boriqueña’ by Salvador Llamozas (1854-1940), in 1880 (1976, 85), and to compositions by other art music composers such as José A. Montero (1839-1881) (see also Soto 1998), and the famous band music composer Pedro Elías Gutiérrez (1870-1954) (see also Peñín 1998). Salazar on the other hand argues that the *merengue* originated from the Andalusian *tanguillo*, but could also have derived from the *fulía negra*, an Afro-Venezuelan folk type of the central coast, and that the *tango merengue* originated from Haiti, spreading throughout the Caribbean (Salazar 1991, 41). Soto mentions a possible derivation from the Basque *zorrico* proposed by Vicente Emilio Sojo (Soto 1998, 220). It was also performed by *grupos cañoneros* (‘cannon’ music groups), due to the fact that the musicians would call the listeners’ attention by firing a bamboo cylinder (*trabuco*) filled with an explosive mixture dubbed *carburo*, every time a performance of *merengue* would start in the entrances (*zaguanes*) of private houses. Its traditional instrumentation consisted of guitar, *cuatro*

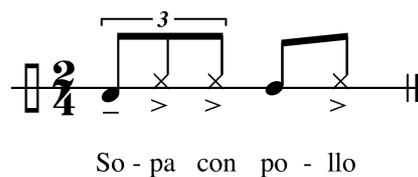
(Venezuelan strummed four-string chordophone), *rallo* (gourd rasp), maracas, and a mandolin, flute, violin or clarinet as melodic instruments, with voices (Soto 1998, 221).

After the success of merengue in the arrangements of Larrain's orchestra in the 1940s, among many other *orquestas de baile*, the presence of this music and dance style diminished considerably in a changing, modernizing country, as a result of the growing distribution of foreign recorded music, which was widely accessible on radio as well as in concerts by touring foreign artists. During the 1950s, however, one or two *merengues* continued to be included in the repertoire of dance orchestras such as Billo's Caracas Boys, who played for higher social class events, and especially for the famous Carnival celebrations in Caracas during the regime of the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952-58). *Merengue* has regularly been included in the repertoire of musicians with *neofolklore* tendencies – in small vocal ensembles such as the Quinteto Contrapunto, from the mid-1960s, and Serenata Guayanesa, originating in the next decade - as well as in choir arrangements from the beginning of the 1970s onwards. The same applies to the new hybrid-instrumental *ensambles* which sprang up in the 1980s, such as 'El Cuarteto,' 'Grupo Raíces de Venezuela,' 'Ensamble Gurrufio,' among many others, and to solo singers such as Simón Díaz, Cecilia Todd and Lilia Vera. It also became one of the rhythms adopted by the art music composers involved in the Nationalist school led by the composer Vicente Emilio Sojo in mid-twentieth century, such as Inocente Carreño. This trend has persisted well into the twenty-first century, where art music composers equally versed in popular music, such as Orlando Cardozo in his *Merenguísticas*, have taken the *merengue* rhythm as being a symbol of the new Venezuelan culture, although it is part of the past as a dance music genre. New small *ensambles*, as well as jazz artists devoted to *fusión* music, have experimented in the search for the type of music style that defines Venezuela, and advocate for the *merengue* as one of the best candidates among all

Venezuelan rhythms to represent the new national pop music-to-be. In both cases - its usage in art music nationalism as well as in *fusión* music, where performance takes place without collective dance - the *merengue venezolano* faces a change from its former function since it had been a music ideally suited for dancing in couples. At the same time, the *merengue* is also being continually promoted through different channels with the intention of regaining acceptance in the pop media, which, as a key to success, would imply to serve again as music for dancing. Just how this dynamic creative situation will develop is unpredictable today, but may depend on the creative level attained by whoever employs this attractive rhythm.

Musical Characteristics

Despite the many turnarounds in its history, the *merengue* has a birthright that qualifies it as the typical Venezuelan rhythm: traditionally, the first lesson given to anyone learning to play the *cuatro*, the national folk instrument, includes the *merengue* rhythm, strummed on the right hand by spelling the words ‘*sopa-con-pollo*’ (chicken soup), in order to seize the rhythm (see Example 1). Once this technique has been mastered, the *cuatro* student learns to play the first song, the traditional *merengue* called ‘Compadre Pancho.’



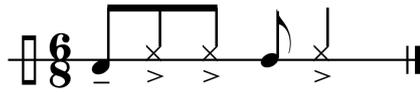
Example 1. *Merengue* in 2/4 meter (with the words used in *cuatro* lessons)

Merengue venezolano survives in a version intended to be close to the original, through the performances by *grupos de proyección* (revivalist folk groups) such as ‘Los Antaños del Stadium’ since 1950, ‘Cañón Contigo,’ founded in the early 1980s, and ‘Rucaneo del

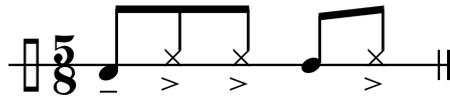
Mabil,' in 1995. The latter's stated purpose is '... to rescue this forgotten music typical of a city, Caracas, which has no longer any music to define it ...,' and at the same time to '... provide a dance-music alternative to compete with foreign music ...' (Gil 2005, author's translation). They include other traditional salon dance music in their repertoire as well as *merengue*, such as *pasodobles*, *joropos*, vals, fox-trots and *aguinaldos*. These groups incorporate wind instruments such as the saxophone, trumpet and trombone, the *cuatro*, *rallo*, a snare drum with cymbal and the electric or double bass, and usually dress in formal pair of trousers with suspenders and a flat-top round, straw hat. Their performances are seen more as a museum-type of concert, nostalgic of the lost and forgotten cultural homogeneity of Caracas.

Although the *merengue* is no longer part of regular dance repertoire in the early twenty-first century, the charm of the rhythm continues to attract present-day composers who are actively producing songs in this idiom, such as Luis Laguna, Pablo Camacaro of the 'Grupo Raíces de Venezuela,' and jazz artists such as Aldemaro Romero, Gerry Weil and the newly arrived pianist Prisca Dávila, among many others.

The rhythm of *merengue* is traditionally written as a two-beat phrase ($\pm 108 - 140$ bpm), but a controversy exists as to how to transcribe it into music notation. Scholars and composers have proposed different versions of it, without arriving at any agreement (Ramón y Rivera 1976, 89; Salazar 1991, 42; Soto 1998, 221). As the *merengue* has become part of the life of written art music and of arrangements of jazz music in its recent history, three notational options have been used but none of them works efficiently to make a performance from notation, without previous audio knowledge, sound like a *merengue venezolano*. It can be written in a 2/4 meter with triplets and two binary eighths notes (see Example 1 above), or in a 6/8 meter as in the majority of Venezuelan folk music (see Example 2):

Example 2. *Merengue* in 6/8 meter

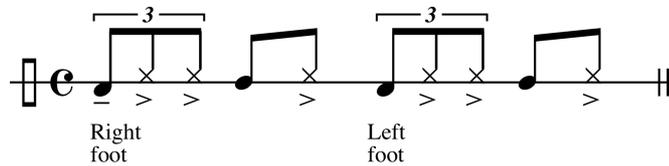
But among art music and jazz composers, the trend has been to choose a 5/8 meter (see Example 3):

Example 3. *Merengue* in 5/8 meter

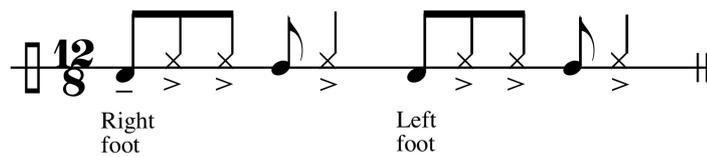
The problem with the first option is that the fifth note (the second eighth note on the second beat), sounds too slow. In the 6/8 version, the rhythm sounds too similar to an existing large body of Afro-Venezuelan music. With the version in 5/8 meter, the music would not be danceable because the two beats (dotted quarter note + quarter note) would be irregular. This version has become the preferred one for new composers since it is an unusual meter to experiment with, creating irregular syncopations. Since it is not meant to be danced to in any case, it is usually performed faster and measured in one single beat subdivided into five eighth notes. So there are two different rhythms existing for the *merengue venezolano* in the true musical sense, each differentiated by its regular or irregular beat structure. These two rhythms have become functional in two different fields of music activity: folk/pop/dance music using 6/8 or 2/4; art music/fusión/jazz using 5/8.

In the true *merengue* dance sense, the rhythm should be understood as a four-beat meter, since the dancer makes a major step with the right foot on the first beat and a major corresponding step with the left foot on the third beat. So it is either a four-beat rhythm (see

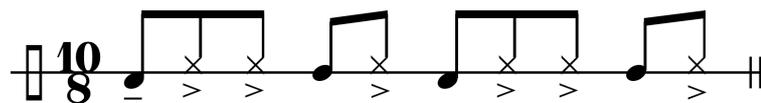
Examples 4 and 5), or the undanceable $10(5+5)/8$ meter (see Example 6), a fact that has not been previously considered in any literature.



Example 4. *Merengue* in a four-beat, binary-subdivided meter



Example 5. *Merengue* in a four-beat, ternary-subdivided meter



Example 6. *Merengue* in a four uneven-beat, $10(\text{five} + \text{five})/8$ meter

The difficulty caused by the last accented note of the phrase in Examples 4 and 5, the fifth note, in order to achieve the *merengue* ‘feel’ in its performance, can be solved by playing it with a nuance back or forth depending on whether it is written as a binary eighth note (Example 4) or as a quarter note within a $12/8$ meter (Example 5). This is what does indeed happen in the performance of the *merengue venezolano*, a delightful, catchy rhythm to dance.

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