

Unlocking the Groove: Integrating Latin Percussion in Jazz Ensembles

Presented by Jose Antonio Diaz, Diaz Music Institute

Overview

This clinic explores the rhythmic foundations and rehearsal strategies that help jazz ensembles authentically perform Latin jazz styles. Using a live demonstration group, participants will gain hands-on understanding of clave patterns, percussion integration, and Latin phrasing.

The Foundation of Latin Jazz Rhythm

Understanding the clave (3-2 and 2-3) as the rhythmic backbone of Latin music.

Examples of the various forms of Clave:



Overview of Percussion Instruments – congas, bongos, timbales, cowbell, shaker, güiro.

Claves



Claves are percussion instruments traditionally made of wood. These two pieces of wood, when struck together, produce a high-pitched sound. The claves perform a specific pattern that is used as a guideline for various Afro-Cuban rhythms.

Cha-cha Bell



The **cha-cha bell** is a small high-pitched bell mounted on the timbales that is used almost exclusively in the cha-cha-cha and other styles like the bolero and guajira.

Guiro



The **guiro** is an important instrument in the performance of the cha-cha-cha rhythm. The guiro adds the scraping sound to the texture of the cha-cha-cha rhythm. Traditionally made from a gourd, this instrument has wide grooves and is played by scraping the instrument with a small stick up and down the grooves.

Conga Drum



One of the most important Afro-Cuban instruments is the **conga drum**. The conga drum has its origins in West Africa. This instrument was made from tree trunks with calfskin stretched over the top and attached with wooden pegs and/or rope. The most common part performed on the conga drum is a pattern called tumbao. Tumbao is the basic conga drum pattern used in son-derived rhythms. The following is a basic tumbao used in the cha-cha-cha rhythm.

Timbales



The **timbales** are a pair of single-headed, tunable metal drums mounted on a stand. The timbales' sound is produced by striking the drum with sticks and/or the hand. Timbales were initially used exclusively by Cuban ensembles called charanga orchestras. These groups were interpreters of a song style called danzón. The instrumentation of these groups consisted of strings, woodwinds, string bass, guiro, and tympani. The tympani later evolved in the 1940s to what we now know as timbales. Today, the timbales are a major contributor to the Afro-Cuban sound. The standard timbales setup includes cowbells, woodblocks, and a cymbal.

Hands-On Demonstration: Understanding the Instruments

- Live demonstration of key rhythmic patterns and textures.
- Function of each percussion instrument within the ensemble.
- Integrating Latin percussion into a standard jazz rhythm section.
- One of the best methods to use to develop rhythmic continuity with the ensemble is a technique called Layering. Layering is like putting a musical puzzle together one piece at a time. When the parts are all in place, the result is a rhythmical Latin groove.

Rehearsal Techniques: Bridging Jazz and Latin Rhythms

- Step-by-step teaching methods for introducing Latin jazz charts.
- Developing the drum set player's Latin vocabulary (samba, mambo, cha-cha, songo).
- Aligning percussion, bass, and piano for a cohesive groove.
- Horn phrasing and articulation in Latin jazz – accent placement and tone color.

Common Mistakes and How to Fix Them

- Avoid tempo drift by anchoring to the percussion section.
- Prevent overplaying; create space and clarity.
- Correct rhythmic interpretation and horn articulation.
- Tips for directors leading Latin jazz without percussion expertise.