

## ACADEMIC ARTICLE

# PEREZ PRADO: A STORY OF RHYTHM, DRUMMING AND DANCING

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### Abstract

Despite his success or perhaps because of it, the renowned Cuban musician Pérez Prado was the target of criticism from some of his contemporaries. For some jazz musicians Prado's compositions lacked substance, were commercial even bordering on corny. Yet he also composed "concerts" which hardly had commercial success as an object. If his mambos are judged as lacking in quality, how to explain the interest classical musicians expressed in them? These questions led me to consider an idea advanced in popular music circles as to whether there was not one but several "Pérez Prados", i.e. one that composed mambos; another dedicated to marketing light commercial tunes; yet a third focused on "serious" concert music. An analysis of three central elements in all of his work do not reveal several "Pérez Prados". Rather it demonstrates that Prado was a single composer with different facets arising from diverse circumstances and artistic and economic needs, but based on the same musical foundations. Prado was a maestro whose variations never abandoned the main themes: rhythm, drums and dancing.

**Keywords:** mambo, drums, dance, rhythm, Benny Moré, rumberas

Pérez Prado has two qualities I admire very much – style and rhythm . . . everything he does, everything he writes is full of rhythm.

(Arturo “Chico” O’Farrill)

Pero qué bonito y sabroso bailan el mambo las mexicanas . . . !

(Benny Moré)

The goal of this essay is to clarify a conceptual conundrum regarding the work of the great musician Dámaso Pérez Prado. Much has been written about his *oeuvre*. We know of his gift for composing and orchestrating successful melodies, a talent revealed very early during his time with the Casino de la Playa jazzband in Havana, later manifested in his first mambo tunes, confirmed in his arrangement of "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White", and reaffirmed with his composition "Patricia". In the span of ten years he did what no popular music composer accomplished before or after: recording with four different orchestras four hits of universal impact, "Mambo No. 5", "Mambo Jambo", "Cherry Pink" and "Patricia". Three of these were his own compositions that, starting with the mambo, were nourished along the way by strands of cha-cha-chá and rock-and-roll. Writers like Jack Kerouac, García Márquez and Vargas Llosa lavished praise on Prado. Film directors Federico Fellini, Billy Wilder, Oliver Stone, Martin Scorsese, Carlos Saura and Pedro Almodóvar used his tunes in soundtracks; his music was present in US and European movies that featured Jane Russell, Silvana Mangano, Anita Ekberg, Woody Allen and Clint Eastwood. Prado's imprint is heard in innumerable jingles all over the world. Born and trained in Cuba, Pérez Prado became a global artist. He universalised the sounds of Cuban music and simultaneously Cubanised world music.

Despite his success or perhaps because of it, Prado was the target of criticism often expressed *sotto voce* by some of his contemporaries. For some jazz musicians Prado's compositions lacked substance, were commercial even bordering on corny. But then how to judge the "concerts" composed by Prado which hardly had commercial success as an object? And if his mambos are judged as lacking in quality, how to explain the interest classical musicians expressed in them?

These questions led me to consider an idea advanced in popular music circles as to whether there was not one but *several* "Pérez Prados", i.e. one that composed mambos; another dedicated to marketing light commercial tunes; yet a third focused on "serious" concert music. Or that perhaps it is better to think of *one* Prado, a composer with different facets all sharing common foundations? That is the conundrum I seek to resolve with an examination of Prado's musical biography. To that end I completed an extensive reading of

Prado's bibliography; examined texts about the creation of the mambo not only as a musical genre but also as a danceable style; and explored the relationship between the work of Pérez Prado and the "New York mambo". I reviewed earlier interviews with musicians and other contemporaries of Prado, and collected additional secondary historical materials.<sup>1</sup>

## In the Beginning there was Music

Pianist, arranger, composer and bandleader Dámaso Pérez Prado was born in the city of Matanzas, about 100 miles east of Havana, Cuba, on 11 December 1916, the son of Pablo Pérez, a reporter who worked for Havana's *Heraldo Comercial*, and Sara Prado, a school teacher in the Escuela Pública #17. From an early age Dámaso became acquainted with the piano: his uncle and aunt were accomplished players. The young Prado studied piano with María Angulo who utilised the Falcón Conservatory method. Alberto Falcón, a local matancero pianist, had achieved distinction in the artistic world of the time. He founded his conservatory, and organised a chamber music orchestra in Havana, which included the brilliant composer Amadeo Roldán. At the time Prado was studying classical piano the artistic talk-of-the country in Cuba was Roldán's 1928 ballet *La rebambaramba*. In his ballet Roldán used for the first time Afro-Cuban percussion instruments in a classical setting, a novelty which was surely discussed in Prado's educational environment.

Pérez Prado received comprehensive musical training with Rafael Somavilla Pedroso, a distinguished trumpet player and conductor, successively, of the Banda Municipal de Matanzas, the Matanzas Chamber Orchestra and the Matanzas Symphony Orchestra as well as the Matanzas jazzband (Acosta 2012: 122).

Dámaso was a brilliant student who learned the fundamentals of trumpet, saxophone and percussion and finished piano training in record time. At 16 he began to play for the local jazz jazzband Hermanos Beato and later with local charanga bands in radio stations, eventually leading his own charanga, playing in Matanzas and other nearby locales. Between 1936 and 1939 Prado played piano occasionally and contributed arrangements for the well-established and popular ensemble Sonora Matancera.

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1 I acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Chocolate Armenteros, Armando Peraza, Cachao López, Bebo Valdés and Alex Acuña, musicians who shared with me memories and opinions about Pérez Prado and the mambo; to Leonardo Acosta, Radamés Giro, Rosa Marquetti, Helio Orovio, Ned Sublette and Isabelle Leymarie for their ideas; and to my colleagues José Galiño and Emir García Meralla for their comments on the essay. Special thanks to Sergio Santana for his encyclopedic work on Pérez Prado.

Pérez Prado settled in Havana around 1940 at a propitious time for young, upcoming pianists. A number of changes had increased the demand for piano players at the beginning of the 1940s. Arsenio Rodríguez revolutionised the *son*, creating what is known as the *conjunto* format. Arsenio expanded the format by adding a conga drum, up to three trumpets and a piano, opening a door for the employment of piano players in these conjuntos. At the same time the growth in popularity and numbers of jazzbands, such as Casino de la playa, Orquesta Riverside, Cosmopolita and Bellamar, also demanded additional pianists, who often were expected to prepare arrangements as well. As a result, a number of young piano players, some of them coming from the provinces, showed up in the Havana music scene in the early 1940s. When Pérez Prado arrived he soon found himself in select company as his colleagues included a legion of pianists that were to make significant contributions to the development of Cuban music, sometimes as composers, sometimes as arrangers, and often as innovators.<sup>2</sup>

The new openings did not guarantee secure employment for the young musicians who did not have the luxury of choosing what kind of music ensemble to work for. Thus, Prado worked a variety of jobs over the next few years. He played piano for the house band at the Pennsylvania Club in the Playa de Marianao district, moving after that to the Cabaret Kursal near Havana Bay. Prado also played *danzón* and *danzonete* for the charanga de Paulina Álvarez, the conjunto Jóvenes del Cayo and as accompanist travelling through Cuba with up-and-coming singer Celia Cruz, the young *bolerista* Elena Burke and *guajira* singer Radeúnda Lima. He also found employment with the company band for radio station CMQ, La Cubaney, led by trumpeter Enrique Pilderot, which featured the legendary bongosero Agustín Gutiérrez.<sup>3</sup>

### Singer “Cascarita” and Casino de la Playa

Dámaso’s signs of brilliance emerged when he began working as an arranger for singer “Cascarita”, the most popular music singer of the early 1940s in Cuba, known for his interpretations of guarachas like “Coge pa’ la cola” and “El golpe

2 Among them Lino Frías, “Peruchín” Jústiz, René Hernández, Rubén González, Bebo Valdés, “Lili” Martínez Griñán, Felo Bergaza, Julio Gutiérrez, Orlando de la Rosa, Adolfo Guzmán and Frank Emilio Flynn.

3 A similar example was Bebo Valdés, who began working with the Hermanos Ulacia jazzband in 1937, later worked for the Hermanos Camacho conjunto, later yet for the Wilfredo García Curbelo orchestra in the Cabaret Faraón, and for the house band at the CMQ radio station, eventually securing the post of arranger for the Julio Cueva orchestra in 1945.

de bibijagua”. Prado eventually joined “Cascarita” in 1943 in the top Cuban dance jazzband at that time, Casino de la Playa, as pianist and arranger. The Casino travelled frequently to other Latin American countries where its sound and the voice of its lead singer Miguelito Valdés became very well known. With the Casino Prado began to emphasise the rhythmic intensity of Cuban dance music in his orchestrations, for example, arranging and recording tunes by the renowned rumbero and composer Chano Pozo.

The young pianist recorded successful tunes which revealed both his classical training and a distinct piano style, using dissonances, unusual in Cuban music up to then, and chord clusters (chords comprising at least three adjacent tones in a scale). Importantly Henry Cowell, generally considered as the composer most responsible for the establishment of clusters in classical music, presented his music in Havana concerts in 1930 and 1931. His style was reviewed with excitement in the city’s classical music review *Musicalia*. In 1933 composer Amadeo Roldán conducted Cowell’s works with the Havana Philharmonic Orchestra. Both Roldán and Alejandro García Caturla, the leading Cuban classical musicians of the moment, maintained correspondence with Cowell, and studied his work with care. Cowell in turn, brought the music of Roldán and Caturla to the attention of American audiences. The classical music community in Cuba at that time was a tightly knit group. It is likely that Prado, a teenage piano student at the time of Cowell’s visit, who was studying piano with the Falcón Conservatory manual, learned about Cowell’s innovations from his music teachers, eventually adapting chord clusters to his own playing.<sup>4</sup>

Prado’s contemporaries in the early 1940s already regarded Dámaso as an original arranger “con mucho swing” (Valdés 2000). Others recognised Prado’s talent for catchy arrangements. Musicologist Helio Orovio reprinted an article from the November–December issue of Havana’s show-business magazine *Radio Cine* which carried a photograph of a young Pérez Prado. A note below the photo stated that “D. Pérez Prado (El Rey del Mambo), [the King of Mambo] is a valued young musician who has excelled in his knack for mambos and introductions. His arrangements are behind the most popular songs, *montunos* and guarachas at this time” (Orovio 2005: 18; my translation). The word mambo as used in *Radio Cine* was *not* referencing the musical and dance style that appeared in the global music scene towards the end of the decade but rather a segment by that name in the structure of popular dance tunes of the

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4 Perhaps it is not by chance that Cuban musicologist José Reyes Fortún (2017: 89) detected a relationship between the “Rhythmitiana” concert by Cowell, and “Trompetiana”, one of the first tunes composed by Prado.

time. No one raised complaints about the naming of Prado as the ‘King of the mambo’ by *Radio Cine* magazine. This ‘nobility’ title did not seem to create any waves of rivalry, probably because the word mambo, a musical term already in use, was not yet connected to the commercial success the later dance and style would come to signify.

## The Flights of Prado

After the end of World War II there was a notable increase in travel by musicians between Havana, New York and other major cities in the hemisphere. New York artists like Tito Puente and Daniel Santos journeyed to Havana. Cuban musicians moved to New York, Mexico City, Panama, Lima, Caracas and other urban centres in Latin America. Humberto Cané, *tres* player for the Sonora Matancera, settled in Mexico City; Benitín Bustillo, trumpet player in the Arsenio Rodríguez conjunto, travelled and resided in Lima, Peru, for several years.

Pérez Prado joined the musical pilgrimage. He spent three months in New York in early 1946, landing in the centre of rich Cuban and African American music surroundings. He was invited by the Puerto Rican dancer, actress and singer Diosa Costello, nicknamed the “Puerto Rican bombshell”. Costello was a prominent figure in “Latin” show business in the city. She had appeared in the Broadway musical *Too Many Girls*, and was featured by New York bandleaders Xavier Cugat and Noro Morales in their music shows. Costello’s musical director was another matancero, Gilberto Valdés, renowned for his Afro-Cuban themed compositions, for example, “Ogguere”, “Rumba abierta”, “Yo vengo de Jovellanos”, as well as the guaracha “El botellero”. Valdés was simultaneously musical director for the Katherine Dunham troupe which used Cuban percussionists La Rosa Estrada and Julio Méndez and, briefly in 1947, Chano Pozo, in Afro-Cuban dance performances. With the help of Costello and her husband, Cuban bandleader Pupi Campos, Pérez Prado arrived in an exciting world of jazz, modern dance and Cuban music.

It is difficult to assess what impact Pérez Prado’s musicianship and skills as an arranger had on the local scene or what impact the New York scene had on him. During those three months he prepared arrangements for Xavier Cugat, Miguelito Valdés and Desi Arnaz. Certainly his impact as an arranger did not arise simply because of that short trip: years later the renowned Puerto Rican arranger and bandleader Ray Santos remembered that, for bandleaders in the city in the 1940s and 1950s, “almost all the arrangements we got our hands on were printed stock arrangements that came from Cuba, arrangements by Prado and other good arrangers like Julio Gutiérrez. Those arrangements were used directly for recordings by Tito Rodríguez, Tito Puente, Machito and Noro Morales” (Santos 2006; my translation).

Prado's association with Costello may have impressed upon him the need to showcase his rhythmic inventions via a dance choreography. In that way he would be following a practice, begun in the 1930s, by which Cuban music for non-Cuban publics was often promoted via dancing, either dancing show couples, i.e. René y Estela, Pablito y Lilón or, as Xavier Cugat liked to say, by putting a "pretty girl" dancing in front of the band. Prado's subsequent career shows his disposition always to combine his music with dance.

Upon his return to Cuba in August 1946, Prado was interviewed for *Radio Cine* magazine which once again referred to the pianist as the Rey del Mambo. In the interview Pérez Prado spoke of a new dance rhythm he was developing that he intended to call "son mambo". A photo accompanying the interview showed Pérez Prado sitting at the piano looking at a musical score titled "Son Mambo" (Betancourt 1986: 112)

A year later Pérez Prado took an orchestra accompanying actress Blanquita Amaro on a tour to Puerto Rico and Argentina. Amaro had already established herself as a box office attraction for her parts in several Cuban and Mexican films including *Embrujo antillano*, one of the first rumbera films of the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. In Puerto Rico Prado befriended the young composer Tite Curet Alonso and bandleader Domingo Peterson and wrote arrangements for the Orquesta Siboney in San Juan. Amaro's debut in Argentina, a country also enjoying its own "Golden Age" of cinema, was successful. She appeared dancing in the Argentine film *Cuidado con las imitaciones* in which Dámaso participates with his orchestra playing his own guaracha "Así, así". In the film one can observe Pérez Prado's already characteristic piano style, and his use of several conga and bongo drummers closely aligned with Amaro's dancing. Amaro remained in Argentina for the next five years appearing in several other films while Prado returned to Cuba.

## Muchos Mambos

To make sense of what was to follow in Prado's musical career it is necessary to take a brief detour to explain how "mambo" was already a household word in the Cuban music realm by the late 1940s. Singer "Cascarita" was recorded yelling *mambo!* in the popular tune "Véte pa la cola", arranged by Prado for the Casino del la Playa orchestra early the decade. The shout of "¡mambo!" can be heard in recordings by New York Cuban music ensembles towards the end of 1946.<sup>5</sup> Mambo was also an interjection used sometimes by *columbia*

5 For example, in the tune "El Rey del mambo" by José Curbelo, recorded in late 1946. I am grateful to Rosa Marquetti for that information.

rumberos in Matanzas to encourage dancing moves. Linguistically mambo means chant or prayer, in the Kikongo language brought to Cuba by African slaves, one of language terms utilised in the *palo monte* Cuban popular religion. One of those chants was used in the early 1950s in the tune, “Palo mayimbe”, by the Sonora Matancera. Complicating matters “Mambo” had been the title of a 1938 danzón, a composition by Orestes and Cachao López. As a result of the increased use of the word a controversy arose around its meaning and function in dance music, perhaps the most bitter and long-lasting controversy in Cuban popular music.

In addressing the mambo as a concept, this initial controversy focused on an innovation added to the structure of the danzón introduced by charangas, in particular the Arcaño y sus maravillas orchestra in the late 1930s. This new segment was also called the mambo.<sup>6</sup> It represented a second adaptation by the charangas to the increasingly popular son.<sup>7</sup>

In the early 1940s arrangers like Pérez Prado, René Hernández and Bebo Valdés adapted this “mambo”, in that specific meaning of the word, to the big dance jazzbands, giving the saxophones a more rhythmic role, playing unison figures derived from the son *treseros*, during the montunos. By the mid-1940s the word mambo was inserted already in musical scores to indicate that section of the montuno. This was the mambo which Pérez Prado excelled at.

Arsenio Rodríguez played an important role in subsequent arguments surrounding the origins of the mambo, i.e. the style with that name recorded by Pérez Prado later in Mexico. I address Arsenio’s intervention below. But Arsenio was not part of the initial controversy about the meaning of the mambo. For now it is important to note Prado’s respect for Arsenio and Arcaño’s music in conversation with Tite Curet Alonso in Puerto Rico during his trip to Borinquen in 1947 (Curet Alonso 1993: 124).

Before his trip to Argentina and upon his return to Cuba Pérez Prado recorded several tunes which he hoped would become successful in the local musical scene, one in which, apart from constant musical innovations, there were also changes in dance styles between 1944 and 1948. The *bote* or *botecito*, slow and danced *a tiempo* (or on the down beat), held a brief sway. Another variant sprouted up among those who danced a *contratiempo* (or on the upbeat),

6 Until around 1935 the danzón was made up of three parts. An introduction, or clarinet part, followed by the main theme, concluding a final section, the montuno, which allowed the musicians to improvise. The montuno had been an appropriation by the charangas from the son in the early 20th century.

7 This borrowing from the son was to culminate in the mid-1950s with the Orquesta Aragón, a *sonero* orchestra par excellence.



something common among devotees of Arsenio Rodriguez' *son montuno* (Garcia 2006). Followers of that modality began to dance more quickly and energetically. Dancers complemented the speed with brief separations of the couples that allowed improvised solos emphasising torso and shoulders moves in a style closer to an African rather than a European aesthetic. People referred to this new way of dancing as mambo. The Arthur Murray studio dance company became so interested that it sent some of its instructors to Cuba to observe and learn the new style.<sup>8</sup> With the name of mambo the novelty soon showed up among dancers in New York (McMains' 2015: 239). It is not all unreasonable to assume that, as in the case of Enrique Jorrín and the cha-cha-chá, created in the same time period, Prado was inspired to some degree by the dance novelty to develop a music construct to match the dancers' initiative. In any event, sometime between 1946 and 1949 Prado recorded in Havana several of his own compositions which displayed an inclination for adding complex, "classical" ideas into popular Cuban music – "Mambo No. 5", "Kuba-mambo", "Mi cazuelita", "Timba timba", "Trompetiana", "Rumbambo", "So caballo", "Mambo kaén" and others. Some of these tunes already contain the rhythmic figures, structure, syncopation, dissonance and other characteristics associated with his later Mexico recordings. Several prominent musicians including top percussionists Mongo Santamaría and Armando Peraza, as well as Reinaldo Mercier, "Cascarita", Daniel Santos and Vicente "Guyún" González, collaborated in these recordings.

### **Sí, Sí, Sí, Yo Quiero Mambo . . .**

Either before leaving or upon his return to Havana, Pérez Prado ran up against unexpected hostility. The Latin Division of the Southern Peer Music Co. & International, the most important recording company in Havana at the time, held a meeting with local composers and musicians. In obvious frustration for his inability to place Pérez Prado's compositions and arrangements in an established "box" for Cuban dance music, the Southern Peer representative described Prado's arrangements as "extravagant" and an "adulteration" of Cuban music. He informed his audience that Southern Peer would no longer record Prado's nor any musician that would use Pérez Prado as arranger. In effect the company blacklisted Pérez Prado and discouraged his musical activity in Cuba. The recording company may have feared that the security of the

8 Information based on conversation with one of Arthur Murray dance instructors who travelled to Havana in the summer of 1949 to observe the new style.

market niche enjoyed by Cuban dance music would suffer if arrangements became more complex. The decision may explain why those Prado recordings were not released at the time.

After his return to Havana, Dámaso travelled back and forth to Mexico several times (Santana Archbold 2017: 58), eventually settling there permanently in 1948, probably pushed by the unwelcoming Havana atmosphere for his recording and pulled by a brighter future in México (Santana Archbold and Bassi 2012). Cuban and “música tropical” in general had long been popular in the Aztec capital and other Mexican cities like Veracruz.<sup>9</sup> By the mid-1940s the arrival of Cuban musicians achieved a crescendo. In 1945 Miguel Matamoros travelled to Mexico with a conjunto that included Benny Moré and Francisco Repilado (Compay Segundo). Benny Moré stayed in Mexico when Matamoros returned to Cuba, playing with a variety of groups and appearing in films. Other Cuban musicians performing in the Aztec capital included *soneros* Cheo Marquetti, Kiko Mendive, Humberto Cané, bolerista José Antonio Méndez, showman Francisco Fellové, composer Justi Barreto and pianist Isolina Carrillo. By the end of the 1940s a number of notable Cuban female dancers such as María Antonieta Pons, Amalia Aguilar and Ninón Sevilla were already appearing in Mexican films featuring “música tropical”.

In 1947 Mongo Santamaría first and later Armando Peraza settled in México to join Clave de Oro. The Cuban dance ensemble *Mulatas de fuego*, with Celia Cruz added as vocalist, appeared on the scene in 1948. In that same year the film *Salón México* was released with brief appearances by Celia and the *Mulatas de fuego*, music by Son Clave de Oro, and featuring danzón “Almendra” in the sound track which also included current hits like “El caballo y la montura”, and Machito’s “Sopa de pichón”. Mexico City had become a veritable musical Mecca for Cuban musicians. There may have been another important contributing factor to Prado’s decision to relocate there. Recording facilities and techniques in Mexico City were state-of-the-art and superior to those available in Cuba at that time, featuring something novel called High Fidelity (Santana Archbold 2017: 200). An astute musician like Perez Prado would have seen an opportunity to avail himself, as he did later, of novel recording dimensions,

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9 In 1928 the Son de Cuba, based in Marianao, had arrived in Mexico, featuring a tresero from Santiago de Cuba, Lalo Ruiz. Several of its members under the guidance of Agustín Lara, who was looking for accompaniment for *Toña la Negra*, formed the Son Clave de Oro, a conjunto which essentially established the son cubano in all of Mexico. In the same decade another *santiaguero*, Consejo Valiente “Acerina” formed his popular danzón orchestra.

such as HiFi, the use of echo chamber sounds and other special effects. The arrival of Perez Prado in the late 1940s can be seen in retrospect as occurring at the right place and at the right time.

With the support of Mendive, Ninón Sevilla, Humberto Cané and bongosero Clemente “Chicho” Piquero, Pérez Prado organised an orchestra of Mexican and Cuban musicians, the latter mostly percussionists, and began to perform at a Mexico City nightclub in a show named *Al son del mambo*. Beginning in late 1949 and for the next three years Prado launched a complete new music and dance style he called mambo, which promptly became a world-wide phenomenon. There are many ways to describe what was radically distinct about the music that Pérez Prado’s orchestra played. In the words of Leonardo Acosta, it was a novel genre because it presented “various ‘new’ combined elements, such as: (1) rhythm and rhythmic patterns, (2) a melodic-harmonic dimension, (3) an orchestration style and general scope of sound and (4) form or structure” (Acosta 2012: 87). In a more direct fashion Ned Sublette viewed Prado as turning “Cuban music upside down and inside down . . . [Prado’s early recordings] were scorchers. They don’t sound like anything else in Cuban music, or anything else, period” (Sublette 2004: 558).

How popular was Perez Prado’s mambo? In Mexico it became a sensation on the radio, juke boxes and live shows. His mambos were characterised by their variety. He recorded more than 30 tunes with the up-and-coming singer Benny Moré. In 1949–50 Pérez Prado and Moré travelled through Mexico cashing in on the mambo boom. Their recordings became immediate hits all over México and Latin America.<sup>10</sup> Some like “La múcura” and “Pachito E’Ché”, composed by Colombian musicians, resonated with Colombian audiences; others more “Afro-Cuban” in sound, like “Babarabatibiri” and “Anabacoa”, appealed to audiences in Cuba where “[Pérez Prado]’s success could not have been greater . . . not only did his records sell, it also could be heard all day and night long over the radio and in juke boxes, and his arrangements sold rapidly in music stores” (Acosta 1993: 67; my translation). The continuous broadcasting of these tunes was as true in Havana as well as in the most remote backwoods regions of Eastern Cuba wherever radio signals reached.<sup>11</sup>

Simultaneous with his tunes with Benny, Prado recorded in late 1949 two instrumental tunes which rapidly acquired global popularity, “Mambo No. 5”

10 These popular sounds had been frowned upon by record companies in Havana only a year or so earlier.

11 The notion advanced by some that Prado’s music was not popular in Cuba is contrary to the facts.

and “Rico mambo”, the latter released soon after in the United States as “Mambo Jambo”. These were followed by several other barnburners like “Mambo No. 8” and “Caballo negro”.<sup>12</sup>

Pérez Prado’s appeal derived importantly from connecting those early mambos with dancing. His appearances with his orchestra in Mexico’s rumbera films, which cemented a mutually beneficial relationship between the Cuban musician and the local film industry, were watched throughout Latin America and the Latino barrios in US cities. In 1950 alone his mambos were featured in 18 Mexican films, with “Mambo No. 5” and “Rico mambo” appearing in three of them. Important too for Mexican audiences were themes chosen to appeal to the masses, and to the youth, such as his mambified ‘cover’ of the popular romantic tune “Tú, solo tú”, and mambos like “Mambo del papelerero”, “Lupita” and “Mambo del Politécnico”. By the end of 1950, mambo music and dance and Pérez Prado’s fame had caught like wildfire. In the United States the media baptised him, awkwardly, the Glenn Miller of Mexico.

The world-wide mambo sensation revived the controversy as to its origins. Arsenio Rodríguez claimed to be the inventor of the mambo, stating in a 1952 interview for *Bohemia* magazine that “What Pérez Prado did was to mix the mambo with American music, copied from Stan Kenton. And he did us irreparable harm with it. I’ll never forgive him for that, or myself for creating that damned mambo” (Cubillas 1952: 49). The relationship between Kenton and Pérez Prado we discuss below. Otherwise Arsenio’s claim to have invented the mambo is similar to earlier attributions to the invention to the López brothers, and the Arcaño orchestra, in that what Arsenio calls mambo, which he normally named “diablo”, was an improvisation segment of a son montuno, i.e. the same word but with a different meaning.

Musicologists who have explored the issue in detail are unanimous in acknowledging Pérez Prado’s mambo, the music and dance genre, as the matancero’s creation, regardless of what elements that came before he used in putting together the final, standalone product.

Leonardo Acosta clearly regarded Pérez Prado as the one Rey del Mambo and one of the great innovators of Cuban popular music. We noted earlier Ned Sublette’s similar opinion. After an exhaustive review of the literature Radamés Giro concluded that the musical genre named mambo was created by Pérez Prado, as did Isabelle Leymarie who states that it was Pérez Prado “who truly invented the mambo as a distinct musical genre” (Leymarie 2002: 115). Top

12 Another mere conjecture is a statement to the effect that Pérez Prado did not record more numbers with Benny Moré because he, Prado, did not want someone more important than himself in the orchestra.

contemporary instrumentalists like Armando Peraza and Chocolate Armenteros (who played with Arsenio's conjunto for several years) were of the same opinion (Armenteros 1996; Peraza 1994). Tito Puente, a musician frequently associated with the invention of the mambo, expressed his point of view in this way: "For me, as for all musicians in New York and the world, the only King of the Mambo is Pérez Prado" (Sierra 1995: 99).

## Drums . . .

Pérez Prado's dedicated focus was on the rhythm section of his bands. As a music producer and critic commented in a *Downbeat* magazine issue in 1954 "Prado is the first performer of Latin American music I have seen in years who devotes as much time to his rhythm section as to the reeds and brass . . . Prado tells each man exactly what sort of rhythmic figuration he wants on each rhythm instrument" (Diaz 1954: 17). For Prado the drummers in the percussion section were the "heart of the orchestra" (Acuña 2017). He discouraged set-drummers from playing in the conventional style of American jazz, suggesting instead that they convey the feeling of the licks and riffs from conga drummers into their playing, encouraging them to break with conventions. Prado often modified the makeup of the rhythm section, sometimes using two conga drummers and a set-drummer, sometimes using one conga drum, timbales, bongo and set drums; or, in the case of his 1960s *dengue* style, using one musician to play the *aro*, or car tire rim (also known as brake drum). The bongosero often played in the manner of a *quinto* in a rumba ensemble. In his early mambo recordings Prado used a drummer (Yeyo Tamayo) that played timbales and bass drum. Yeyo would deliver the band by combining timbal rim and head shots with loud bass 'bombs' producing an unusual effect, like a thunderous bongo drum-call. Prado's arrangement of Lecuona's "La Comparsa", for which he used timpani for the introductory bars instead of the customary bass and strings, demonstrates his interest in experimenting with percussion.

Whereas for the other sections he was content to use musicians of diverse backgrounds, Prado always preferred Cuban or at least Latin American percussionists. He chose the best: perusing the personnel in his recordings and live performances one finds the names of a veritable Mount Kilimanjaro of Afro-Cuban percussion: Mongo Santamaría, Armando Peraza, "Yeyo" Tamayo, Carlos Vidal, Antar Daly, Agustín Gutiérrez, Ramoncito Castro, Clemente Piquero, Julio del Razo, Francisco Aguabella, Silvestre Méndez, Juan Cheda, Lee Pastora, Mike Pacheco, Modesto Durán, "El Niño" Nicasio, Alex Acuña, Leo Acosta, Johnny Pacheco, Ray Barretto and so on. Any doubts as to Pérez Prado's priority for drums and drumming he laid to rest with his "Mosaico Cubano", in

his 1956 LP *Havana 3 A.M.*, which features the jawbone and a very fast guancó; and decidedly with his 1960s *Concierto para bongó*.

In terms of the totality of the ensemble sound, Prado's set off the saxophones counter to the trumpets, with the former playing rhythmic riffs while the trumpets engaged the melody. They were also set off in terms of timbre, with the saxophones at a low pitch while the trumpets played stratospherically high notes. As Leonardo Acosta pointed out, that kind of timbre separation brought the style closer to a traditional African sound (Acosta 1993: 41). The whole thing was then punctuated by Dámaso's piercing, guttural, grunted cues and his own dancing moves: a rhythmic avalanche.

## And Dance!

Prado succeeded in firmly establishing the mambo as a new *dance* style, analogous to the earlier *danzón* and the later *cha-cha-chá*, but far faster and more energetic than either of them. The film *rumberas* did much to establish the new dance. In his live shows and in some of the films referenced above dancers, like Ninón Sevilla and Amalia Aguilar, were central participants. Prado also featured two Cuban stylists, sisters Caridad and Mercedes Vázquez, who adopted the name of the Dolly Sisters, inspired by the Hungarian dance duo of the same name from earlier in the 20th century. The *rumberas* did much to popularise the mambo as they themselves became the focus of attraction with celebrated marquis names such as “the Golden Venus”, “the Caribbean Hurricane” and even “the Atomic Bomb”. Dámaso, a good dancer himself, was keen on the choreography of his own performance which included jumps, high kicks and other unexpected body movements. As Cachao explained, Pérez Prado's mambo was a choreographed spectacle, in that sense also different from anything that came before (López 1994).

Thus, the story of the mambo as a music genre ought to be told in conjunction with the evolution of Cuban-style dancing. To be sure, when studied from the point of view of dance there is no question that it was a new, joint musical and dance development, nothing that can be associated with the music styles created by Cachao, Arsenio or Bebo Valdés.

The dismissal of Pérez Prado's mambo and his band as basically a Latinised version of Stan Kenton's orchestra, a comment made by Arsenio Rodríguez and others, arose in the midst of the contentious arguments about the origin of the style. Some of the confusion arose because of a tune “Mambo a la Kenton”, wrongly attributed to Pérez Prado (it was composed by Armando Romeu in Havana), and a tune by Kenton dedicated to Prado, named “Viva Prado”.

The argument lacks foundation. First, because Prado's eminently danceable flavour was completely opposed to Kenton's, whose band, in addition to being

short on swing proclaimed itself a “concert”, rather than a dance ensemble. Second because its lack of musical merit has been demonstrated by scholars of the subject. Leonardo Acosta put the matter to rest thus:

A thorough analysis is not necessary to see essential differences between the bands of Kenton and Perez Prado. At the very time when Kenton increases the trombone section to four and then five, Dámaso employs a single trombone, and this for effects such as pedals . . . “growls” . . . The dominant tendency in jazz since the 1930s was to increasingly combine the sound of the bands, blending instruments from different sections – a tendency accelerated by Kenton . . . Pérez Prado does the opposite and establishes different planes with two basic registers . . . one high . . . and one low . . . (Acosta 2012: 88)

The unique character of Prado’s mambos is revealed by the approval given not just by a massive audience but also by sophisticated Latin American and European classical music critics and “classical” musicians like Alejo Carpentier, Abel Vallmitjana and Sergiu Celibedache. Said Carpentier:

It is the first time a genre of dance music uses harmonic procedures that were until recently, the monopoly of so-called “modern” composers . . . there are mambos which are extraordinary inventions, both from an instrumental point of view and melodically . . . all audacities of American jazz performers have been left behind . . . [by Pérez Prado’s mambo]. (Carpentier 1985: 34)

Pérez Prado’s commercial success led to visits to the United States where he played in 1951 to packed audiences in a tour from coast to coast and his impact continued to be felt as he recorded commercial mambo-versions of several jazz standards. His first Los Angeles performance in 1951 to the largest crowd ever at the Zenda Ballroom in Los Angeles was an epic moment in the musical history of the city. While billed as a dance, that was not possible because of the crush. That event and subsequent performances launched his mambo as the latest “Latin” music in the United States. In that performance and several subsequent recordings made in Los Angeles, Prado always used local resident musicians: he hired great Mexican instrumentalists like drummer Leo Acosta; Afro-Cuban *conguero* Modesto Durán; famed LA drummer Shelley Manne and trumpeter Maynard Ferguson.

While dancers Sevilla and Pons performed just as often in New York as in Los Angeles, Perez Prado had a difficult time performing in New York because of restrictions on foreign instrumentalists in New York City. Los Angeles was receptive to him and his music, so his mambo is closely

identified with Los Angeles and the West Coast. His mambo has certainly left a lasting impact in the city of angels.<sup>13</sup>

Prado's success helped increase the popularity of all Cuban music in Mexico.<sup>14</sup> But something unexpected happened when Pérez Prado was at the pinnacle of success: he was unceremoniously expelled from Mexico on 6 October 1953, literally picked up and put on an airplane to Havana. The reasons for this sudden deportation have never been clear. Officially the reason was that Prado had over-extended his visa, hardly an excuse for such treatment. Some have suggested that contractual disputes were used by Prado's enemies to persuade the Mexican bureaucracy to expel the Cuban musician. Pressure to rid Mexico of Prado and hopefully his mambo may have come as well from the Catholic Church hierarchy and from antiquated and moralistic elements in the Federal District art scene. His forced exile from Mexico would last more than a decade.

Upon arriving in Havana the matancero faced once again an inhospitable environment, this time for reasons different than the ostracism he had suffered just a few years earlier. Dancing tastes had evolved. After a few years of intense mambo dancing Cuba had embraced the slower cha-cha-cha which was all the rage as played by various charanga groups, especially Orquesta América, Aragón, Fajardo, Ideal and others. Slow and less complex for dancing was the music played by the Sonora Matancera, that had risen in the public's acceptance, employing vocalists like Daniel Santos and Celia Cruz. Alas, Prado could only find professional solace and success by returning to New York.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the regulations that restricted Prado's New York performances, the dance he had helped establish and his arrangements and his recordings notably influenced the city's music. It suffices to listen to the "Mambo" segment in the *Afro-Cuban Jazz Suite* recorded by Chico O'Farrill with the Machito orchestra in late 1950 or Machito's own "Mambo sentimental" and "Oboe Mambo" to recognise immediately the impact of Pérez Prado characteristic sound on Afro-Cuban jazz and Latin music in New York.

13 Los Angeles Philharmonic's conductor Gustavo Dudamel has made arrangements of Prado's most famous numbers, "Mambo No. 5", "Mambo No. 8", "Mambo Jambo".

14 The D.F.-based Conjunto de Yeyo y Cané received wide acclaim and a Cuban caravan that included declamator Luis Carbonell, música guajira interpreter Guillermo Portabales and divas Rita Montaner and Marta Pérez toured the entire country.

15 A mambo mania had swept across the United States by that time. All of a sudden everyone was recording something with the name mambo in its title: Rosemary Clooney, Nat "King" Cole, Artie Shaw and other widely respected jazz musicians of the moment like Duke Ellington ("Bunny Hop Mambo"), Billy Taylor ("Mambo Azul") and Woody Herman ("Woodchopper's Mambo").



There has been some confusion since claims have been made that music called “mambo” as played by Latin bands in the city was either more genuine, or complex, or both, than Prado’s invention, or even that the “mambo” had actually been created first in New York. This is yet another instance of another meaning given to the word “mambo”.

Latin music in New York in the late 1940s and early 1950s was the product of many ingredients, jazz being the most important. Horn players in “mambo” bands in New York were almost all American musicians who played jazz on top of Afro-Cuban percussion sections. Machito’s band was a successful example of the approach. Tito Puente himself defined his music as based on the approaches of Cuba’s Casino de la Playa and Stan Kenton (Sierra 1995: 99). Naming the music mambo was essentially a question of marketing. As we noted earlier, the word was very much in the air and, just as all Afro-Cuban and much Afro-Caribbean music had been dubbed *rhumba* in New York in the 1930s (a name having little to do with the actual rumba) and would be called *salsa* in the 1970s, it was called “mambo” in the city in the late 1940s and 1950s. It was certainly the name given to the accompanying dance. The Latin bands of Tito Puente, Pupi Campo, Xavier Cugat, Machito, Tito Rodríguez and Joe Locho filled the air with a multitude of “mambo” recordings which were in a style more “conservative” than Perez Prado’s revolutionary approach. The New York mambos kept to the traditional structure of Cuban tunes to which jazz chords and solos were added. In other words, mambo in New York was something else, different than Perez Prado’s. It can be more appropriately defined as “the bringing of Latin rhythms to the big band jazz sounds of the 1940s and 1950” (Brennan 2008: 64). Clearly “mambo” in New York in no way detracted from Pérez Prado’s invention of a very personal, original and unique music and dance genre. Yet the arranging mind of Perez Prado may have been present, even in those jazzy New York “mambos”, some of which, as noted before, used stock arrangements developed earlier in Havana by musicians including Prado.

Shortly after arriving in the US Pérez Prado invented two new styles, similar in many ways to the mambo, the *suby* and the *culeta*, but neither attracted even a minimum level of interest in the public. He also continued to record mambofied covers of American music standards like “Chattanooga Choo Choo”, “Stomping at the Savoy”, “Ballin’ the Jack”, “St. Louis Blues Mambo” and even the Spanish tune “El relicario”. Less than overwhelming commercial adventures were the two singles recorded with the African American singer, dancer and actress Eartha Kitt, “Freddy” and “Sweet and Gentle”. The second was a barely disguised version of the cha-cha-cha “Me lo dijo Adela”, popular in Havana at the time. With the benefit of benevolent hindsight these two numbers are true

collector's items of a collaboration between two artistic figures, the "King" and the Kitt, with distinct musical styles and striking stage presence.

Prado's manner of recording mambified covers of standard and/or popular tunes led some contemporary jazz musicians to view his music as commercial, even cheesy. The criticism did not take into account another avenue that Prado began to pursue simultaneously, that is, his laborious efforts at complex compositions. The first result of his endeavours was the 1954 four-movement "Voodoo Suite", a tone poem that combined jazz, Afro-Cuban, mambo and fusion elements, which he produced jointly with jazzist "Shorty" Rogers. "Voodoo Suite" was recorded by an orchestra of 37 musicians, which included four saxes, five trumpets, three trombones, French horn, bass and seven percussionists and vocalists. In this his first of several "conciertos" Prado demonstrates a mastery of the blues and jazz idioms, incorporates call-response songs and chants typical of Afro-Cuban religious rituals as well as sacred rhythms, such the 6/8 conga drum patterns used in Cuban *abakuá* parades and *bembé* celebrations. Personnel in the recording included established jazz musicians Shelly Manne on drums and Maynard Ferguson on trumpet in addition to top Cuban percussionists Carlos Vidal Bolado and Modesto Durán (Marquetti 2016: 275).

Prado's "commercial" approach resulted in a tremendous success in 1955, when he recorded an unusual orchestration, a mixture of mambo with cha-cha, of the song "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White" by French composer Louiguy. This arrangement held the charts for 26 weeks, including ten consecutive weeks as the number one hit in the United States. By comparison, in 1956 Elvis Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel" would be the #1 hit for eight weeks. Once again the appeal of the tune was increased by dancing featured in a film: Hollywood star Jane Russell danced to it in Howard Hughes' production of the film *Underwater!* "Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White" reached number one as well in charts in England and Germany. It became one of the most popular instrumental pop tunes of all time.

A year later rock-and-roll made its appearance via Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley, Bill Haley and others. With the advent of rock the mambo slowly began to disappear from the US music scene. But Prado refused to go away. In 1958 he brought out "Patricia", a kind of undefinable slow mambo-rock featuring, for the first time in American pop music, an organ as the lead instrument. Cinema and dancing jumped at the opportunity: Swedish actress Anita Ekberg danced to "Patricia" in Federico Fellini's 1961 film *La Dolce Vita*. The tune also reached the number 1 spot in the pop music charts, and it became a classic in American music. In the same year Prado released a similar arrangement, his successful version of the Neapolitan song "Guaglione".

In 1962 Prado recorded in New York the second of his instrumental concertos, the “Exotic Suite of the Americas”, structured in seven movements: Theme of Two Worlds, Amoha, Criollo, Theme of Two Worlds, Uamanna African, Blues in C Major and Theme of Two Worlds. Recorded with mostly American musicians the Exotic Suite did not achieve much recognition in the United States. That was not the case in Cuba where documentary filmmaker Santiago Alvarez decided to use the first movement as a theme in the soundtrack of the *Noticiero ICAIC Latinoamericano Special Edition No. 382* of 16 October 1967, that reported the death of Ernesto Guevara in Bolivia. Since then the sound of that movement of the Exotic Suite, repeated year after year when Guevara’s death is commemorated in the island has been identified in many Cubans’ sonic memory with the image of fallen guerrilla fighter.

Back to his “commercial” side, by the early 1960s, it was certainly the case that Pérez Prado’s star began to fall in the United States. This was the case in general for Cuban music in the United States. After revolutionaries came to power in Havana the name Cuba ceased to be the marketing hook that the music business had utilised since the 1930s. In 1956 it made business sense to title an LP *Havana 3 am*. Not so in 1965. Not after Fidel Castro came to power, the Bay of Pigs fiasco and the Missile Crisis scare. Prado remained popular in Japan where he took tours year after year; and in Spain, where he added Cachao López to his orchestra while playing in Madrid and other cities in 1962. After years of efforts, he finally was allowed to return to Mexico on 31 August 1964. His return was accompanied by an uptick in his creativity.

## Dengue Time

Prado had just launched a new rhythmic dance style, the dengue, which proved to be his last successful innovation. As in the case with his first mambos, there are no precise dates as to when the first dengues were recorded and played. But clearly it was something he was dreaming up just prior to his return to Mexico. In March 1964 Prado travelled to Peru where presumably for the first time he played and recorded several dengues. The circumstances surrounding these early performances of the dengue are vintage Pérez Prado and merit recounting.

Always meticulous with the rhythm section Prado chose two local percussionists. The first, “El niño” Nicasio, was a Cuban conguero and bongosero steeped in the toques of Afro-Cuban traditions, who stayed in Lima after travelling there in 1947. For a set-drummer Prado, who had the pick of the local lot and, demonstrated his rhythmic nose for exceptional drummers by choosing a mere teenager, Alex Acuña, who would eventually be regarded as one of the top drummers in the world of jazz.

With the dengue Prado introduced in the rhythm section the *aro* or brake drums, an instrument typically used in the congas, the street bands of the carnival in Santiago de Cuba.<sup>16</sup> Always concerned with associating his musical innovations with a dance style Prado fronted the band with the Puerto Rican singer/dancer Deisy Guzmán. As had happened years before with the mambo, Deisy Guzmán's dance moves provoked the immediate condemnation of Lima's mayor who, with the backing of the archbishop, tried to ban televised performance of the dengue. During his stay in Perú Prado performed and/or played several dengues, i.e. "Dengue no. 6", "Guanábana", "El dengue del amor" and "Limeña." Prado later released several dengues in Mexico, e.g. "Silvia", "Dengue de la montaña rusa" and "Dengue de la Universidad" and in 1965 launched the film *El dengue del amor* in which true to form Prado featured another brilliant Cuban singer and rumbera (María del Carmen Rodríguez) with the stage name of Gigi Ambar, who danced in the film to the sound of "Patricia". The new style met with little success in Mexico where people wanted to tie him to his earlier mambos. But it turned into a sensation in Cuba the year after when it became emblematic of the 1966 Havana Carnival. As documented by Ariana Orejuela, the famed sonero Roberto Faz featured it in his group's Carnival performances which were amply covered in radio and TV broadcasts. Faz recorded several dengues including "Dengue del pollo", "El dengue y su tiqui tiqui", "Dengue del puerquito", "Dengue para ti" and "Dengue de Faz" all marked by the sound of the iron *aro* (Orejuela 2004: 208).

Given the dengue's sudden appeal other dance bands jumped into the arena with their own versions of the dance rhythm. The Neno González orchestra scored a hit with "Carolina dengue", as did the Orquesta Sensación with its "Cantinflas baila el dengue". Orquesta Aragón and Pello el Afrokán hopped on the dengue bandwagon as well. In a sense one can see the dengue as joining, in Cuba, the rise of the Afro-Cuban folkloric instruments in the centre of popular dance styles, something that began in the early 1960s with Enrique Bonne's Tambores orientales followed as they were by Pello el Afrokán's Mozambique. Coincidentally Prado was formulating the dengue at the same time that in Cuba Pello el afrokán was launching his Mozambique, which also brought the sounds of street carnival drumming into the dance halls of Cuba. With little fanfare the dengue found its way to the United States market with tunes like "Topkapi" and "James Bond theme" both in his 1965 LP *Lights! Action! Prado!*

16 Perhaps Pérez Prado was inspired by the Mariano Merceron's orchestra in which sometimes one of the percussionists played the ring with a metal bolt. In the dengue Neasio used sticks with the same purpose.

In 1965 Prado composed and performed live his third concerto, the “Concierto para bongó”. Probably recorded in Mexico City in that year, it was released a year later in New York. There is little information about the personnel involved in this unusual 17-minute recording featuring bongo sustained solos. A careful listening appears to reveal two bongoseros playing, one using hands, the other sticks. One of the bongoseros may have been Julio del Razo, who is known to have played on live presentations of the Concierto para bongó in Mexico City (Marquetti 2016: 280). As with his earlier hits, it is difficult to put this music squarely in a box. But again it made its mark in a film serving as background music in Pedro Almodóvar’s *Kiki*.

In 1964–5 Prado engaged in a ten-month tour that started in Las Vegas, included a dozen US cities and finished in Puerto Rico. After 1965 he lived in Mexico City, where he became a fixture for the next 20+ years, performing on radio, TV, movies, and live shows. Prado never lost his interest in the classical music training of his early years. The day Erena Hernández interviewed in Mexico City in 1979 he was performing a *Prelude* by Rachmaninoff and one of Grieg’s sonatas with an orchestral format made up of three trumpets, three trombones, three saxophones, electric bass, conga, bongó and drum set. He appeared occasionally in the United States and remained very popular in Japan. Prado continued to influence world music: in 1999, 15 years after his passing, German singer Lou Bega achieved world-wide commercial success with his own version of “Mambo Number 5”, 40 years after it was first recorded in Mexico.

## Rhythm, Drums and Dancing

Three fundamental aspects of his musicianship are manifest in Prado’s various creations, whether mambo hits, commercial versions of jazz standards or abstract concerts. First is rhythm in a general sense, as stipulated by Chico O’Farrill in an earlier quotation. Rhythm characterises all of Prado’s work, from his guarachas with the Casino de la Playa to the dengue. He was quite conscious of this aspect of his musicality; when Erena Hernández asks Prado to define what he tries to communicate with his music, he replies without hesitation “musical ideas, rhythmic ideas” (Hernández 1993: 50). Throughout his career Prado devoted himself to inventing rhythms: the mambo, the suby, the culeta, the dengue. Some proved more successful than others, but all constituted new rhythms.

A second crucial aspect is the privileged place occupied by percussion in Prado’s orchestral formats. In all his compositions and arrangements percussion inhabits the centre of the piece. Its worth repeating that any doubt about the priority that Pérez Prado gave to drums and percussionists vanishes when

listening to his “Cuban Mosaic” in the LP *Havana 3 AM*, recorded in 1956 where Cuban percussion, including a fast guaguancó, predominates; or with his 1966 “Concierto para bongó”.

The third aspect was the requisite dancing stemming from the emphases on rhythm and percussion. The Pradian rhythms were promoted, choreographed and stylised as dances for *vedettes*, show dance couples and celluloid actresses as well as for the masses of the dancing public. Even his “concerts” contain eminently danceable segments. Of course, among all his rhythms, the mambo excelled in dance halls. Among the many arguments that tip the balance in favour of Prado as creator of the mambo, a phrase improvised by Benny Moré at the end of “Locas por el mambo”, which refers to “a short man with a seal’s face”, is quoted with relative frequency. Perhaps another tune recorded by Moré points more clearly to this third fundamental aspect of Prado’s music, namely the mambo “Bonito y sabroso”. In it the mambo is clearly identified as a particular dance style. It is no coincidence that mambo has been described as a jitterbug “en candela”, because at first glance it seemed to combine the jitterbug acrobatics with the sensual movements of the dance partners (Delgado and Muñoz 1997).

These three central elements in all the musical work of Prado do not reveal several “Pérez Prados”, one the King of mambo, another the arranger of light commercial music and a third focused on abstract concert music, but rather a single composer with different facets arising from diverse circumstances and artistic and economic needs, but based on the same musical foundations. Prado was a maestro whose variations never abandoned the main themes: rhythm, drums and dancing.

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