Afro-Caribbean Stylistic Elements as Topics in the Music of Silvestre Revueltas: Conveying a Political Discourse in Caminando, No sé por qué piensas tú, and Sensemayá

Elsy M. Gallardo-Díaz
James Madison University

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Afro-Caribbean Stylistic Elements as Topics in the Music of Silvestre Revueltas: Conveying a Political Discourse in Caminando, No sé por qué piensas tú, and Sensemayá

Elsy M. Gallardo-Díaz

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

School of Music

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FACULTY COMMITTEE:
Committee Chair: Robert D. McCashin
Committee Members/ Readers:
   Pedro Aponte
   Andrew Connell
   Foster Beyers
   Mary Jean Speare
Dedication

Con inmensa gratitud a mis amados padres, Elsa y Juan, a quienes debo en gran parte lo que soy y lo que he logrado hasta hoy.
Acknowledgments

I praise God for granting me life, health, skill, opportunities, and for guiding and directing my steps until this point. I thank God for the many people who generously helped me during my doctoral journey and during the writing of this document.

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to my mentor, professor, and advisor, Dr. Robert McCashin, for his generous and caring spirit inside and outside the classroom, for being an excellent role model as a professor, and for choosing to remain in my committee even after his retirement. I owe deep gratitude as well to Dr. Pedro Aponte, Dr. Mary Jean Speare, Dr. Andrew Connell, and Professor Foster Beyers for encouraging me to do my very best research and for providing valuable feedback and suggestions.

Special thanks are due to Dr. Roberto Kolb Neuhaus from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, to whom I am indebted for the idea of this paper, and who facilitated numerous materials for my use. As I was planning my Lecture Recital around Revueltas’ Sensemayá (1938), he pointed my attention to the existence of the chamber version, as well as to Caminando and No sé por qué piensas tú. His suggestion of considering topic theory as the framework of my analysis opened up a completely new and fascinating research field for me, as topic theory offers the possibility of finding meaning and expression in a given musical work by taking into account its place in society. This approach provided me with an appealing opportunity to go well beyond mere theoretical and analytical considerations and, instead, engage in a more fruitful and relevant project.

I owe special thanks too, to Dr. Eugenia Revueltas Acevedo, daughter of Silvestre Revueltas, for her willingness to meet with me in Mexico City to talk about her father and answer my questions. Her vision and generosity in making his papers, photographs, and manuscripts available has made a difference in my research.
I am very thankful to Lilian and Klebert Feitosa for their advice and constant encouragement to finish this project and forever leave ABD limbo, and to Alisi and Sifa Potauaine, for their unselfish support and assistance during my time in Harrisonburg. They all deserve a million of thanks for their hospitality and aid during the week of my defense. Many thanks as well to Janet and Juan Carlos Rodríguez for their timely and invaluable hospitality, and to Priscilla Soto for facilitating my search of materials at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin.

Last but not least, I am eternally grateful to my beloved parents, Elsa and Juan, for believing in me and loving me unconditionally every step of the way. Their constant guidance, affection, support, and prayers have been a source of strength and a great blessing.

Permission to reprint the excerpts included in this dissertation was kindly granted by Peermusic Classical (Caminando and No sé por qué piensas tú) and Music Sales West – G. Schirmer, Inc. (Sensemayá):

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Abstract

Although the music of Silvestre Revueltas has often been categorized as merely Mexicanist, this paper aims to demonstrate that not all of his music falls squarely within that classification. Among his brief but significant artistic output, three pieces for voice and small instrumental ensemble incorporate Afro-Caribbean stylistic elements drawn from popular and religious Afro-Cuban music. Composed in early 1937, Caminando, No sé que piensas tú soldado, and Sensemayá were based on poems by the Cuban Nicolás Guillén, the foremost representative of Afrocubanismo and, like Revueltas, an ardent believer in art as a tool for political protest and for social transformation. In this document, I argue that in using Afro-Caribbean stylistic elements in these works, Revueltas’ motivation was political rather than picturesque or exoticist, and that the stylistic elements incorporated in the three pieces are used as topics, thus alluding to specific social, cultural, and political contexts.

In this paper I explore the political ideals of Revueltas and the role of the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists as a platform for an international group of intellectuals and artists opposing war, fascism, and imperialism; the political and social climate in Cuba that so decisively informed the content of Guillén’s poems; the origins, development, and characteristics of the Cuban son, the genre that most influenced Guillén’s revolutionary poetry; and the role of Afro-Cuban religious rituals and music —including its direct connection with popular music— as a source of inspiration for Guillén. Additionally, I identify specific Afro-Caribbean stylistic elements in Revueltas’ three works and trace them back to the Cuban son, the rumba, and ritual/carnival Afro-Cuban music. Then, within the framework of topic theory, I demonstrate how said elements reinforce the meaning of the poems: the protest against the oppression and exploitation of blacks and mulattoes in Cuba and the Caribbean, and the pursuit of permanent freedom and justice.
Introduction

During his lifetime and for many years after his death, the oeuvre of Silvestre
Revueltas was largely considered to belong primarily to the realm of Mexican Nationalism.
The predilection of the composer for the music of the people and the predominantly
Mestizo sound ideal evident in his works was superficially interpreted by most as nothing
more than Mexicanism, as seeking to exalt the beauty of the country and romanticize its
landscapes.¹ Since the 1980s, however, a growing number of scholars began challenging or
expanding the nationalist narrative, illuminating many other aspects of Revueltas’ music —
most notably Peter Garland, Yolanda Moreno Rivas, Julio Estrada, and, particularly, Roberto
Kolb Neuhaus.² The years around the centenary of Revueltas’ birth — 1999 — saw the
publication of the most comprehensive collection of the composer’s letters and writings, and
the first comprehensive catalog of his works.³ Furthermore, a number of first performances,


³ Most of Revueltas’ correspondence and letters are compiled in Silvestre Revueltas, Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo: apuntes autobiográficos, diarios, correspondencia y otros escritos de un gran músico, comp. by Rosaura Revueltas (México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 1989). For the catalogue
editions, and world premiere recordings of long neglected compositions were undertaken — including the three works studied in this paper: *Caminando*, *No sé por qué piensas tú*, and *Sensemayá* (chamber version).⁴

Among the different facets of Revueltas’ music, its connection with the Afro-Cuban has certainly been recognized and discussed in varying degrees of depth. The full orchestra version of *Sensemayá* (1938), perhaps the best known and most performed work by the composer, has been the subject of extensive research, while the chamber version has attracted comparatively less attention.⁵ *Caminando*, and *No sé por qué piensas tú*, one the other


⁴ The instrumental versions of *Caminando*, *No sé por qué piensas tú*, and *Sensemayá* were first performed in 1995 by the Camerata de las Américas under Enrique Diemecke in the XXIII Festival Cervantino. In 1997, the Camerata under Diemecke recorded the pieces; sixty years after Revueltas programmed them for the 1937 season of the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional. There is no record of those performances happening, likely because Revueltas spent several months in Spain during the Civil War. Published editions of the same works have appeared only until recently (see Bibliography).

hand, have been practically ignored. Moreover, the three works (also referred to as Poemas de Nicolás Guillén) have never been approached together as a unit—a rather interesting oversight, given that all three pieces share similar characteristics and background. In fact, all are based on the poetry of Nicolás Guillén—a leader of the Afro-Cubanist movement in his country and a poet of social protest—and feature Afro-Caribbean stylistic elements prominently. Additionally, the pieces are the only music composed by Revueltas in 1937, directly as a result of meeting the poet in the context of a political meeting in Mexico City.

For these reasons, the purpose of this paper is to explore Revueltas’ use of Afro-Caribbean stylistic elements in Caminando, No sé por qué piensas tú, and Sensemayá, and to demonstrate how said elements function as musical topics—and thus, referential to specific political and social contexts. This paper also aims to demonstrate that by using Afro-Caribbean stylistic elements in these pieces, Revueltas transcends the Mexican nationalism—a populist, “top-down, state-sponsored movement” which sought to create a national canon of art (and therefore, a national identity) through the use of folk material—and instead, seeks to convey a political message of protest against social injustice in solidarity with the Cuban people, and by extension, with the oppressed working classes in Mexico and everywhere.

---

6 Another work, not dated but presumably composed between 1937 and 1940, is Coqueta para Genio, a short piano piece for his daughter Eugenia (see Kolb Neuhaus, Silvestre Revueltas: catálogo de sus obras, 24).

In the first chapter, I furnish a brief biography of Silvestre Revueltas, highlighting events or circumstances that played a role in originating, shaping, and strengthening the composer’s leftist ideology, including his upbringing, his experience in Chicago, his lackluster work experience in the United States; his career in Mexico at a time when Communist sentiments were popular; his affiliation with the League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers (LEAR); and his travel to Spain at the time of the Civil War. The majority of the information was drawn from sources in Spanish, most significantly, Revueltas’ own writings and letters, and Carlos Chávez’s published letters.

The next three chapters highlight the many parallels between Silvestre Revueltas and Nicolás Guillén, particularly their shared commitment to social justice and the advancing of the class struggle, and their conception of art in all its manifestations as a tool for social progress and political protest. Chapter two provides an account of the 1937 meetings of the LEAR in Mexico City in which Revueltas and Guillén met for the first time and where Revueltas first heard Guillén’s poetry. That encounter and the subsequent interaction between the two artists in early 1937, directly originated the three works by Revueltas that comprise the focus of this paper. I also provide a general overview of the political climate and the resulting social issues prevailing in Cuba and the Caribbean at the time, specifically the imperialist domination of the United States, as those factors heavily influenced the political tone and the themes of the two collections that contain the above mentioned poems: West Indies, Ltd. (1934) and Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas (1937).

Next, I discuss how, as a logical consequence of their political persuasion, both Guillén and Revueltas incorporated popular stylistic elements into their oeuvre. In the third

chapter I explore the origins, development, and musical characteristics of the Cuban son — the most representative Cuban popular genre— given its preponderance in the literary output of Guillén. To illustrate this point, I exemplify the presence of the montuno structure of the son in the three poems set by Revueltas. In addition, I emphasize the socio-political connotations of the genre and highlight its deep connection with African religious and ritual music. This section also provides insight into the source of inspiration for Guillén’s “Sensemayá” as well pertinent information regarding the intended political discourse of *West Indies, Ltd.* and *Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas.*

In chapter four, I focus on Revueltas’ predilection for the music of the people, not with a Mexicanist approach but with a political one. Here, I agree with the premise established by Roberto Kolb Neuhaus, that in his early works Revueltas routinely incorporated diverse stylistic elements drawn from popular sources as topics, to allude to specific cultural and political contexts. I propose that the same applies also to *Caminando, No sé por qué piensas tú,* and *Sensemayá.* Topic theory, which seeks to find meaning in music based on its connection to real life, provides an extremely helpful analytical framework for this paper. Therefore, I present an overview of the musical topic, a concept first introduced by Leonard Ratner in 1980 in his book *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style.* By “topics” Ratner referred to conventional figures and styles widely employed by eighteenth-century composers to convey meaning to their audiences, given the specific connotations of each topic —class, affect, geography, and social occasion. Other topic theorists such as Kofi Agawu, Wye Allanbrook, and Danuta Mirka have since expanded upon Ratner’s original “universe of topics,” taking into consideration topics developed even in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Based on this line of thought, I posit that the topics Revueltas utilized in this three works to represent specific characters and to allude to specific cultural and political
contexts surrounding those characters are: the Cuban son in Caminando, the Cuban rumba, the son, and the military topic in No sé por qué piensas tú, and, Afro-Cuban ritual and carnival music in Sensemayá.

I devote chapters five, six, and seven of this paper to Caminando, No sé por qué piensas tú, and Sensemayá, respectively. I identify and describe specific Afro-Caribbean stylistic elements utilized by the composer, demonstrating how they derive from popular music and, thus, their connection with the topic at hand. After providing an interpretation of the text, I demonstrate how the use of Afro-Caribbean stylistic elements —along with other relevant compositional devices employed by Revueltas— enhances the meaning of the text.

Primary sources consulted for this paper include scores, manuscripts, poem collections, letters, diaries, photographs, and miscellaneous documents. Digital images of the available manuscripts of Silvestre Revueltas’ Caminando and No sé por qué piensas tú, as well as the recently edited full scores of the instrumental versions of Caminando, No sé por qué piensas tú, and Sensemayá (chamber version) were generously provided by Dr. Roberto Kolb Neuhaus from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). The online Biblioteca Digital Silvestre Revueltas of the UNAM, was an invaluable source of digital images of photographs, letters, autograph scores, instrumental parts, and other miscellaneous documents related to the life and work of Revueltas —all made available for research by the generosity of Dr. Eugenia Revueltas, daughter of Silvestre Revueltas and guardian of his estate. The writings, letters, and diary of the composer —compiled by his sister Rosaura in the book Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo— provided first hand biographical information on the composer. Published scores of Revueltas’ three works were consulted at the Biblioteca Cuicamatini of the Facultad de Música at the UNAM, while newspapers and other periodicals were accessed at the Biblioteca de las Artes of the Centro Nacional de
Investigación, Documentación e Información Musical “Carlos Chávez” in Mexico City. A collection of photographs of Silvestre Revueltas as well as a copy of the first edition of Nicolás Guillén’s *West Indies, Ltd.* (1934) was perused at the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division of the Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin (UT). A copy of the first edition of *Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas* (1937) was consulted at the Biblioteca Central of the UNAM. Guillén’s *Epistolario selecto* contains the poet’s letters and first hand reports from his political activities and relationships. Lastly, scores and manuscripts of music by Cuban composers Amadeo Roldán and Alejandro García Caturla were consulted at the Free Library of Philadelphia and the James Madison University Music Library.
Chapter 1. Silvestre Revueltas: Biographical Background

To my father I owe the best of my interior life and my best love for mankind. To [my mother] I probably owe to have been born with an ill-fated fondness for music…and an inexhaustible nostalgia for new horizons.\(^8\)

[A mi padre le debo lo mejor de mi vida interior y mi mejor amor por los hombres. A ella [mi madre] se debió probablemente que yo naciera con una malhadada afición por la música…y una inacabable nostalgia de nuevos horizontes.]

—Silvestre Revueltas

Silvestre Revueltas was born in the last hours of December 31, 1899 in Santiago Papasquiaro, a small mining town in the west-central state of Durango, Mexico. The oldest of twelve siblings, Silvestre spent his childhood in constant contact with nature —the mountain range of the Sierra Madre Occidental, and later, the Lerma River that empties into the Chapala Lake in the state of Jalisco —exploring, hunting, foraging, camping, always attuned to its sounds. It was in an environment such as this, surrounded by his “first loves: the sky, the water, the mountains” that Silvestre experienced music for the first time:

I was very young —three years old, she [my mother] tells me— when I first heard music. It was a little town orchestra playing a serenata in the main square. I stood there listening for a long time, surely paying intense attention, because my eyes crossed. My eyes stayed cross-eyed for three or four days.

When I was a boy, I always preferred to play drumbeats on the bathtub than to do anything useful, and so, I spent my days imitating diverse instruments with my voice, improvising orchestras and songs, and accompanying myself with the bathtub.\(^9\)

\(^8\) Revueltas, *Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo*, 26-27. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are the author’s.

\(^9\) Ibid., 27-28.
Silvestre’s parents—José Revueltas Gutiérrez (1871-1923) and Romana Sánchez Arias (1883-1939)—were of very humble origins and possessed little formal education. José, an orphan since the age of eight, was constrained to become an itinerant merchant to support his family. After marrying Romana, he worked as a bookkeeper for a mining company and opened a small store in Santiago. Romana was the daughter of a mining worker: a “rustic, uncultivated woman,” as Revueltas called her.10 Time and time again, the family moved from one location to another as the father tried his luck in various commercial ventures, even in the midst of the conflagration of the Mexican Revolution. Poverty, unprivileged social status, and the dearth of cultural and artistic opportunities notwithstanding, José and Romana endeavored to provide the best possible education for their children. Indeed, in his later years Silvestre would reminisce about her mother’s vision, as she “dreamed of someday having a child become an artist, a poet, a writer, or a musician; someone who could express everything she admired and loved about nature and life.”11

At age six, Silvestre took his first violin lessons from Francisco Ramírez—a musician in his hometown band—continuing later in Colima, Ocotlán, and Guadalajara, where he made his public debut at age eleven at the Teatro Degollado.12 In 1911, when the family moved back to Durango, and thanks to a prosperous season for his father’s business, Silvestre attended the Instituto Juárez of Durango, pursuing violin studies in a more formal

10 Ibid., 19.

11 Ibid., 27. Remarkably, several of the Revueltas siblings became internationally renowned artists: Silvestre (composer, conductor, and violinist), Rosaura (actress and dancer), José (writer and political activist), and Fermín (muralist). Three others achieved only moderate success: Consuelo (painter), Emilia (pianist), and Agustín (sculptor).

12 Luis Cortez and Xochiquetzal Ruiz, “Revueltas Sánchez, Silvestre,” in Diccionario de la música española e hispanoamericana, ed. Montserrat Bergadá et. al. (Madrid: SGAE, 2002); and Revueltas, Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo, 28.
setting. In 1913, he settled in Mexico City to study in the Conservatorio Nacional under José Rocabruna (violin) and Rafael J. Tello (composition). During his time in the capital — from 1913 to early 1917, at the height of the Mexican Revolution — Revueltas was a member of the student opera orchestra and worked as a freelance violinist, musicalizing silent films at the Cine Cartagena and, occasionally, playing at social events. In 1917, after concluding his studies at the Conservatorio, Silvestre was appointed as concertmaster with the Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional, a position he held only for a few months. Ironically, in spite of his progress and his active musical life, Silvestre’s letters reveal a young man already preoccupied with thoughts of death, weighed down by dark forebodings of his future as an artist, and struggling with intense feelings of isolation and despair. On a letter dated April 17, 1917, Revueltas pleaded with his parents to allow him to return to Durango in order to “find some peace” for his soul and to rest from his “moral fatigue,” complaining that, although his studies were going well, his enthusiasm had “completely waned” and he was leading an “insufferable and sterile” life.

For the next decade, Silvestre’s musical formation and most of his professional work took place in the United States. In September 1917 he enrolled at the St. Edward’s College (now St. Edward’s University) in Austin, Texas, where he received musical instruction from

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16 Revueltas, Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo, 34-38.
Brother Louis Gazagne of the Congregation of the Holy Cross.\textsuperscript{17} Correspondence from this period shows that although Revueltas lacked much enthusiasm for his regular academic life (“life in school does not pass quickly enough for me”), he experienced great satisfaction and success as a performer (“I have achieved some fame in town!”), both as a soloist and as orchestral musician.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, Silvestre soon distinguished himself, earning glowing reviews for his “usual masterly way” and his “magnificent” playing, and receiving the “Gold Medal for Violin” in the commencement ceremonies on May 26, 1918.\textsuperscript{19} At that time, Silvestre’s incipient compositional style began to manifest as well. In one of his letters, Revueltas mentioned for the first time that he was thinking of composing (beyond academic assignments) — he offered to compose a piano piece for his sister Emilia who was taking piano lessons at the time.\textsuperscript{20}

In January 1919, after gaining acceptance into the prestigious Chicago Musical College (now Roosevelt University), Revueltas began studies in harmony, composition (with Felix Borowski), and violin (under Leon Sametini). Only six months later, he graduated with

\textsuperscript{17} Candelaria, 515, 517.

\textsuperscript{18} Revueltas, \textit{Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo}, 38-39; and Candelaria, 523-524. According to records obtained by Candelaria, the name of Silvestre Revueltas appeared under the first violin section in the rosters published by the \textit{Austin American} paper on December 16, 1917, March 24, 1918, and May 13, 1918.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 521.

\textsuperscript{20} Revueltas, \textit{Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo}, 42. Letter dated April 17, 1918. Additionally, there is record of Revueltas purchasing music paper on November 25, 1917 as well as a mention by Louis Gazagne of Silvestre as “a concert violinist with a bent for composition” (see Candelaria, 521).
“honorable mention in the diamond, gold, and silver awards for violin.”21 Between 1922 and 1926, Silvestre pursued his last violin studies with distinguished Hungarian pedagogue Otakar Ševčík, as well as with Pawel Kochanski.22 Alongside his studies, Silvestre’s romantic life thrived, and within one year he befriended and married American opera singer Jules Klarecy – she would give birth to their only child, Carmen (born April 1922). It is possible to speculate that Jules was the “amiga from college” Silvestre referred to in one of his letters: a young woman who wanted to convince him to try and learn “worthwhile” social activities: “to swim, play ball, ride a horse…dance, sing.”23

Once his formal studies concluded, Silvestre began searching for work in order to support his new family. Between May 1920 and March 1925 he maintained his affiliation with the Chicago Federation of Musicians (CFM) and worked, rather intermittently, in some of the silent “moving picture” houses of the city.24 His stay in Chicago was frequently interrupted by personal and professional trips abroad, including a trip on December 1923 to attend his father’s funeral in Mexico City. For months at a time, Revueltas would remain in Mexico —leaving behind his wife and young daughter in Chicago— touring the most important cities and appearing, to widespread acclaim, in a variety of solo and chamber performances.


23 Revueltas, Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo, 44. Letter dated June 1, 1919.

Most significant for his career was meeting Carlos Chávez in 1924—a member of Varèse's International Composer’s Guild in New York—with whom he formed a close friendship and a fruitful artistic partnership. According to Silvestre's own memoir, 1924 was also the year when he resumed composing after a period of self-imposed silence. The few works he produced signaled the beginning of a new era for him and a radical departure from his early compositional style, which lacked the modernism that characterized his later works, and even resembled Impressionism.

By the time he returned to Chicago, Silvestre had grown tired of the city, its weather, and his lackluster employment options. Furthermore, as he had already begun to develop “an inclination for leftist ideals,” he could not reconcile those with Jule’s ideology “based on social, ethical conceptions of the bourgeoisie.”

Concluding that they had nothing in

25 Ibid., 183, 187. Although officially residing in Chicago, Revueltas spent the following periods performing in Mexico: late 1920-summer of 1921, December 1923-December 1924. For more details on Revueltas’ tours, see Espinosa Barco, Frente a frente.

26 Carlos Chávez, “La música en México,” Conferencia no editada (18 de octubre de 1971), quoted in Carlos Chávez, Epistolario selecto de Carlos Chávez (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), 16-17. Chávez reminisced: “Silvestre and I stroke a great and loyal friendship; I recognized in him a great violinist, an exceptionally talented musician and a human being of enormous sympathy. We played together in some New Music Concerts…”

27 Revueltas, Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo, 30. Silvestre recounted a time between 1917 and 1920 where he submitted a composition for violin and piano to one of his professors, who stated, to Silvestre’s great surprise, that the style was entirely “Debussian.” Later, when Silvestre became familiar with Debussy’s music and realized how similar his sound ideal was, he resolved not to compose again until he had “created [his] own language.”

28 Chávez, Epistolario selecto, 52. Letter written to Chávez on December 23, 1924: “White and gray, and more white and more gray. A…desperate sadness covers all things…”

common, Revueltas left Chicago permanently on March 11, 1925, effectively separating from his wife. Their divorce was finalized on June 10, 1927.\(^{30}\)

After spending one year performing in Mexico, Silvestre arrived in San Antonio on April 1926 seeking new professional opportunities. He became the concertmaster of the opulent Aztec Theatre in downtown San Antonio and joined the faculty of the San Antonio College of Music as a violin teacher.\(^{31}\) In 1928, at the instance of Chávez, Silvestre joined the Pan-American Association of Composers led by Henry Cowell and Edgar Varèse, a venture that facilitated the dissemination of some of his works in the United States and Cuba, and afforded him contact with Varèse, Aaron Copland, and conductor/author Nicholas Slonimsky. For a short time Revueltas endeavored to establish a permanent orchestra in San Antonio, reporting to his parents that the rehearsals had been successful; however, his hopes to secure the support of city officials did not materialize and the project was abandoned.\(^ {32}\) Dissatisfied with his low salary at the Aztec he left for Mobile in 1928 and joined the Saenger Theater orchestra as its concertmaster. On the side, Silvestre conducted a small orchestra, arranged for theater, and spent time studying orchestral scores and listening to recordings. Soon, however, when the Saenger adopted the Vitaphone (recorded film sound), he found himself unemployed and returned to San Antonio, resuming his teaching duties at the College of Music.\(^ {33}\)

\(^{30}\) Parker, “Revueltas, The Chicago Years,” 190-191.

\(^{31}\) Espinosa Barco, 69.

\(^{32}\) Revueltas, Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo, 45-46.

The year 1929 marked a major turning point for Revueltas’ professional career. At the invitation of Carlos Chávez—who had recently become director of the Conservatorio Nacional de Música and the Orquesta Sinfónica de México (OSM)—Silvastre returned permanently to Mexico to teach violin, chamber music, and conduct the student orchestra in the conservatory. In addition, he was officially appointed as associate conductor of the OSM in February 1929—an association that fostered the beginning of a productive period of orchestral composition for Silvastre. With an intense desire to “fight against the ancestral apathy and the cavernous obscurity of academic musicians,” Chávez and Revueltas programmed works of composers who represented the new musical trends of the time (Stravinsky, Shostakovich, Milhaud, Schoenberg, Honegger, Debussy, Hindemith, Ibert, Prokofiev, Poulenc, Varèse, Bartók, and Ravel), while simultaneously promoting the works of young Mexican composers such as José Pablo Moncayo, Salvador Contreras, Blas Galindo, and Daniel Ayala. Additionally, as part of the government’s initiative to “educate

34 Revueltas, Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo, 228-229. Letter from December 18, 1928: Chávez promised Silvastre a daily salary for his duties at the Conservatory of between $12 and $14 pesos. In a letter dated December 20, 1928, Chávez reiterated his offer.

35 Facultad de Música (FaM), [Without title], digital object: Biblioteca Digital Silvestre Revueltas, in Portal de Datos Abiertos UNAM, accessed April 4, 2016, http://datosabiertos.unam.mx/FaM:BDREV:D_PR04. Revueltas first conducted the Orquesta Sinfónica de México on September 8, 1929. The OSM premiered the following works by Revueltas: Esquinas (1931), Colorines (1932), Ventanas (1932), Cuauhnáhuac (1933), Janitzio (1933), Planos (1934), and Danza Geométrica (1935).


the people,” the OSM offered concerts for children and launched a free series of concerts for workers in 1933, making cultural events accessible to the poor classes for the first time.38

In 1931, Silvestre met Ángela Acevedo, a voice student at the conservatory, and married her soon after. The couple welcomed three daughters: Natalia (1932-1934), Eugenia (b. 1934), and Alejandra (1935-1936). His vast correspondence with Ángela reveals his deep love for her and his only surviving daughter Eugenia. In 1935, the friendship between Chávez and Revueltas ended when Silvestre left the OSM to accept the directorship of the rival Orquesta Sinfónica Nacional (OSN). It was with the OSN that Revueltas intended to perform Caminando, No sé por qué piensas tú, and Sensemayá under the title Poemas de Nicolás Guillén during the 1937 season —not as part of a regular concert, but interestingly, as part of children and workers’ concerts (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2).

Figure 1.1. Proposed program for the first concert for workers by the OSN, 1937.39


Coupled with his fallout with Chávez, Revueltas’ performing career as a violinist completely ceased and he devoted himself solely to teaching, conducting, and composing. Around the same time, Silvestre became increasingly militant in his leftist ideas, although, unlike his brothers Fermín and José, he never joined the Mexican Communist Party. He became an active member of the League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers (LEAR), a political organization that enlisted numerous Mexican and foreign artists and intellectuals aiming to “further the class struggle” by means of “literature, painting, music, theater, and other expressions of intellectual labor.” Accordingly, Revueltas participated as a conductor in a number of meetings of the LEAR and other political events (see Figure 1.3).

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40 Ibid.

41 Eugenia Revueltas, interview by the author, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, March 10, 2016.

In 1937, in the midst of the raging Spanish Civil War, Revueltas and the LEAR delegation traveled to Spain in solidarity with the Republican cause. He presented concerts of some of his works in Valencia, Madrid, and Barcelona (still Republican strongholds), which he declared to be his contribution to the fight against “that fascism, the destruction of everything noble and grand.”\(^{44}\) By the end of 1937 it became clear that Franco would crush the Republic, as more and more Republican territories capitulated to fascist forces. After five months of what turned out to be a life-changing sojourn, Silvestre returned to Mexico, never fully recovering from the disillusion of seeing the Republican ideals defeated. Back in Mexico, the composer experienced a “gradual disintegration of morale,” although his


\(^{44}\) Revueltas, *Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo*, 101.
creative activity continued unabated.\textsuperscript{45} Silvestre’s economic situation continued to be precarious and his acute alcoholism caused him to be confined in insane asylums on several occasions.\textsuperscript{46} After a tragic relapse into alcoholism, Revueltas died of pneumonia in Mexico City on October 5, 1940, on the very night his ballet \textit{El Renacuajo paseador} was premiered at the Palacio Nacional de Bellas Artes.\textsuperscript{47}

Since the early 1920s Silvestre had been fantasizing about music that was “color, sculpture, and movement,” dreaming with a type of music that could not be transcribed nor expressed through the existing notation system.\textsuperscript{48} However, it would be in the course of his last decade that Revueltas produced the vast majority of his oeuvre, particularly the works that earned him lasting international recognition.\textsuperscript{49} His catalogue consists primarily of orchestral and chamber works, but it also includes songs, political music, music for ballet, film scores, and works for diverse ensembles.


\textsuperscript{46} A diary written during Silvestre’s last visit in 1939 is reproduced in “Diario en el sanatorio,” in Revueltas, \textit{Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo}, 150-177.


\textsuperscript{48} Revueltas, \textit{Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo}, 30.

\textsuperscript{49} Notable conductors who performed Revueltas’ music during his lifetime or soon after his death were Nicolas Slonimsky, Erich Kleiber, Leopold Stokowski, and Leonard Bernstein.
Chapter 2. The Revueltas—Guillén Connection: The Quest for Social Justice

What am I in view of the tragedy? What can I do? It burdens me the thought of our work as artists, full of vanity, of presumption. How is it possible not to feel oppressed, hurt, small, useless at the sight of a dying man, a child, a woman who cries? And of what benefit can it be to them, and why would it matter to them a series of sounds or lines… I think of my small oeuvre, work of love and faith, so insignificant…in view of the great human sorrow… I believe the smallest sincere effort is useful.50

¡¿Qué soy yo ante esta tragedia? ¿Qué puedo hacer? Me agobia el pensamiento de nuestra obra de artistas, llena de vanidad, de presunción. ¿Cómo es posible no sentirse oprimido, pequeño, inútil ante un hombre que muere, un niño, una mujer que lloran? ¿Y de qué puede servirles a ellos, y qué les puede importar una serie de sonidos o de líneas… Pienso en mi pequeña obra, obra de amor y de fe, tan pequeña…ante este gran dolor humano… Pienso que el más pequeño esfuerzo sincero es útil.]

—Silvestre Revueltas

He represents the protest of the most exploited class in Cuba and the world, the black race.51

[El representa la protesta de la clase más explotada de Cuba y del mundo, la raza negra.]

—Waldo Frank, speaking about Nicolás Guillén

For several decades, superficial readings of Revueltas’ oeuvre have reinforced a rather narrow concept of him, categorizing the bulk of his work merely as Mexicanist. For example, Otto Mayer-Serra affirmed that the “rather harsh conception of musical Mexicanism…peculiar to Chávez’s scores” was evident in some of the music of Revueltas, and that the titles of Revueltas’ scores “relate to the varied aspects of the Mexican panorama” and to “picturesque aspects of present-day Mexico.”52 Nicolas Slonimsky, on the other hand, simply characterized Revueltas as “the modern Mexicanist of music” and quoted

50 Revueltas, Silvestre Revueltas por él mismo, 94, 58.


the program notes on *Cuauhnahuac* (ancient name of Cuernavaca) and *Janitzio* (lake in Michoacán), in which Revueltas sarcastically stated “the *huehuetl* (Indian drum) is used as a means of nationalistic propaganda (…) other instruments in the score are even more nationalistic,” and “posterity will undoubtedly reward my contribution to national tourism.”

Aaron Copland described Revueltas as the “more obviously Mexican artist” since, in his view, the composer drew “more directly [than Carlos Chávez] on actual tunes that originate from popular Mexican music.”

Recent scholarship, however, has shed light on a number of hitherto neglected aspects, such as his modernism and particularly the politico-social elements in his work. As discussed in the previous chapter, Revueltas was a man of deeply held convictions, highly sensitive to the plight of the marginalized, the suffering, and the destitute, not only in Mexico, but wherever he saw other human beings in need. He was a composer entirely devoted to his art, not for the sake of art itself, but as a powerful means of social renovation. His was an “ethical commitment…with the humble class.” Indeed, his political ideology about social issues derived “from the people, from the working class, from the oppressed

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55 Roberto García Bonilla, “Mitos y realidades de Silvestre Revueltas,” in *Visiones sonoras: entrevistas con compositores, solistas y directores* (México, D.F.: Siglo XXI/CONACULTA, 2001), 24. Eugenia Revueltas affirms that the origins of her father’s social consciousness may be traced back to his childhood, when his father would read him the writings of Dostoyevsky.
and the exploited” and he resolved to assume his “human and virile duty” and “fight side by side with [his] comrades for a new and better life” (see Figure 2.1).\textsuperscript{56}

![Figure 2.1. Silvestre Revueltas visiting the mine “2 Carlos,” February 24, 1939.\textsuperscript{57}](image)

Although he had been instrumental in bringing the works of European composers to the attention of Mexican audiences, Revueltas preferred the music of the people — the kind of music that could be “heard in the provinces,” music that “does not ride on a Rolls Royce but walks barefoot….” He did not see a practical use for music “wrapped in imported silks from the European boulevards,” as it was “so far removed from the… distressing reality of


the masses.” For Revueltas, the only valid path to be followed by any artist of his day was to devote “talent, technique, and creative energy” to the “exclusive service of a just social cause, the liberation of the proletariat and its culture;” he declared: “the artist of his time, of his hour, stands with the longings and the struggle of the working class….”

As Revueltas’ political militancy became increasingly overt, he affiliated with the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists (LEAR), becoming its president from May 1936 to February 1937. During its brief existence (1933-1938), the LEAR enjoyed ample support and unprecedented freedom of expression under the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas, who himself enacted sweeping reforms benefiting workers, peasants, students, and women. The mission of the organization was to propel the class struggle “by means of the most rigorous and ample intellectual campaign in favor of the large masses of workers and peasants…through literature, painting, music, theater, and other means of expression…”

In fact, the professed objectives of the LEAR were:

To create a new art integrated with the interests of the great masses, linked to the political and professional struggles of the artists from Mexico and other peoples of the world, as well as to strengthen bonds of solidarity with those who fight for national liberation, democracy, and against the imminence of war (emphasis mine).

A shared interest among communist and socialist groups in Mexico and abroad was their readiness to support the revolutionary efforts in other countries. Of particular concern in the 1930s was the urgent need to defend the cause of the Spanish Republic against

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58 Ibid., 29, 201.

59 Ibid., 187.


General Francisco Franco and the spread of fascism. The tragedy of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)—where tens of thousands of innocent civilians were mercilessly slaughtered—was a powerful catalyst for action that brought together an international body of intellectuals and artists desiring to devote all their creative activity to the service of the popular causes—among them, the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén.\textsuperscript{62}

On January 19, 1937, Guillén left Cuba for the first time to attend a Congress for Writers and Artists organized by the LEAR in Mexico City. While taking part in one of the meetings at the Palacio de Bellas Artes—in homage to Spanish Republican Marcelino Domingo—he was invited to recite some of his poems.\textsuperscript{63} The next day, as the featured speaker for the closing ceremony, Guillén delivered a rousing speech in the name of the intellectuals of Cuba, denouncing the oppression of the Cuban people at the hands of the United States, enabled by the Cuban government and its military (see Figure 2.2).\textsuperscript{64}

Following his address, at the insistence of the audience, he repeated the poems he had recited the previous evening—including “No sé por qué piensas tú” (“I can’t figure out why”). The effect of Guillén’s reading on the attendees was electrifying: he had to continue

\textsuperscript{62} Eugenia Revueltas, “Nicolás Guillén y la LEAR,” \textit{La experiencia literaria} no. 11 (2003): 61-67, accessed February 7, 2016, http://hdl.handle.net/10391/2092. The attack against the Republic provoked in Cuba a strong expression of support for the Spanish people, along with a resistance to the dictatorship of Batista in the island. In Mexico, during one of the LEAR meetings in Guadalajara (December 1936), Revueltas premiered \textit{Homenaje a Federico García Lorca}, composed in memory of the Spanish poet executed at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War for his anti-fascist statements.

\textsuperscript{63} Guillén, \textit{Epistolario}, 108-109. Fittingly, Guillén read poems related to the military theme: “No sé por qué piensas tú, soldado” “Fusilamiento” (later dedicated to Silvestre Revueltas), and “José Ramón Cantaliso.”

reciting, and read almost half of his book *West Indies, Ltd.* —including the *son* “Caminando” (“Walking”).

Encouraged by the communist sentiments thriving in Mexico, Guillén remained in the country for about three months. He continued writing and publishing, while cultivating friendships among like-minded literary figures. Along with other members of the LEAR he would attend the *tertulias* (gatherings) held at the home of the composer Jacobo Kostakowski, where he recited his poems. According to Eugenia Revueltas, it was on one of those occasions that Silvestre first heard Guillén’s “Sensemayá.” Soon thereafter, Revueltas

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set three texts by the poet: “No sé por qué piensas tú” from the collection *Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas*, as well as “Caminando” and “Sensemayá” from *West Indies, Ltd.*

In order to understand the significance of Guillén’s poems, it is imperative to take into account the history of Cuba, first as a colony of Spain, and later as a protectorate of the United States. After the signing of the Platt Amendment in 1902—granting the United States the right to intervene in the Cuban political and economic affairs at any time—the same colonialist ideology and its effects continued to hold sway. The provisions of the Cuban Constitution prohibiting racial segregation were ignored. As a matter of fact, mestizos, mulattoes, and Blacks continued to be dehumanized, relegated to menial jobs, denied basic rights and services, and their culture and customs were routinely disparaged and proscribed. The cultural, political, and economic domination of the United States became institutionalized in 1934 as the Cuban government and the local élites catered to foreign interests, facilitated the establishment of foreign monopolies, and violently repressed political dissidents through the military.⁶⁸

With this brief background in mind, it is not surprising that most of the poetry written by Guillén—beginning with the collection *West Indies, Ltd.*, and *Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas*—is entirely political in nature. In fact, although the mature poetic production of Guillén had already begun with the publishing of *Motivos de son* (1930), it was not until *West Indies, Ltd.* that the poet became overtly militant in his social protest. For the poet, this work constituted “his definitive entrance into the painful Antillean fate” as the “socio-political imprint in his poetry” was wholly beyond question.⁶⁹ His poems denounce

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political issues such as poverty, racial discrimination, repression, social inequality, systematic exploitation, and political and social corruption. However, the central theme of Guillén’s oeuvre was anti-imperialism, as the Cuban dictatorship and the foreign capitalists imposed an unbearable “burden of oppression and exploitation [on] all ethnic groups in the lower strata of the society,” particularly on blacks.\textsuperscript{70}

The three poems that constitute the focus of this paper are contained in two separate collections. The first one, \textit{West Indies, Ltd.} (1934), was published in Cuba after the fall of the Machado regime and during the rise of the pro-American Batista dictatorship, when a tribunal (\textit{Tribunal de Urgencia}) was established to “repress political dissidents, persecute communism, and any other movement of social protest” (see Figure 2.3).\textsuperscript{71}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{cover.jpg}
\caption{Cover of the original edition of \textit{West Indies, Ltd.} (1934).}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{71} Alfred Melon, “Guillén: poeta de las síntesis,” in \textit{Tres ensayos sobre Nicolás Guillén}, ed. David Chericián (La Habana: Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 1980), 56. In effect, Guillén was incarcerated in 1936 for publishing “subversive” (leftist) material in his poetry and in the literary magazine \textit{Mediodía}, of which he was an editor.
Notice the caricature of the black man working at the *zafra* (sugar cane harvest). In this collection “the predominant theme is that of the…sugar cane plantation worker that…substituted the slave in the same task and almost with the same result.” If Guillén’s early work had focused mainly on the issues of Cuba, particularly in Havana, the scope in *West Indies, Ltd.* broadened to include the entire Antillean archipelago, where the same inhumane treatment of the lower classes and the blacks prevailed (see Figure 2.4).

![Image](image_url)

Figure 2.4. Allister Macmillan, “Sugar Cane Plantation, Jamaica” (1909).

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In general, the tone of West Indies, Ltd. is one of pessimism, anger, and “caustic
denunciation against the American domination;” although, there is an occasional “glimpse of
liberating hope.” The choice of an English title—rather than the Spanish “Antillas”—
clearly alludes to the domination by the white masters who imposed their culture and
language on the colonized as superior. The use of the abbreviation “Ltd.” mirrors Langston
Hughes’ collection Scottsboro Limited (1932) and refers to the deplorable condition of the
Antilles, wholly striped from their sovereignty and reduced to the status of a mere
corporation by the imperialist powers.

Cantos para soldados y zonetas para turistas was published in Mexico City in May 1937.
Regarding this collection, Guillén stated: “I have been working very hard…in the
completion of my book of verses [Cantos para soldados], unpublishable (at least for now) in
Cuba, and that will be published around the 15th of the next month.” In this two-part
collection, the themes of “the black slave, the master and the whip” disappear, as Guillén
portrays the social injustice suffered by “whites and blacks indiscriminately.”
Two distinct groups are addressed: the soldiers —of proletarian and peasant origin— who were just as
“exploited as the people,” and the tourists —mostly American— that “ignore[d] the reality
in Cuba…” The first part of the collection, Cantos para soldados, bore the dedicatory: “To
my father killed by soldiers” and featured an engraving by José Chavez Morado (see Figure

74 Ibid., 67, 71.
75 Ruscallada Bercedóniz, 82. Foreign investors controlled 75 percent of the arable
land, 90 percent of essential services, and 40 percent of the sugar production in Cuba (see
77 Ruffinelli, 88.
78 Ibid., 79, 84.
2.5). There, Guillén speaks to the soldiers—not as hated enemies, but as members of the same dispossessed class—calling on them to unite with the people and to help enact social change. He appeals to them to realize that by serving as the “repressive instruments of national oligarchies at the service of colonialism and imperialism” they betray their own.\footnote{Guillén’s father, a liberal senator, was assassinated on November 1, 1916, for challenging the reelection of Mario García Menocal, a pro-American president. Nicolás was 17 years old.}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure2.5.png}
\caption{Engraving by José Chavez Morado featured in the original edition of \textit{Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas} (1937). Picture taken by the author.}
\end{figure}

In the second part, \textit{Sones para turistas}, Guillén denounces the “noisy and ostentatious luxury of the tourists thirsty for \textit{son} and guitar,” and attempts to bring universal attention to

\footnote{Ruffinelli, 79.}
the grim reality that the system would prefer to keep under wraps.\textsuperscript{81} In fact, while tourism — referred to by many as the “second zafra” — was actively promoted in 1934 in order to make up for the low prices of sugar in the markets and the tariffs imposed by the United States, the profits benefited only the foreign corporations and a minority of privileged Cubans. In practice, most Cubans could not afford to visit touristic attractions, and segregation, exploitation, and income equality continued rampant.\textsuperscript{82}

A logical consequence of the political leanings of Silvestre Revueltas and Nicolás Guillén was a close identification with the people and with their culture, which in turn, translated into the assimilation of popular culture into their artistic production. Both men approached the popular from within — not as outsiders, depicting the exotic in “Others” — legitimizing “low art” as a valid means of expression, and investing it with political meaning. In the poetry of Guillén, particularly in the three texts that concern our study, two main influences can be cited: the Cuban son genre and the music of the African slaves as expressed in their religious rituals and Carnival celebrations. The music of Revueltas, on the other hand, reveals how the composer utilized an eclectic array of popular or folk elements as topics, in order to refer to specific political and cultural contexts.

\textsuperscript{81} Melon, 55.

\textsuperscript{82} Adolfina Cossío, \textit{Rhythmic Effects in Nicolás Guillén’s Poetry} (Santiago de Cuba: Universidad de Oriente, 1979), 12.
Chapter 3. The Guillén—Revueltas Connection: Popular Forms of Art (Part I)

Regarding the orientation of my poetry, I believe that I have finally found it. I love the study of the people; the interpretation of its sorrows and joys.\textsuperscript{83}

[En lo que se refiere a la orientación de mi poesía, creo que al fin me he encontrado. Me encanta el estudio del pueblo. La interpretación de sus dolores y de sus goces.]

—Nicolás Guillén

For Nicolás Guillén, the assimilation of the Cuban \textit{son} into his oeuvre constituted a revolutionary approach—artistically and socially—as he broke away from the dominant European literary conventions and sought to assert the cultural contributions of the blacks as relevant and necessary for the Cuban society. The poet explained: “I have tried to incorporate into Cuban literature what could be called the poem-\textit{son}—not as a simple musical motive but as an element of true poetry—based on the technique of that kind of dance so popular in our country.”\textsuperscript{84} Guillén’s achievement—the aesthetic merits of the poem-\textit{son}, but most significantly, its political and sociological significance—is described by his biographer Ángel Augier as:

The discovery of a form of poetic expression extracted from a musical genre of genuine popular origin and, therefore, a mulatto artistic product, in which the constitutive elements—Afro-Hispanic—of the native society participate. Moreover, the black and his problems were featured in the highest literary plane—in other words, the most discriminated segment of the Cuban population—in moments of great political tension and of social and patriotic inconformity.\textsuperscript{85}

\begin{flushright}
[El hallazgo de una forma de expresión poética extraída de un género musical de genuino origen popular cubano y, por tanto, producto artístico mulato, en el que participan los elementos constitutivos—afro hispanos—de la sociedad criolla. Además, se llevaba al primer plano literario al negro y sus problemas, es decir, el]
\end{flushright}


\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 115-116. “He tratado de incorporar a la literatura cubana—no como simple motivo musical, sino como elemento de verdadera poesía—lo que pudiera llamarse poema-son, basado en la técnica de esa clase de baile tan popular en nuestro país.”

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 36.
sector más discriminado de la población cubana, en momentos de gran tensión política y de inconformidad social y patriótica.]

But, what might explain Guillén's preference for the son over other popular genres?

Part of the answer may lie in the poet's upbringing, as he was constantly exposed to — and influenced by — the genre. When asked about the first time he heard a son, he replied:

In Camagüey, while I was a child, in the house of a neighbor, a very nice mulatto by the name of Rosario Díaz. Every night a son that was becoming popular was sung there; I am talking [19]10, [19]11, and [19]12. Later, as a grownup, I would constantly hear sons in the dances of the Victoria society. However, the son — or sons — that influenced me were those of the Sexteto Habanero, as I have said before, in my youth, toward the late 1920s and afterwards, and those of the Matamoros.  

[En Camagüey, siendo yo un niño, en casa de una vecina, una simpática mulata llamada Rosario Díaz. Todas las noches se cantaba allí un son, que empezaba a tener influencia popular; hablo de los años 10, 11 y 12. Después siendo yo más grande, oía sons sin cesar en los bailes de la sociedad Victoria. Sin embargo, el son — o los sons — que influyeron en mí fueron los del Sexteto Habanero, como he dicho antes, en mi juventud, hacia fines de los años 20 y siguientes, y los de los Matamoros.]

However, a more satisfactory answer to our question can be found in the following statements by Guillén:

The son… is in my opinion an adequate form to achieve vernacular poems, perhaps because it is also our most representative music. On the other hand, I believe that the “poem-sones” — from a literary point of view, and because of the significance of the popular in the world today — constitute a way to be in the “avant-garde” (…) Among us, where we often think only with imported ideas, a certain degree of heroism is necessary to show up with some primary verses, written in the manner in which many of our blacks (and not a few whites) speak and think.…  

[El son… es a mi juicio una forma adecuada para lograr poemas vernáculos, acaso porque esa es también nuestra música más representativa. Por otra parte, creo que los “poemas de son,” desde el punto de vista literario, y por la significación que en el mundo tiene hoy lo popular, constituyen un modo de estar en la “avanzada” (…) Entre nosotros, donde a menudo no pensamos más que con cabezas de importación, precisa cierto heroísmo para aparecerse con unos versos primarios, escritos en la forma en que hablan y piensan muchos de nuestros negros (y no pocos blancos.

86 Nancy Morejón, Recopilación de textos de Nicolás Guillén (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1974), 46.

también)….]

Speaking about the *son* —an instrumental music, a popular song, and a dance—, Odilio Urfé agreed with Guillén when he called it “the most characteristic and representative expression rising from the [Cuban] popular soul,” and the most “original synthesis accomplished by [the] people and its most representative musicians.”

He remarked that:

Due to its extraction, development, sonic and choreographic characteristics, and social use, the Cuban son came about historically as the most suitable and representative means of expression for the most humble strata of the Cuban socioeconomic and political structure after World War I.  

[Por su extracción, desarrollo, característica sonora y coreográfica y uso social, el son cubano devino históricamente como el medio de expresión más idóneo y representativo para las capas humildes de la estructura socio-económica-política de la Cuba de la post-primera Guerra Mundial.]

Indeed, in the cities, the *son* flourished in places typically inhabited by poor, illiterate blacks and mulattos, such as *solas* (tenements)—which explains why “the theme and subject matter [of the *son*] were reflective of city-ghetto life,” and of “the marginal status of the Afro-Cuban working classes, by incorporating cultural forms unknown and/or unacceptable to the dominant society.”

Although it is impossible to establish the exact time for the genesis of the genre, what is known today as the classic *son* developed in the second half of the nineteenth century.

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89 Ibid., 199.

and in the early twentieth century. Most historians indicate that the *son* originated in the mountainous rural and suburban enclaves of the Sierra Maestra in the province of Oriente—primarily in Baracoa, Guantánamo, Santiago de Cuba, and Manzanillo—in the zone known as the Faja Negra (Black Belt), an area that felt the influence of the French Creoles that migrated from Haiti. From Oriente, the *son* spread throughout the island, reaching Havana in 1909 via a group of soldiers of the Permanent Army: the so-called Trío Oriental. As the genre took roots in the capital, the *son* incorporated elements from “the percussion-and-voice Afro-Cuban rumba” (which flourished in the same tenements), from “the more song-oriented, guitar-and-vocal canción and bolero tradition called trova, and from the already established contradanza.

As the *son* remained the province of the black population at a time where the elites decried African culture as a threat to the development of Cuba, every aspect of its practice was routinely proscribed. Under President Mario Menocal (1913-1920), the “inferior” and “primitive” instruments associated with the *son*—bongós, maracas, and marimba—were confiscated and destroyed. The “ongoing condemnation of the *son* by the middle classes” caused the government to launch a campaign against it, resulting in police beatings, incarceration, and the imposition of fines, as performers and participants were accused of “immoral behavior,” “dancing the immoral *son*,” or charged with “the use of illegal African

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92 Tony Évora, *Orígenes de la música cubana: los amores de las cuerdas y el tambor* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1997), 272, 277. In time, the Trío evolved into the Sexteto Habanero in 1918, and in 1927 became the Septeto Habanero.

instruments.” Although the Machado administration (1925-1933) promoted the son, it prohibited conga drums in hotel ballrooms, and city officials banned “every kind of comparsas or parrandas that use as music the bongó, and other similar instruments.” Furthermore, the son was closely associated with questionable forms of entertainment like brothels, cabaret, and academias de baile (dancing schools, where prostitution was common), reinforcing its poor reputation among the conservative middle class.

Paradoxically, while the middle class shunned the son, many of the wealthiest white families (the most prominent politicians, business leaders, and landowners) became the most important patrons of the genre, hiring conjuntos as entertainment for their semi-clandestine encerronas (private parties). By the 1920s, the most celebrated son ensembles — the Trío Matamoros, the Sexteto Habanero (see Figure 3.1), and the Septeto Nacional— had signed lucrative recording contracts with American companies like the Victor Talking Machine

94 Moore, 94, 96. The bongó was considered especially offensive because it was played with the hands (for whites, good drums were played only with sticks) and thus, it resembled the drums used in Santería and Abakuá ceremonies. Indeed, many popular musicians were santeros or Abakuá men (ñáñigos) and continued performing the toques (drum patterns), songs, and dances of their cults in private. Some cultic elements and terminology made its way into the son, including ritual greetings and words, and names of saints and instruments (consider, for example, the son “Criolla carabalí” by the Sexteto Habanero, sung in Abakuá language and incorporating Abakuá rhythms and phrases). See also, Rebecca M. Bodenheimer, Geographies of Cubanidad: Place, Race, and Musical Performance in Contemporary Cuba (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015); and Ivor L. Miller, Voice of the Leopard, African Secret Societies and Cuba (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009).


96 Moore, 98-99.

Company (later Victor RCA), and Columbia. Soon, the *conjuntos* were performing nationally and internationally to great acclaim—even appearing in foreign films—fostering the mass disseminating of the genre.98 Radio broadcasts, coupled with the enthusiastic reception of the *son* in cities like Paris, played a crucial role in securing its acceptance by the Cuban upper classes. At last, by the end of the decade, the first black genre from the streets—a marginal, working-class genre at first performed only by poor blacks and mulattos—had, without undergoing excessive alteration or transformation, achieved widespread popularity in Cuba to become “the epitome of national expression” and the “Cuban genre par excellence.”99

A comprehensive study of the Cuban *son* is well beyond the scope of this paper, nevertheless, an overview of some of its most characteristic elements is certainly relevant. The instrumentation of the *son* allowed for great flexibility, however, the classic *son conjunto* (sextet) consisted of a more or less standardized set up of mostly rudimentary instruments of popular origin: guitar, *tres*, *bongós*, *botija* or *marimbula* (substituted in 1923 by the more “respectable” double bass used in the *danzón*), *maracas*, *claves*, and sometimes *güiro* (scraper) — the trumpet was added to urban ensembles until 1927.100 Unlike jazz, military band, or *orquesta típica* players, *soneros* played by ear and did not require deep musical knowledge or training to play their instruments, which highlighted the informal aspects of the genre but

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98 Rick Davies, “The Son,” in *Trompeta: Chapottín, Chocolate, and the Afro-Cuban Trumpet Style* (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 30. See also, Évora, *Orígenes de la música cubana*, 281; and Moore, 98. The Trío Matamoros performed in Mexico, Latin America and Europe; the Sexteto Habanero, in New York; and the Septeto National in Spain and Chicago.


100 Évora, *Orígenes de la música cubana*, 297-300.
also reduced their employment opportunities.\footnote{Cristóbal Díaz Ayala, \textit{Música cubana: del areyto a la nueva trova}. 3\textsuperscript{a} ed. (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1993), 116.} In fact, \textit{soneros} were excluded from musicians’ unions, as only musicians “with formal training and who could read music had a right to membership.”\footnote{Moore, 97. See also Díaz Ayala, 116.} As a sung genre, the traditional \textit{son} required two vocal parts—covered by the instrumentalists themselves—typically moving in parallel thirds and sixths.\footnote{Manuel, “From Contradanza to Son,” 193. Voices in thirds and sixths are also typical of \textit{bolero}, \textit{trova}, and \textit{canción} styles.}

![Figure 3.1. The Sexteto Habanero in 1925.\footnote{Wikipedia, Public domain image, accessed June 21, 2016, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ea/Sexteto_Habanero.jpg.}](image-url)
One of the fundamental characteristics of the *son* is its constant superimposition of three layers of different timbres (*franjas timbricas*) — a distinctive feature of all African and African-derived music. First, the double bass — played pizzicato and therefore, assuming a percussive role — executes the characteristic anticipated bass of the *son*, and establishes the rhythmic-harmonic basis. Second, the *tres* plays an ostinato of figurations (*guajeo*) in the high register, while the guitar plays steady patterns in a semi-percussive fashion (usually consisting in two groups of 16ths). The *maracas* and the *bongó* duplicate the guitar rhythm, except in the *estribillo*, where the *bongó* leaves its regular rhythmic pattern and plays freely in response to the improvisation of the soloist.\textsuperscript{105} Last, the *claves* play a two-bar asymmetric rhythmic pattern characteristic of the *son* — the *son clave*. The two-bar ostinato consists of five strokes grouped into two “beats”: 3:2 or 2:3, where the syncopated bar containing the triplet (*tresillo*) is considered the strong beat (see Figures 3.2 and 3.3).\textsuperscript{106} The *clave* establishes the timeline, a point of reference that facilitates the organization of the polyrhythms of the entire ensemble.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{3.2.png}
\caption{The 3:2 *son clave* pattern.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{3.3.png}
\caption{The 2:3 *son clave* pattern.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{105} Fabio Betancur Álvarez, *Sin clave y bongó no hay son: música afrocubana y confluencias musicales de Colombia y Cuba*, 2\textsuperscript{a} ed. (Medellín: Editorial Universidad de Antioquia, 1999), 137-138.

\textsuperscript{106} Évora, *Orígenes de la música cubana*, 294-296. The asymmetric pattern is an essential feature of West African music, particularly in Kwa and Benue-Congo. Brought to the New World, this type of timeline can be found in *rumba* (*yambú*), *contradanza*, and Abakuá music as well.
The classic Cuban *son* consists of two essential parts: the *largo* section followed by the *montuno*.\(^{107}\) The *largo*, *motivo*, or *canto*, derived from the European song tradition, has a descriptive or narrative function, and typically involves four rhyming lines sung by the lead voice.\(^{108}\) The *montuno*, *coro*, or *estribillo*, is the core of the *son* and implies intense repetition of single words, partial and entire verses—in fact, the primitive rural *sones* consisted mainly of a simple refrain repeated over and over again.\(^{109}\) Musically, the *montuno* is based on rhythmic ostinati and features an alternation of tonic-dominant harmonies.\(^{110}\) This call-and-response form is found in all African oral forms, African drum music, and in Afro-Caribbean music.

Traditional Afro-Cuban music has its origins in religion: Yoruba, Conga, and Abakuá ritual music.\(^{111}\) In fact, the traditional *comparsas de carnaval*, *congas*, and *paseos*—itinerant groups that performed and danced publicly a variety of Afro-Cuban genres, including *sones*—were the offspring of the Carnival celebrations and *cabildo* processions organized by African slaves on the *Día de Reyes*.\(^{112}\) It is not surprising, then, that besides the *son*, another popular element


\(^{109}\) Évora, *Orígenes de la música cubana*, 275. The refrain can be a commentary to the solo verses, or repeated as an *estribillo*.

\(^{110}\) Manuel, “From *Contradanza* to *Son*,” 193.


in the poetry of Guillén is found in the rituals, dances, songs, and music associated with the Carnival. Speaking about the genesis of his poem “Sensemayá,” Guillén explained:

I remember the day in which I wrote it: January 6, 1932, Día de Reyes [the Feast of the Epiphany]. I was in bed sick in a Havana hotel where I was living. Perhaps the enforced idleness gave wings to my thoughts that took me back to my childhood. Ever since I was a child, in my native Camagüey, a Negro song kept resounding in my mind, a popular song, composed for killing a snake: “Sámbala, culembe; sámbala, culembe…” How, why did this come to my mind then? Perhaps because I had been reading portions of Fernando Ortiz’s work on black sorcerers; perhaps because of the prestige of that day, evoking Día de Reyes as it was in the days of colonial Cuba. The hoped-for day, the one, the great, the magnificent day when the black slaves received from their white masters permission for each one to feel as though he was in his home country and to sing and to dance in the company of his family and his tribe and to worship his gods and to be again the vassal of his king.  

[Recuerdo el día en que lo compuse: 6 de enero de 1932, Día de Reyes. Yo estaba enfermo, en cama y vivía en un hotel habanero. El ocio forzado dio tal vez alas a mi pensamiento, que voló hacia mi infancia. Desde niño, en mi Camagüey natal resonaba en mi mente una canción de negros, una canción popular, hecha también para matar una culebra: “Sámbala, culembe; sámbala, culembe…” Cómo, por qué me venía eso a la memoria entonces? Acaso porque había estado leyendo páginas de don Fernando Ortiz sobre los negros brujos; tal vez por el prestigio de aquel día, la evocación de lo que fue bajo la colonia en Cuba el Día de los Reyes. El día esperado, el único, el grande, el magnífico día en que los esclavos negros recibían de sus amos blancos permiso para que cada cual se sintiera en su país y cantara y danzara en el seno de su familia y de su tribu y adorara a sus dioses y volviera a ser vasallo de su rey.]

The killing of a snake referred to by Guillén —an ancient ritual practiced by many cultures in Africa and other continents— was a popular pantomime in the carnaval de los negros (black carnival) in nineteenth-century Havana (see Figure 3.4).  

In his important study on the Día de Reyes, Fernando Ortiz described the snake dance:

of Día de Reyes is said to have taken place in 1884, although some scholars claim it was until 1898 (Moore, 66).


114 See, Anderson, 104-106; Josaphat B. Kubayanda, The Poet’s Africa: Africanness in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 105-106; Fernando Ortiz, La antigua fiesta afrocubana del ‘Día de Reyes’ (La Habana: Ministerio de
A carnival band of Negroes leaping, dancing, and singing, carried on their backs, through the streets of Havana, an enormous, artificial serpent several meters long, stopping before the big houses where they would be given a Christmas bonus. On the Feast of the Kings, after parading around the entire Havana, the pantomime was performed in the patio of the palace of the general captains, before the supreme authorities. The songs and gestures alluded to the terrible characteristics of the snake: ‘Look at his eyes, they look like a flame / and look at his teeth, they look like needles.’ Someone pretended to kill the reptile, and with the snake stretched out on the ground, they danced around it, singing to it, ending with the refrain: “The snake is dead / Calabasón, son, son.” According to Bachiller and Morales, they finished like this: “The snake is dead / sánaga, muleque.”

He added: “From the snake dance another *son* followed, sung by a little black girl (or woman) and a *diablito* (masked ñáñigo dancer; literally, “little devil”):

**TEXT**

**TRANSLATION**

**LA NEGRITA**
Mamita, mamita, yen, yen, yen.
Que me traga la serpiente, yen, yen, yen.

**THE LITTLE BLACK GIRL**
Mommy, mommy, yen, yen, yen.
The snake will swallow me, yen, yen, yen.

**EL DIABLITO**
Mentira, mi negrita, yen, yen, yen.

**LITTLE DEVIL**
Lies, my little black girl, yen, yen, yen.


115 Ortiz, Los bailes y el teatro de los negros en el folklore de Cuba, 284-285.
Son juegos de mi tierra, yen, yen, yen. Those are games from my homeland, yen, yen, yen.

Etcetera…

Figure 3.4. Frédéric Mialhe, “Día de Reyes,” La Habana (1848).

Like the son, the Carnival also carried deep socio-political connotations, as it was an event directly related to slavery and reflected the perpetual desire of the blacks to attain freedom. The Carnival “served as a masquerade for acts of resistance” and for “the expression of Afro-Cuban religious beliefs and rituals: and, as such, [it was] a signifying

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116 Ortiz, La antigua fiesta afrocubana del ‘Día de Reyes,’ 71.

117 Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Beinecke Digital Collection, accessed May 22, 2016, http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3524925. Día de Reyes, like the West African festivals, was a social-religious event. The masked dancers, usually Abakuá members, or ñáñigos, are known as diablitos or ireme. For more in-depth information, see Daniel E. Walker, No More, No More: Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
counterdiscourse to the master’s discourse.”\textsuperscript{118} Like the traditional West African festivals, \textit{Día de Reyes} was a “way in which African-descended populations of the New World slave societies gave voice to their collective reality.”\textsuperscript{119} Julia Cuervo Hewitt offers the following perspective:

Carnival came to be perceived as a signifying element on the representation of the Caribbean experience in terms of resistance against slavery, against “acculturation”… Understanding that Carnival is a “performative” mode of awakening memories and of freeing hope, especially under undesirable and repressive conditions created by the system of slavery in colonial Caribbean societies. Carnival, whether preceding Lent or on ‘Día de Reyes,’ became the commemoration of a collective “longing” for freedom. Carnival offered the conditions for the possibility of change: in the way of hope, running away, or rebellion. At the same time, public performances allowed slaves to articulate, through dance, music, gestures, or dress, those feelings and desires about which they could not speak openly. In the Caribbean, Carnival, as a mode of performing resistance, carries the memory of repression and sacrifice, but also of hope, in a sense of “becoming other.”\textsuperscript{120}

She adds:

In the early part of the twentieth century, writers and musicians would turn to the performances of \textit{Carnaval de los negros}, to \textit{nánigo} rituals, and to the representation of the \textit{diablito} dances as a tangible expression of Africa in the Caribbean: as the testimony of the survival of African beliefs and practices within \textit{hispanidad}, and as a way to defy political conditions and oppressive neocolonial social values. The dances and gesticulations of the \textit{diablitos}, for example, became the basic choreographic elements for…several of Nicolás Guillén poems…\textsuperscript{121}

Indeed, Guillén wrote his “Sensemayá” during the repressive Machado regime, which banned traditional \textit{comparsas, congas}, and all public displays of Afro-Cuban music and dance,
not only in Havana but also in other cities. In his article “Cada año es carnaval” (“Every year is carnival”), Guillén deplored the fact that carnival celebrations — among the most genuine and colorful manifestations of Afro-Cuban culture — were becoming a lost tradition; he lamented, too, that comparsas were widely regarded as “an embarrassment, a cause for blushing,” and were maligned as undesirable “manifestations of traditions that hark back to the not-so-distant days of slavery.”

In light of the background provided, a brief analysis of the three poems that constitute our study is in order. Even a cursory look at the texts reveals the presence of characteristic elements of the son — and by extension, of elements derived from African music and poetry — in particular its percussion-based “highly variable rhythmic structure and polyrhythmic character,” and its “free, more flexible consciousness of time.” The following devices are apparent: stanzas of unequal number of verses, stanzas with verses of different meters; typical alternation of long and short verses; diverse combinations of estribilos (refrains); many types of repetition; as well as varying placement of accented and unaccented syllables in a verse; combinations of long and sort vowels; clusters of identical vowel sounds; and words — such as jitanjáforas and/or ideophones — that exploit the nasal resonance of the consonants “n” and “mb” (prevalent in the Bantu language). Because the

122 Anderson, 91. Comparsas were banned from 1913 until 1937, when they were allowed again because of their potential as touristic attractions.

123 Ibid.


125 Ian Smart, Nicolás Guillén: Popular Poet of the Caribbean (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 43-44, 48; and Williams, 37-38. In Spanish literature, “arte menor” denotes popular verses of eight syllables or less. Between 1922 and 1967 Guillén wrote a total of 10,906 verses, from which 6856 (62.9%) belong to the category of “arte menor.”
above elements highlight the close relationship between language and music and language and drums — associated with drum poetry —, the three poems are meant to be read aloud, in order to fully experience their rhythmic richness.¹²⁶

“Caminando,” a poem-son structured as a montuno, is entirely composed by pairings of octosyllabic and tetrasyllabic verses (except v. 15). The gerund “caminando” appears twenty-one times, and functions as the estribillo: on the one hand, the poem is bookended by triple iterations of the estribillo (vv. 1-2, and 31-33); on the other, the estribillo alternates with a verse in a typical call-and-response form. Interestingly, the estribillo falls on an even-numbered verse the first six times, while the following six, it falls on an odd-numbered verse. The stressed syllable of the estribillo — “nan” — exploits the natural resonance of the “n” sound and helps establish the rhythm because of the constant repetition. Note the prevalence of paroxytone endings, and the stanzas of variable number of verses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXT</th>
<th>TRANSLATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Caminando, cami\textit{nando},</td>
<td>Walking, walking,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 ¡cami\textit{nando}!</td>
<td>walking!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Voy sin rumbo cami\textit{nando},</td>
<td>I go aimless walking,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 cami\textit{nando};</td>
<td>walking;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 voy sin plata cami\textit{nando},</td>
<td>I go without money walking,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 cami\textit{nando};</td>
<td>walking;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 voy muy triste cami\textit{nando},</td>
<td>I go very sad walking,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 cami\textit{nando}.</td>
<td>walking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Octosyllabic verses (3372) — typical of popular art — comprise 30.9% of the grand total, and 49.04% of the “arte menor” category. Thus, the octosyllabic meter is by far the most utilized by Guillén (see Ruscalleda Berecóniz, 197). The term jitanjáfora, coined by Mexican writer Alfonso Reyes in 1929, refers to real or invented words possessing purely aesthetic — but not semantic — value, due to their rich sonority and evocative quality.

¹²⁶ Betancur Álvarez, 63. Regarding drum poetry, see Ruth Finnegan, 

9 Está lejos quien me busca, It is far who searches for me,  
10 caminando; walking;  
11 quien me espera está más lejos, who waits for me is farther,  
12 caminando; walking;  
13 y ya empeñé mi guitarra, and I already pawned my guitar,  
14 caminando. walking.  

15 Ay, Alas,  
16 las piernas se ponen duras, the legs get hard,  
17 caminando; walking;  
18 los ojos ven desde lejos, the eyes see from afar,  
19 caminando; walking;  
20 la mano agarra y no suelta, the hands grabs and doesn't let go,  
21 caminando. walking.  

22 Al que yo coja y lo apriete, The one who I grab and squeeze,  
23 caminando; walking;  
24 ese la paga por todos, that one will pay for everyone,  
25 caminando; walking;  
26 a ese le parto el pescuezo, I will break his neck,  
27 caminando; walking;  
28 y aunque me pida perdón, and even if he asks for forgiveness,  
29 me lo como y me lo bebo, I eat him and I drink him,  
30 me lo como y me lo bebo, I eat him and I drink him,  
31 caminando, walking,  
32 caminando, walking,  
33 caminando… walking...

In the poem “No sé por qué piensas tú” the pronouns “yo” (I) and “tú” (you) appear in all but three verses, functioning as estribillos.127 The oxytone endings — a very typical feature of African poetry — “mark a dance rhythm,” and the short vowels “o” and “u” mimic the low and high sounds of the bongó.128 A rhythmic mood is created by the various arrangements of the pronouns — 1) both in the same verse; 2) one following the other in subsequent verses; 3) individual pronouns as a verse — and by their changing rhyming patterns throughout the poem (a-b-c-b-a; b-a-a-b; a-b-a-b; b-a-c-b-a-a-b; and etcetera).


128 Melon, 69.
No sé por qué piensas tú,
soldado, que te odio yo,
si somos la misma cosa
yo,
tú.

Tú eres pobre, lo soy yo;
soy de abajo, lo eres tú
soldado, que te odio yo?

Me duele que a veces tú
me olvides de quién soy yo;
¡caramba!, si yo soy tú,
lo mismo que tú eres yo.

Pero no por eso yo
he de malquererte,
si somos la misma cosa,
yo,
tú,
no sé por qué piensas tú,
soldado, que te odio yo.

Ya nos veremos yo y tú,
juntos en la misma calle,
sin odios ni yo ni tú,
pero sabiendo tú y yo,
a donde vamos yo y tú...
¡No sé por qué piensas tú,
soldado, que te odio yo!

Ya nos veremos yo y tú,
juntos en la misma calle,
sin odios ni yo ni tú,
pero sabiendo tú y yo,
a donde vamos yo y tú...
¡No sé por qué piensas tú,
soldado, que te odio yo!

In “Sensemayá,” the responsorial structure resembles the character of the *montuno* section of a *son*, but most importantly, the incantatory, trance-inducing element of African ritual music. Four *estribillos* alternate with three *canto* sections in the poem. The first and third stanzas are composed entirely of three repetitions of the *estribillo* “¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!” In the last stanza, the *estribillo* appears in inverted order —before, rather than after, the verses— and it is repeated four, instead of three times. Note the alternating oxytone and paroxytone endings —in comparison to the other poems, where the endings are
predominantly of a single type—in addition to the juxtaposition of highly resonant verses of drum-like quality (with “mb” clusters) and less resonant ones of a chant-like quality (exploiting the “s” sound). Significantly, oxytone endings are “common in ritual songs, especially in those of magic types, or mambos,” as well as in Lucumi santería, where the songs “begin on a pickup and have a masculine ending.”

In the fifth stanza, “Sensemayá” functions as the estribillo, following the typical alternation of long and short verses. The oxytone-paroxytone juxtaposition is also exploited here, and the serpent-like “s” sound is exploited in every verse and the estribillo.

Not surprisingly, the only octosyllabic verses in this poem are in the estribillo sections and in the two stanzas shown above, which mention the name “Sensemayá” along with one of its attributes or actions. This brings to mind once more the popular quality of the montuno.

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In the narrative stanzas (second, fourth, and sixth), we can observe similar elements to those already mentioned: constant repetition of words and partial verses, changing rhyming patterns, verses of different meters, and variations on the type of endings:

**TEXT**

La culebra tiene los ojos de vidrio;
la culebra viene y se enreda en un palo;
con sus ojos de vidrio, en un palo,
con sus ojos de vidrio.
La culebra camina sin patas;
la culebra se esconde en la yerba;
caminando se esconde en la yerba,
caminando sin patas.

Tú le das con el hacha y se muere:
¡dale ya!
¡No le des con el pie, que te muere,
no le des con el pie, que se va!

La culebra muerta no puede comer,
la culebra muerta no puede silbar,
no puede caminar,
no puede correr.
La culebra muerta no puede mirar,
la culebra muerta no puede beber,
no puede respirar,
no puede morder.

**TRANSLATION**

The snake has eyes of glass;
the snake comes and curls around a stick;
with its eyes of glass, around a stick,
with its eyes of glass.
The snake walks without feet;
the snake comes and hides in the grass;
walking it hides in the grass,
walking with no feet.

You hit it with the axe and it dies:
hit it now!
Do not kick it with the foot, it will bite you,
Do not kick it with the foot, it will flee!

The dead snake cannot eat,
the dead snake cannot hiss,
it cannot walk,
it cannot run.
The dead snake cannot see,
the dead snake cannot drink,
it cannot breathe,
it cannot bite.

The open celebration and the brilliant incorporation into his poetry of some of the most representative Afro-Cuban cultural manifestations — particularly at the time of highest widespread racial discrimination and government censure — puts Guillén into the “realm of social and political resistance,” successfully defying the oppressors.\(^{130}\) By celebrating the Cuban _son_ and the _Día de Reyes_ festivities through his work, he validated the place of black culture within the universal literary scene and within the fabric of the Cuban society.

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\(^{130}\) Anderson, 107.
Chapter 4. The Guillén—Revueltas Connection: Popular forms of Art (Part II)

I compose in hopes of being understood by the people of my country, music that speaks of our shacks, our adobe houses, our popular festivals, music of our racial sorrows, not music that tells about skyscrapers and European palaces, of bejeweled and decadent societies.\(^{131}\) I can tell you little about my œuvre... I get my inspiration from popular motifs... to impregnate my work with the atmosphere of the villages.\(^{132}\)

[Escrevo con la esperanza de ser comprendido por la gente de mi país, música que habla de nuestros jacales, de nuestras casas de adobe, de nuestras fiestas populares, de nuestros dolores raciales, no música que diga de rascacielos y palacios europeos de sociedades joyeadas y decrépitas. Poco puedo decirle de mi obra... Me inspiro para ella en motivos populares... para impregnar de ambiente del pueblo mis trabajos.]

— Silvestre Revueltas

In spite of his classical training and his instrumental role in bringing the music of the great European composers to Mexican audiences, Silvestre Revueltas was a musician of the people. During his lifetime, he stated his preference for the music of the less privileged and, like Guillén, sought to incorporate some of their cultural referents into his music. Naturally, as other composers, musicians, and intellectuals became acquainted with a number of Revueltas’ works, they did not fail to perceive the popular traits in his music. After meeting Silvestre in Mexico, Aaron Copland remarked that his music was “derived from the more usual everyday side of Mexican life” and that he was “a man of the people, with a wonderfully keen ear for the sounds of the people’s music.”\(^{133}\) The Spanish poet Rafael Alberti described Revueltas’ music as “very Mexican, but not parochial; popular, but without transcriptions;” he perceived in it “the nocturnal atmosphere, burlesque and sad, of the

\(^{131}\) Kolb Neuhaus, “Dos por medio y cuatro por un real, mirando que el tiempo está muy fatal,” 134.


“carpas,” of the little theaters in the slums of Mexico.”¹³⁴ The conductor/author Nicolas
Slonimsky wrote:

During the decade 1930-1940, Revueltas composed prolifically. There are no
symphonies or symphonic poems on the list of his works; rather, they are sketches,
evocations of moods, of musical pictures of Mexico. His orchestration is often
inspired by the…Mexican popular orchestras…. The folkloric element is always
present in Revueltas’ melos…. But Revueltas never quotes popular tunes….¹³⁵

The musicologist Otto Mayer-Serra observed, too, that Revueltas “never use[d] authentic
folk melodies in his works,” and stated that the composer was:

…Interested in present-day Mexico with the festivities of its market-places, the
comical, sad atmosphere of the carpas —the crude little playhouses of the capital—,
the tumult of the crowd in the street, the shrill colors of the people and the
landscapes, the songs and music of the country….¹³⁶

As the above statements show, the single narrative about Revueltas’ music —starting
during his lifetime and challenged until only very recently— focused exclusively on its
“Mexicanness” and dwelled on its picturesque qualities. However, far from merely
conforming to the artificial construct of Nationalism encouraged and propagated by the
Mexican government of the post-Revolution, Revueltas —unlike the majority of Mexican
composers at the time— went beyond it. Yolanda Moreno Rivas explains:

It is evident the inside knowledge of Revueltas of the popular music; he captured its
spirit in the numerous motives of popular color that are seen in his music. But the
presence of those motives does not explain the mechanism of recreation of the
popular theme nor its exceptional status within the nationalist movement in the
1930s. Revueltas’ music did not submit to the ethic, social, and didactic
considerations of the Mexican school. (…) Revueltas was not concerned with the

¹³⁴ Rafael Alberti quoted in “Retrospectiva crítica en torno a Silvestre Revueltas: un
saludo en Madrid a Silvestre Revueltas,” Heterofonía: revista de investigación musical 17, no. 2

¹³⁵ Slonimsky, 248.

problems that worried nationalist composers: utilization of folk material and the creation of national art.\textsuperscript{137}

Julio Estrada agrees with Moreno Rivas when he states that although the chamber music of Revueltas “retains the provincial spectrum of the rural bands” and shows the composer’s proximity to the “popular universe,” he “eludes the nationalist tone.”\textsuperscript{138} Olga Picún adds that Revueltas did not “aspire to become a spokesperson of the ‘national musical identity.’”\textsuperscript{139}

Following the same line of reasoning, the preeminent Revueltas scholar Roberto Kolb argues that in many of the composer’s works—including most of those traditionally interpreted as “Mexicanist”—the presence of popular elements serves a political purpose rather than a nationalist one, as the “popular stylistic elements and musical types refer to specific cultural, social, or political contexts and subjects.”\textsuperscript{140} He explains:

The semantic actors that populate the music of a Revueltas so passionate for the proletarian cause are usually the poor and dispossessed. The composer represents them through his music, not like his colleagues, by citing familiar melodies that represent them, but by abstracting in a very subtle way gestural, rhythmic, and timbriic elements from those musics, transforming them in his music.\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{137} Moreno Rivas, \textit{Rostros del nacionalismo en la música mexicana}, 186-187, 192.

\textsuperscript{138} Estrada, \textit{Canto Roto}, 53, 57

\textsuperscript{139} Picún, and Carredano, 22.

\textsuperscript{140} Roberto Kolb Neuhaus, e-mail message to author, September 21, 2015.

\textsuperscript{141} Roberto Kolb Neuhaus, \textit{Contracanto: una perspectiva semiótica de la obra temprana de Silvestre Revueltas} (México D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2012), 56. Examples of such treatment include the use of \textit{pregones}, voices, and sounds of the streets in \textit{Esquinas} (1931 and 1933), \textit{Parián} (1932), and \textit{El afilador} (1924? and 1929) to evoke social inequality; the use of a Mexican folk tune as a “proletarian motive” in \textit{Tierra pa’ las macetas} (1924?); the use of onomatopoeia and ostinati to represent poverty in \textit{El tecolote} (1932); elements of the blues in \textit{Canción para una muchacha negra} (1938, based on a poem by Langston Hughes) to protest the lynching of blacks in the South of the United States; and elements of gypsy music in \textit{Homenaje a Federico García Lorca} (1936) to honor the slain Spanish poet (see Kolb, \textit{Contracanto}, 36-37, 113, 217-218; Kolb Neuhaus, “Dos por medio y cuatro por un real, mirando que el tiempo está muy fatal,” 138; and Estrada, \textit{Canto Roto}, 23, 25, 30).
Therefore, it is clear that when Revueltas “resorts to a kind of cultural representation by means of topical composing,” he does so “in order to musically embody a political message rather and an identitary one.”

But, what are musical topics? Musical topics have been defined as a “subject for musical discourse” that “can provide clues to what is being ‘discussed’ in a piece of music,” as an “allusion within a piece of music to well-known kinds of music associated with various social settings,” and as “richly codified style types which carry features linked to affect, class, and social occasion…” In 1980, Leonard Ratner first proposed a “universe of topics” associated with the music of the eighteenth century and subdivided it into two major classes: types or “fully worked-out pieces,” and musical styles or “figures and progressions within a piece.” The first group consists primarily of dances, while the second includes signals, genres, styles, music from specific groups, and other figures (see Figure 4.1).

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144 Ratner, 9.
Musical types   | Musical styles   
--- | ---
minuet  | alla breve  | fanfare  
gavotte  | brilliant style  | march  
sarabande  | Empfindsamkeit  | ombra  
bourrée  | French overture  | learned style  
gigue  | hunt style  | Sturm und Drang  
contredanse  | pastoral  | Turkish music  
Ländler  | amoroso  | alla zoppa (syncopated)  
musette  | aria  | cadenza  
march  | fantasy  | Mannheim rocket  
siciliano  | opera buffa  | recitative  
passepied  | sigh motif  | singing style  
polonaise  | concertante  | lament  
allemende  | Italian style  | chorale  
waltz  | galant style  | ecclesiastical style  
horn call  | Alberti bass  | commedia dell’arte  
Trommelbass  | popular style  

Figure 4.1. Universe of topics for Classical music.\(^{145}\)

In his book *Music as a Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music*, Kofi Agawu discusses the transformation and expansion of the universe of topics, from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. While some of the eighteenth century topics persisted in the music of the nineteenth and twentieth century (styles: hunt, military, pastoral, fantasia, and types: minuet, march, gigue, and siciliano), old topics acquired new meanings, and many new styles and dialects were developed (including the African-American traditions of jazz, blues, and gospel). Furthermore, distinct topical universes have been constructed in connection with the oeuvre of individual composers such as Mahler, Schumann, Liszt, Bartók, and Stravinsky.\(^{146}\) Interestingly, the topical universe for twentieth-century music proposed by Danuta Mirka divides topics into three groups: a) eighteenth-century dances, b) music related to various ethnicities, and c) a diverse collection of styles (see Figure 4.2).

\(^{145}\) Agawu, *Music as Discourse*, 43-44.

\(^{146}\) Ibid., 45-47, 49-50.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group A</th>
<th>Group B</th>
<th>Group C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>minuet</td>
<td>Jewish music</td>
<td>Gregorian chant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gavotte</td>
<td>Czech music</td>
<td>chorale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bourrée</td>
<td>Polish music</td>
<td>Russian orthodox church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sarabande</td>
<td>Hungarian music</td>
<td>style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gigue</td>
<td>Gypsy music</td>
<td>learned style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pavane</td>
<td>Russian music</td>
<td>chaconne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>passeped</td>
<td>Spanish music</td>
<td>recitativo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tarantella</td>
<td>Latin-American music</td>
<td>singing style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tango</td>
<td>“Oriental” music</td>
<td>barcarole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>waltz</td>
<td>North American country</td>
<td>Negro spirituals</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>music</td>
<td>jazz</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>café music</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>circus music</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>barrel organ</td>
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<td>lullaby</td>
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<td>children’s song</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>fanfare</td>
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<td>military march</td>
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<td>funeral march</td>
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<td>pastoral style</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>elegy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>machine music</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.2. Topical universe for twentieth-century music by Danuta Mirka.¹⁴⁷

In light of the above, it is clear that Revueltas, too, utilized topics — invented and distinct from those of the European and Mexican Romantic music.¹⁴⁸ According to Kolb:

In the work of Revueltas a topic can be a quote from another music or the title of the work, but also non-semantic elements like a simple chord, a combination of themes, a particular way of relating those to one another, the musical grammar utilized… a peculiar instrumentation, the form of the piece or the genre, a verbal indication of expression, or a reference to another music.”¹⁴⁹

Based on Kolb’s premises, I propose that “topical composing” applies to Revueltas’ *Poemas de Nicolás Guillén*. In other words, Revueltas utilized Afro-Cuban/Caribbean stylistic

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 48-49.

¹⁴⁸ Kolb Neuhaus, *Contracanto*, 68.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 66.
elements as topics in *Caminando*, *No se por qué piensas tú*, and *Sensemayá*. In these pieces, the “semantic actors” or characters — the signified — are clearly established by Guillén’s text: the unemployed worker (*Caminando*); the soldiers of peasant-origin and the oppressed working class (*No se por qué piensas tú*); and, the African slaves abused for centuries, and their cultural traditions, consistently subject to institutionalized censure and proscription (*Sensemayá*). The actors or characters are, in turn, represented or symbolized “by means of the music with which [they are] conventionally associated in a given time and context” — the signifier.\(^{150}\)

Consequently, the principal topics I will explore in *Poemas de Nicolás Guillén* are: the Cuban *son* (*Caminando*); Afro-Caribbean popular music and dance — particularly the Cuban *son* and the *rumba* — along with the military topic (*No se por qué piensas tú*); and Afro-Cuban carnival and ritual music (*Sensemayá*). I will discuss specific Afro-Caribbean stylistic elements that Revueltas incorporated into the three works, with special emphasis on how those elements reinforce the political discourse of Guillén’s poems.

\(^{150}\) Ibid., 55. For a brief discussion on signifier and signified, see Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 4-6.
Chapter 5. Caminando: “The indignant cry of the unemployed”

The sovereign rhythm of a son… The indignant cry of the unemployed, but riding on a disquieting sonorous machine that marks its march with the title word: Caminando. The walking action fills it all, in form and content. The gerund is the foundation of the rhythm, but above all of the desperation of the unemployed, “aimless,” “without money,” “very sad,” who pawned his guitar to eat and whocherishes sinister purposes amidst his exasperation: “The one who I grab and squeeze…."

[El ritmo soberano de un son… El lamento indignado del sin trabajo, pero montado en una inquietante máquina sonora que marca su marcha con la palabra del título: Caminando. La acción de caminar lo llena todo, en la forma y el contenido. El gerundio es el sustentáculo del ritmo, pero sobre todo de la desesperación del desempleado “sin rumbo,” “sin plata,” “muy triste,” que ya empeñó su guitarra para comer y que alienta siniestros propósitos en medio de su exasperación: “Al que yo coja y lo apriete…."

—Ángel Augier

Poem Background: The poem was written in 1934 as part of the collection West Indies, Ltd. and Guillén dedicated it to his friend Ñico López, a pharmacist from Camagüey, Cuba.

Work Background: Revueltas finished composing the music in Mexico City on February 14, 1937 and dedicated the work to Nicolás Guillén. The piece was premiered (or at least first performed after decades of neglect) during the “Coloquio Revueltas hacia el Centenario” (a Revueltas Colloquium celebrated in 1999, on the centennial anniversary of his birth). There are two versions of the song, which are quite different in regards to meter and accompaniment style: 1) the first, for baritone and piano, in 3/4, and 2) a second for vocal duet (SA or ST) and instrumental ensemble, in 2/4. There are three extant complete manuscripts: 1) the baritone and piano version, which contains notes on orchestration and indicates the tessitura of the voice; 2) a mezzosoprano and piano version (unpublished), with no orchestration or tessitura annotations, but from which the instrumental version


 originated; and 3) the orchestrated version. The version for baritone and piano has been published together with the song *Amiga que te vas* under the title *Dos Canciones.*

*Caminando* is scored for soprano and alto soloists (or soprano and tenor), two B-flat clarinets, bass clarinet, bassoon, two trumpets in C, double bass, bongós, and claves. Although the instrumentation does not precisely match the classic set up of the *son conjunto*, Revueltas included some of the most characteristic instruments: bongós, claves, trumpet, and double bass, as well as two vocal soloists. The piece is about four minutes in length.

Guillén himself referred to his poem “Caminando” as a *son*, therefore, it seems natural that Revueltas would incorporate a number of stylistic elements associated with what is known as *el complejo del son caribeño* (the Caribbean *son* complex), which is comprised by several genres such as the *son*, *guaracha*, *merengue* (influenced by the *contradanza*), *son vallenato*, *plena*, *calypso*, and *cumbia*. The most representative Afro-Cuban/Caribbean stylistic elements that will be discussed in relationship to *Caminando* are: 1) texture, 2) instrumentation, 3) rhythmic language, and 4) form, with particular emphasis on how these and other stylistic elements enhance the meaning of the poem.

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154 Interestingly, the instrumentation of *Caminando* is similar to the one Amadeo Roldán utilized for his *Motivos de son*, eight pieces based on poems of Guillén: voice, one or two clarinets, bass clarinet, trumpet, Afro-Cuban percussion, and strings. Revueltas knew Roldán’s *La Rebambaramba*, as he premiered it in Mexico in 1929; however, it is not entirely certain whether Revueltas knew *Motivos de son* or not (see Garland, *In Search of Silvestre Revueltas*, 182.).

155 Guillén, *Epistolario de Nicolás Guillén*, 110; and Victoria Eli Rodríguez, and Zoila Gómez, *Música latinoamericana y caribeña*, quoted in Del areito a la timba: breve historia de la música cubana by Antonio Gómez Sotolongo (nd: Lulu Press, 2010): 60. The genres of the *son* complex are characterized by a 2/4 meter, the alternation of a verse and an *estribillo*, octosyllabic verses, and very short *estribillos*. 
Fundamental to the son, and to all Afro-Caribbean music, is a three-layer texture — called franjas timbricas (timbral layers) or franjas de acción (action layers)— consisting of an ensemble of accompanying instruments that produce a complex texture of contrasting timbres and rhythms. Within this unique matriz de son (son matrix) each instrument “reinforce[s] the basic pulse in a particular way” while being “subject to a time unit or timeline.” The franjas of the classic Cuban son, which establish its rhythmic-harmonic structure, involve the following participants: 1) the double bass, played pizzicato, performing the anticipated bass, “the single most distinctive feature of Afro-Cuban popular music;” 2) the tres, playing arpeggiated figures in the high register (guajeo) in counterpoint with the guitar, bongó and maracas playing steady rhythms; and 3) the claves, which establish the timeline by means of the son clave.

Caminando is built on a multi-layered structure; however, Revueltas manipulates the makeup of the layers and, most significantly, he assigns some of his instruments a different role than they would play in a son conjunto.

The double bass — along with the bassoon, and occasionally, the bass clarinet— conforms, at least in principle, the first franja in Caminando. As expected, the double bass is played pizzicato, however, it never plays the anticipated bass pattern (see Figure 5.1). Instead, during a substantial portion of the piece, the double bass assumes a percussive, drum-like role and duplicates almost exactly the syncopated martillo (rhythmic patterns) played by the bongó (see Example 5.1).

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156 Armando Rodríguez Ruidíaz, The Origins of Cuban Music: Myths and Facts, 55, accessed October 1, 2015, http://www.academia.edu/8041795/The_origin_of_Cuban_music._Myths_and_Facts; and Robbins, 188. According to Robbins, the matriz de son is an “impression of a rhythmic pattern produced by the composite rhythms of all the parts.”

Interestingly, the bassoon is the instrument that carries the most traditional bass role, playing a simple ostinato that implies the traditional anticipated bass pattern. This implied anticipated bass is, in turn, derived from the Cuban tresillo (see Figure 5.2), where the second note is obviated but the essential last upbeat of the measure is still present (see Example 5.2). Thus, the bassoon functions in a similar way to the botijuela, one of the bass instruments used by the earliest son conjuntos to play the primary harmonic sonorities—I, IV, V.  

Figure 5.2. The Cuban tresillo.

In Caminando, the second layer consists of the bongó—along with the double bass, as mentioned above—playing closely related rhythmic patterns with the claves and creating

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158 The botijuela is a clay jug with two openings. A player blows through one of the openings to produce low pitches that resemble those of the double bass (see Elena Pérez Sanjurjo, Historia de la música cubana (Miami: La Moderna Poesía, 1986): 369; and Évora, 298.).
three distinct registers of sound and color within the same layer (see Example 5.3). The bongó, “the quintessential son instrument,” plays an ostinati based on the amphibrach rhythm—essentially a rotated cinquillo, a Cuban/Caribbean rhythmic cell typical of such genres as contradanza, danza, merengue, bomba, and danzón (compare Figures 5.3 and 5.4). The most significant departure from tradition is that the claves abandon their customary role: the son clave pattern is conspicuously absent (see Figure 5.5) and the instrument is, like the double bass, assigned a drum-like part. Rather than establishing the usual timeline, the claves play almost exclusively on the offbeats, as a variation of the weak beat of the son clave pattern.

Example 5.3. Revueltas, *Caminando*, mm. 57-61.

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159 Helio Orovio, *Cuban Music From A to Z* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 53; and Robbins, 188. Robbins calls the bongó and the tres “the most ‘sonero’ of instruments.”
a *son* by playing a single arpeggiated chord “in a rhythmic fashion” before the other members of the ensemble joined (see Example 5.4).^{160}

Example 5.4. Revueltas, *Caminando*, mm. 52-56.

![Example 5.4](image)

The third layer is conformed by the pairs of trumpets and clarinets, which double the voices in the standard format typical of the *son*, that is, two voices (primo-secondo) moving in sixths and thirds.^{161} Interestingly, the instruments double the voices so thoroughly that the song could be effectively performed without the singers. The clarinets double the vocal parts every time the *estribillo* “caminando” is sung (except in the first stanza), while the trumpets play the verses and, in the second stanza, the *estribillo* (see Example 5.5). As the newest member of the *son* septet (introduced in 1927), the trumpet was typically muted, and was used to play melodies, improvise, and play fills along with the *bongo*.^{162} Indeed, Revueltas requires muted trumpets for the introduction of *Caminando* (mm. 3-18), and the first trumpet plays short, semi-independent fills throughout the piece in counterpoint with the other instrumental parts (see Example 5.6). For the rest of the time, the trumpets punctuate the transitions, playing homophonically with the woodwinds.

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^{161} Manuel, “From Contradanza to Son,” 193.

^{162} Sublette, 365; and Isabelle Leymarie, *Cuban Fire: The Story of Salsa and Latin Jazz* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 34.
Afro-Caribbean rhythmic elements found in the *son* and other popular genres — ostinati built from rhythmic cells, polyrhythm and cross-rhythms, silent downbeat, rhythmic anticipation, and hemiola — are abundantly utilized in *Caminando*. Indeed, the very fabric of the piece is built almost entirely from two rhythmic cells (the amphibrach, or rotated *cinquillo,*
and the Cuban tresillo), which are closely interrelated and embody the basic 3:3:2 subdivision of the eight sixteenth notes basic to the 2/4 meter of the son (see Figure 5.6).\(^\text{163}\)

![Figure 5.6. Interrelated Afro-Caribbean rhythmic cells.\(^\text{164}\)](image)

The building blocks of Caminando are most clearly appreciated in the manuscript for piano and voice, where a single cell—a rotated montuno or son pattern, itself derived from the cinquillo (see Figure 5.7)—recurs throughout the piece, except in the estribillos, in the form of: 1) a guajeo (Example 5.7), 2) a pedal or drone (Example 5.8), and 3) chords (Example 5.9).

The guajeo ostinato is the most prominent of the three forms, both in length and frequency.

![Figure 5.7. Montuno or son pattern compared to the recurring cell in Caminando.\(^\text{165}\)](image)

Example 5.7. Revueltas, Caminando (autograph), mm 1-4.

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\(^{163}\) Manuel, “From Contradanza to Son,” 193.

\(^{164}\) Manuel, Creolizing Contradanza in the Caribbean, 20.

\(^{165}\) Natalio Galán, Cuba y sus sones (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1983), 266. The montuno pattern can also be found in the rumba genre (see Pérez Sanjurjo, 355).
Example 5.8. Revueltas, *Caminando* (autograph), mm. 11-12.

![Example 5.8](image)

Example 5.9. Revueltas, *Caminando* (autograph), mm. 22-23.

![Example 5.9](image)

In the instrumental version, the amphibrach and the Cuban *tresillo* undergo further transformations and are passed around by most of the instruments: Figure 5.8 inventories the rhythmic cells based on the amphibrach, and Figure 5.9, those cells based on the *tresillo*.

a) Bass Clarinet (*)

b) Double bass (*)

c) *Bongó* (*)

d) Clarinets (*)

e) Trumpet 2 (rotated amphibrach) (*)

![Figure 5.8](image)

Figure 5.8. Rhythmic cells derived from the amphibrach rhythm. An asterisk (*) denotes a rhythmic cell that functions primarily as an ostinato.
f) Bass Clarinet

g) Trumpets (rotated amphibrach)

Figure 5.8. continued. Rhythmic cells derived from the amphibrach rhythm.

a) Clarinet 1 (shifted tresillo)

b) Bassoon

c) Bass Clarinet
d) Double Bass
e) Trumpet 2 (rotated, shifted tresillo)

f) Bassoon (implied tresillo) (*)

Figure 5.9. Rhythmic cells derived from the Cuban tresillo.
An asterisk (*) denotes a rhythmic cell that functions primarily as an ostinato.

The melodic silent downbeat and rhythmic anticipations are “idiomatic of African musical phrasing” and are frequently heard in the son. In *Caminando*, silent downbeats occur often in both vocal and instrumental parts (see Example 5.10; also refer back to Examples 5.4, 5.5, and 5.8). Rhythmic anticipations —where an accented weak beat is tied to the next strong beat— occur a number of times, once on a downbeat (see Example 5.11).

Example 5.10. Revueltas, *Caminando*, mm. 25-27.

Example 5.11. Revueltas, *Caminando*, mm. 57-60.

From the numerous examples of polyrhythm and cross-rhythm, the most complex occur in measures 47, 78, and 82, as six distinct rhythms are superimposed (see Example 5.12). The most complex example of hemiola occurs in measures 78 and 82, where the triplets sound against duplets and sixteenths.

Example 5.12. Revueltas, *Caminando*, mm. 47 and 78.
At this point, it would be relevant to point out that some similarities exist between *Caminando* and certain works composed by the Cuban Amadeo Roldán, particularly *Rítmica No. 5* (1930). In said work—scored exclusively for Afro-Cuban percussion instruments—Roldán exploits and reconstructs elements from the *son*, even utilizing markings such as “In the tempo of a son” and “Montuno.” Indeed, many of the Afro-Cuban stylistic elements in *Caminando* discussed so far are also evident in *Rítmica No. 5*: timbral layers, the interaction between the Cuban *tresillo* and the *cinquillo*, polyrhythm, syncopation, silent downbeats, rhythmic anticipation, hemiola, *ostinati*, anticipated bass, the *montuno* pattern (see Example 5.13), and a *montuno* section. These similarities are helpful to realize just how closely did Revueltas approach and assimilate the *son* genre, and strongly suggest the possibility that he may have been influenced by Roldán—a topic that deserves further in-depth study.\(^\text{167}\)

Example 5.13. Roldán, *Rítmica No. 5*, mm. 74-79.

\(^{167}\) It can only be speculated whether or not Revueltas was familiar with any works by Amadeo Roldán other than *La Rebambaramiba* (1928), which he premiered in Mexico in 1929.
In terms of structure, *Caminando* follows the tradition of the earliest *sones*, which consisted of a constantly repeated *estribillo* sung by a choir alternating with some contrasting material (the *montuno*) in a call-and-response structure — another quintessential African and Afro-Caribbean element. ¹⁶⁸ Revueltas differentiates between verses and *estribillo* by means of rhythm, texture, and dynamics. The verses are always accompanied by the pedal version of the ostinato and tend to be marked with a louder dynamic marking than the *estribillo*. Every iteration of the *estribillo* is primarily homophonic, marked *p* to *pp*, and begins with an eight-note rest, constantly disrupting the forward motion of the ostinato (see Example 5.14).


¹⁶⁸ Évora, 275. In later *sones*, the call-and-response section became known as the *montuno*. 

\[\text{Example 5.14. Revueltas, *Caminando*, mm. 45-48.}\]
Finally, in light of the above discussion, the most important questions remain: how do the Afro-Caribbean stylistic elements discussed so far fit in with other compositional devices to enhance or reinforce the political meaning of Guillén’s text, and, how do they function as topics? The text of “Caminando” provides the starting point for this discussion.

**TEXT**

1 Caminando, caminando,
2 ¡caminando!

3 Voy sin rumbo caminando,
4 caminando;
5 voy sin plata caminando,
6 caminando;
7 voy muy triste caminando,
8 caminando.

9 Está lejos quien me busca,
10 caminando;
11 quien me espera está más lejos,
12 caminando;
13 y ya empeñé mi guitarra,
14 caminando.

15 Ay,
16 las piernas se ponen duras,
17 caminando;
18 los ojos ven desde lejos,
19 caminando;
20 la mano agarra y no suelta,
21 caminando.

22 Al que yo coja y lo apriete,
23 caminando;
24 ese la paga por todos,
25 caminando;
26 a ese le parto el pescuezo,
27 caminando;
28 y aunque me pida perdón,
29 me lo como y me lo bebo,
30 me lo bebo y me lo como,
31 caminando,
32 caminando,
33 caminando…

**TRANSLATION**

Walking, walking,
walking!

I go walking aimlessly,
walking;
I go walking without money,
walking;
I go walking very sad,
walking.

It is far who searches for me,
walking;
who waits for me is farther,
walking;
and I already pawned my guitar,
walking.

Alas,
the legs get hard,
walking;
the eyes see from afar,
walking;
the hands grabs and doesn’t let go,
walking.

The one who I grab and squeeze,
walking;
that one will pay for everyone,
walking;
I will break his neck,
walking;
and even if he asks me for forgiveness,
I eat him and I drink him,
I drink him and I eat him,
walking,
walking,
walking...
The poem “Caminando” depicts an unemployed or exploited worker on a seemingly never-ending journey of misery, hunger, and sadness — “walking, walking, walking…” and “walking aimlessly” — and Revueltas conveys such message brilliantly through rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic means. The introduction, where most of the elements of the piece appear, is utilized to establish the atmosphere of the *son* (see Example 5.15). Rhythmically, even though the syncopated ostinati carry a feeling of forward motion, the constant interruptions by the predominantly homophonic *estribillo* collectively disrupt the flow of the piece by creating the sensation of constantly having to start all over again, of never being able to gain momentum or make substantial progress (refer to Example 5.14).

Example 5.15. Revueltas, *Caminando*, mm. 1-5.

Because *Caminando* is entirely built from the juxtaposition of a few ostinati, the piece is restricted to a single harmonic area — an F pedal sounds virtually throughout the piece.
(see Example 5.16), and every *estribillo* sounds an embellished plagal cadence (refer to Example 5.14). The harmonic stasis and the resulting lack of thematic development in the piece aptly represent the oppressed caught in the “infuriating trap” of poverty, a condition that never improves. In addition, the monotonous and cyclic melodic contour of every *estribillo*—beginning and ending always on the same pitch—reinforces the idea of walking in circles, of going far from the starting point, and the impossibility to change the situation.

Example 5.16. Revueltas, *Caminando*, mm. 45-50.

The *montuno* section of the Cuban *son*, with its intense repetition, implies a “piling up.” In *Caminando*—a *montuno*—there is a gradual piling up, an escalation of anger and desperation on the part of the oppressed worker as he endures hunger, isolation, lack of money, and physical exhaustion. His initial feelings of deep sadness, lack of purpose, and loneliness (vv. 3-8) give way to bitter complaining at the injustice of his lot (vv. 15-17) and to the first outward expression of his growing resentment (vv. 18-21). As he ponders his future and longs for a better quality of life (v. 18), the overwhelming desire to take justice in his own hands find an outlet in a verbal threat: “the one I grab and squeeze, / that one will pay for everyone, / I will break his neck” (vv. 22-27). For a fleeting moment, the worker fantasizes in carrying out his revenge before the prospect of a long journey before any change can be effected, and ultimately reality, sinks in again (vv. 28-33).

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170 Kubayanda, 99.
Musically, Revueltas conveys the discourse of the poem with remarkable success. At the opening, the *estribillo* (“caminando”) is repeated three times—the first two, sung on one pitch only—alluding to the monotony and routine of his life journey (see Example 5.17).

Example 5.17. Revueltas, *Caminando*, mm. 11-14. First stanza: *estribillo*.

Subsequently, the melodic contour and range of the vocal part is identical in stanzas two and three (vv. 3-14)—ranging from a perfect fourth to a major sixth, and only rising to a minor seventh when the worker laments the loss of his guitar (see Example 5.18).


After the fourth stanza, where the worker cries out in desperation (vv. 15-21),pent up anger cannot be contained any longer. For the first time, the ensemble reaches and sustains a *fff* dynamic. The clarinets play in the upper clarion register a cyclic figure that soon breaks free, and the *claves* play an insistent—if uncharacteristic—rhythm of sixteenth-notes over a pedal, building toward the climactic point of the piece (see Example 5.19).
At the beginning of the fifth stanza, the first clarinet plays in the altissimo register while the principal voice begins on the F at the top of the staff (for a total range of one octave). The most piercing register of the clarinet and the extreme ensemble dynamics allude to the wailing of the worker—who “has reached the limit of his resistance to injustice and misery and shows himself ready to deal with the guilty on his own.” As he utters his long-repressed desire of revenge (“that will pay for everyone”) the trumpets also join the voices, highlighting the desperate and angry character of the threat (see Example 5.20).

Example 5.20. Revueltas, *Caminando*, mm. 78-79, 82-83. Fifth stanza.

In the end, a “glimpse of liberating hope” appears as the worker anticipates the day when he will finally overpower and overthrow those who have oppressed him for so long (vv. 28-30). At this stage, the rhythmic activity reaches its highest point, with most of the instruments busily playing sixteenth notes, while a gradual decrescendo begins (see Example 5.21). This uninterrupted forward motion alludes to a mighty movement of the masses — a

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172 Ruffinelli, 72.
revolution of the working class; the only perceived means to achieve the collective dream of freedom and progress. At last, the *estribillo* interrupts the narrative once more (see Example 5.22) as a reminder of the harsh reality of the working class and of the long journey that lies ahead: it represents that longed for goal, that “even if [it is] distant, must be reached.”

Example 5.21. Revueltas, *Caminando*, mm. 92-96.

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173 Melon, 59.

Summing up, the Cuban *son*—like the eighteenth-century dances listed in chapter four, which denoted urban or rural styles, and aristocratic or popular affairs—carries very specific connotations of social and economic status, race and culture, geographic location, and politics. As we have discussed in chapter three, given the circumstances surrounding its origins and development, the Cuban *son* before its commercialization is inextricably linked to the lowest classes—the blacks and mulattoes—and their neighborhoods, and thus, it evokes images of poverty, illiteracy, prostitution, lack of decorum and sophistication, as well as violence, racial discrimination, and institutionalized oppression.

By assimilating, transforming, and reinterpreting stylistic elements of the Cuban *son* complex in *Caminando*, Revueltas clearly identifies its characters and the cultural space where they move: the oppressed and the unemployed blacks and mulattoes in Cuba and the Caribbean. Rather than adopting a picturesque approach, the discourse by Revueltas is entirely political, as he protests against the political regimes and economic systems that perpetuate social injustice, racial discrimination, and exploitation perpetrated against blacks and mulattoes—and by extension, against the working classes everywhere. On the other hand, if one remembers that eventually the Cuban *son* achieved wide dissemination and acceptance, the same stylistic elements speak of hope, justice, and progress.
Chapter 6. No sé por qué piensas tú: “The distance between soldiers and men”

“No sé por qué piensas tú” perhaps the most well known of all the poems of Cantos para soldados, is a little masterpiece characterized by the admirable interplay between the pronouns that rhyme among themselves in almost all the verses. The octosyllabic verses predominate and a rhythmic cadence is achieved through the accurate placement, on independent verses, of the pronouns you and I.

In this poem Guillén points that the soldier is poor and from the low classes like the people…and then he proclaims that the soldier and the people together and without hatred will bring about the future.¹⁷⁴

[“No sé por qué piensas tú” quizás el más conocido de todos los poemas de esta sección Cantos para soldados, es una pequeña obra maestra que se caracteriza por el rejuego admirable de los pronombres que riman entre sí en casi todos los versos. Predomina el uso del octosílabo y se logra un golpe rítmico con la acertada colocación, en versos independientes, de los pronombres tú y yo. En este poema Guillén plantea la idea de que el soldado es pobre y de abajo como el mismo pueblo… y luego proclama que soldado y pueblo juntos y sin odios harán el futuro.]

Poem Background: This poem was first published in Frente a Frente, the magazine of the LEAR, in Mexico City, in March 1937. By mid May, it had been published by Guillén as part of the collection Cantos para soldados y zones para turistas, also in Mexico City.¹⁷⁵

Work Background: Revueltas finished the work on March 19, 1937 and dedicated it to Juan Marinello—a Cuban writer and politician in attendance at the LEAR meetings in Mexico City, and a friend of Nicolás Guillén. An incomplete autograph of the piece survives along with a complete score and instrumental parts made by a copyist. In addition, some sketches and notes of two versions for voices and piano were found, which differ from the instrumental version in accompaniment and melody. No sé por qué piensas tú is scored for baritone solo, E-flat clarinet, B-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, two trumpets in C, trombone, cymbals, maracas, bongó, two first violins, two second violins, and two double basses.


basses (the number of string instruments is given by Revueltas).\textsuperscript{176} The instrumentation is similar to \textit{Caminando}, but with added trombone, violins, \textit{maracas}, and cymbals. The ensemble is also reminiscent of military bands, particularly in the use of E-flat clarinet, B-flat clarinet, bassoon, trumpets, trombone, and cymbals. The piece is about three minutes in length.

When Guillén published \textit{Cantos para soldados y sones para turistas} in 1937 — the first collection that explores the military theme in his oeuvre — his political focus had expanded from the exclusively Cuban, to the Caribbean, and finally, to the universal. The oppressive military regime of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba, the Spanish Civil War precipitated by Francisco Franco, and the fascist military invasion of Ethiopia by Benito Mussolini, were events that elicited a strong protest from Guillén and other artists and intellectuals. In \textit{Cantos para soldados}, Guillén attempts to bring to the attention of the soldiers — many of them peasants who left their former occupation to attain a more lucrative position and a “higher” social status in the army — the fact that they are trampling upon their own people, but that even while they carry out the desires of the masters, they are expendable. In \textit{No sé por qué piensas tú} Guillén calls the soldiers to become aware of their duty and unite with the people.

\begin{align*}
\textbf{TEXT} & \quad \textbf{TRANSLATION} \\
1 \text{ No sé por qué piensas tú,} & \quad \text{I don’t know why it seems to you,} \\
2 \text{ soldado, que te odio yo,} & \quad \text{soldier, that I hate you,} \\
3 \text{ si somos la misma cosa} & \quad \text{if we are the same thing} \\
4 \text{ yo,} & \quad \text{I,} \\
5 \text{ tú.} & \quad \text{you.} \\
6 \text{ Tú eres pobre, lo soy yo;} & \quad \text{You are poor, so am I;} \\
7 \text{ soy de abajo, lo eres tú;} & \quad \text{I am an underdog, so are you;} \\
8 \text{ de dónde has sacado tú,} & \quad \text{from where did you get the idea,} \\
9 \text{ soldado, que te odio yo?} & \quad \text{soldier, that I hate you?} \\
10 \text{ Me duele que a veces tú} & \quad \text{It pains me that you sometimes} \\
11 \text{ te olvides de quién soy yo;} & \quad \text{forget who I am;} \\
\end{align*}

\textsuperscript{176} Kolb Neuhaus, \textit{Silvestre Revueltas: catálogo de sus obras}, 41-42.
12 ¡caramba!, si yo soy tú,
13 lo mismo que tú eres yo.

good heavens!, if I am you,
just as you are me.

14 Pero no por eso yo
15 he de malquererte, tú;
16 si somos la misma cosa,
17 yo,
18 tú,
19 no sé por qué piensas tú,
20 soldado, que te odio yo.

But not because of that I
will dislike you;
if we are the same thing,
I,
you,
I don’t know why it seems to you,
soldier, that I hate you.

21 Ya nos veremos yo y tú,
22 juntos en la misma calle,
23 hombro con hombro, tú y yo,
24 sin odios ni yo ni tú,
25 pero sabiendo tú y yo,
26 a donde vamos yo y tú…
27 ¡No sé por qué piensas tú,
28 soldado, que te odio yo!

We will soon meet, I and you,
together in the same street,
shoulder to shoulder, you and I,
without hatred, neither I nor you,
but knowing you and I,
where we are going, I and you…
I don’t know why it seems to you,
soldier, that I hate you!

In the first stanza Guillén, as the representative of the people, speaks to the
collective soldier as to a brother, as equals—“we are the same thing.” This equality of
condition is expressed in manifold ways throughout the poem: “you are poor, so am I; / I
am an underdog, so are you; / good heavens!, if I am you, / just as you are me / together in
the same street, /shoulder to shoulder, you and I / where we are going, I and you.” In
addition, the constant alternation of the pronouns “I” and “you” and “you” and “I”
reinforces the concept. Surprisingly, although the assassins of Guillén’s father were soldiers,
the poet’s appeal does not promote hatred. In fact, in every stanza (except number three) he
expresses either “I don’t know why it seems to you, / soldier, that I hate you” or “from
where did you get the idea, /soldier, that I hate you?”

Finally, after a rather passive monologue where Guillén compares himself with the
soldier and expresses his feelings to him, the poem achieves its climax as the poet discloses
his vision of the future, of the time when the soldiers that now serve “as human instruments
of capitalism,” will some day fight alongside the people, “shoulder with shoulder,” in pursuit
of the same objective: the overthrowing of imperialism. Significantly, Guillén later referred to *Cantos para soldados* as a “premonition” as it “announce[d] already in 1937…the Revolution [of 1959]…the reality that was going to be realized in the next thirty years.”

In his setting of *No sé por qué piensas tú*, Revueltas brilliantly juxtaposes the two opposing groups—the soldiers and the people—by means of two very different kinds of music that constantly interact and even overlap with one another. The first group—the soldiers—is represented primarily by a pair of trumpets, instruments long associated with all things military as well as with political power and high status. The second group—the people—is represented by the Afro-Caribbean elements drawn from the Cuban *rumba* and the *son* complex. The most representative military stylistic elements to be discussed in relationship with *No sé por qué piensas tú* are: 1) instrumentation, and 2) style. The Afro-Caribbean stylistic elements that will be discussed are: 1) rhythm, and 2) meter. Additionally, an important element to take into consideration is the dissonant harmonic language that dominates the piece. Although a modernist harmonic language is not unusual in Revueltas’ oeuvre, in this particular case it lends itself very well to the military theme—alluding to the horrors of war and of the overwhelming interference of the military and the police in the everyday affairs of Cubans and other people around the world.

As he does in *Caminando*, Revueltas uses the introduction of the piece to set the space for his characters, opening with a brazen trumpet call accompanied by a roll on the

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178 Ibid.

suspended cymbal. The trumpet fanfare is superimposed onto dissonant tremolos in the woodwinds and strings, creating a martial, even tragic, atmosphere (see Example 6.1).^{180}

Example 6.1 Revueltas, No sé por qué piensas tú, mm. 1-4.

The fanfare or signal played by the first trumpet on the first three measures (a descending interval of a minor third corresponding to the degrees 5 and 3 of the tonic triad) alludes to

^{180} Ibid., 136. “Fanfare” (from the Arabic anfar, “trumpets”) came to be employed for any brilliant flourish, even on a solo instrument, and thus sometimes meant a signal.”
the old military trumpet calls, which typically outlined a triad or otherwise followed a single overtone series (see Figure 6.1).

Figure 6.1. Arpeggiated outline of a trumpet signal.

The next section features military band instrumentation and playing style. In addition, the harmonic and rhythmic ambiguity increases as the chromatic figures of the clarinets are superimposed against the syncopated and dissonant chords played by the low woodwinds and brass, and the dissonant tremolos of the strings (see Example 6.2). The first instance of vertical hemiola appears on measure ten, between the clarinets and brass.

Example 6.2. Revueltas, *No sé por qué piensas tú*, mm. 6-10.
In the last section of the introduction, the character changes suddenly, as the Afro-Cuban rhythmic elements are first incorporated (see Example 6.3). In this regard, Augier maintains that “the rhyme between the pronouns “I” and “you” [that] appears in almost all the verses, as an estribillo… imposes the rhythmic sense of the *son*.”

Alfred Melon, on the other hand, considers said alternation and the brilliant exploitation of oxytone endings as equivalent to “keeping a dance beat.” Indeed, while the stylistic elements in this piece are shared by a number of Afro-Caribbean popular dances, I propose that the main influence in *No sé por qué piensas tú* is that of the Cuban *son* and the *rumba*.

Example 6.3. Revueltas, *No sé por qué piensas tú*, mm. 11-15.

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182 Melon, 69.
After the introduction, although the military elements resurface occasionally, the Afro-Caribbean elements predominate in the piece. In fact, as it can be observed in the example above, the two main ostinati of the piece are derived from a single rhythmic cell, the rotated *cinquillo*—related to the *montuno* pattern used in *Caminando* (see Figure 6.2). The two main variations are, in turn, transformed throughout the piece (see Figure 6.3).

![Figure 6.2. Montuno pattern; cinquillo; and rotated cinquillo in No sé por qué piensas tú.](image)

a) Clarinets, trumpets, violins (*)

b) Trumpets, violins (*)

c) Violins, cymbals, brass (*)

d) Violins, *bongó*, trumpets (*)

e) Trumpets, violins

![Figure 6.3. Variations of the rotated cinquillo in No sé por qué piensas tú.](image)

An asterisk (*) denotes a rhythmic cell that functions primarily as an ostinato.

The accompaniment during the first two stanzas remains essentially the same, as it involves the clarinets, strings and *bongó* (refer to Example 6.3), and minimally, the trumpets. Similarly, the fourth stanza features a leaner version of the accompaniment, with only two of the clarinets, the bassoon and the *bongó* participating (see Example 6.4).
In the third stanza, when for the first time the speaker admits his feelings of pain and frustration known to the soldier, the accompaniment becomes more minimalist as each one of the strings and the trumpets plays a single pitch (see Examples 6.5 and 6.7).

Furthermore, the trumpets, clarinets and cymbals bring the military element to the forefront again. On the one hand, the trumpets play a brief passage of a rather improvisatory character.
in the manner of the traditional trumpet flourishes (see Example 6.6), which the clarinets answer in a similar style (see Example 6.7).


Example 6.7. Revueltas, No sé por qué piensas tú, mm. 40-43.

On the other hand, in connection with the exclamation “good heavens!” the trumpets and clarinets joined by the violins, play flourish-like figures, which are, in turn, permutations of the *cincillo* (see Example 6.8). This dual identity is very significant, because it suggests that in spite of the military character of the passage, its popular roots are still evident. In other words, although the flourish style points to the military, the rhythmic character points towards the popular. That these rhythmic cells represent both “semantic actors” simultaneously, reinforces the message of the texts that proclaims that the soldiers and the people are one and the same thing — “I am you, / just as you are me.”

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Before discussing the last stanza, a brief comment about meter and improvisation is certainly in order. The meters 6/8 and 2/4 are common to popular Cuban dances — *contradanza, conga, tango, danzón, son,* and *rumba.*\(^{184}\) However, the combination of both meters in the initial time signature (see Example 6.1) is significant in that indicates maximum rhythmic flexibility, an essential characteristic of the *rumba.* Larry Crook explains that in *rumba,* “the basic accompaniment patterns of the percussion have a dynamic flexibility built into their structure that allows for duple-triple ambivalence,” but due to “the difficulties of transcribing this rhythmic feel, the *guaguancó* is often written in 2/4 or 4/4 time.”\(^{185}\) As can be seen in the examples provided so far, the frequent juxtaposition of duple and triple groupings in both 2/4 and 6/8, along with various other subdivisions of the measure,


\(^{185}\) Arnedo-Gómez, 134.
contribute to the dynamic flexibility of *No sé por qué piensas tú*. In addition, Revueltas alternates between 6/8 and 2/4 most frequently in the transition between the third and fourth stanzas (see Example 6.9).

Example 6.9. Revueltas, *No sé por qué piensas tú*, mm. 50-57.

![Example 6.9](image)

Regarding improvisation, it is typically the lead singer and the *quinto* player who integrate various levels of subdivision of the measure within the timeline. The subdivisions fall within three main types: 1) duple and multiples, 2) triple and multiples, and 3) quintuple and multiples (see Figure 6.4). The integration of these subdivisions, along with the metric ambiguity, contributes to the high degree of flexibility characteristic of the rumba. In *No sé por qué piensas tú*, several examples of these subdivisions can be found (see Figure 6.5).

![Figure 6.4](image)

Figure 6.4. Subdivision levels of the measure in *rumba*.

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186 The *quinto* is a high-pitched conga drum, a typical member of the *rumba* ensemble.

Other Afro-Caribbean elements in the piece—which are derived from the highly flexible approach to rhythm—are polyrhythm, cross-rhythms, syncopation, anticipated downbeat, vertical hemiola, and silent downbeat (see Example 6.10).

Preceding the fifth stanza, the insistent rhythm and strident timbre of the E-flat and B-flat clarinet, in conjunction with the ostinati played by the rest of the instruments, usher in the climactic point of the piece (see Example 6.11). Elements utilized in previous stanzas and transitions, all converge in the last stanza, including a slight variation of the trumpet and clarinet flourish, the virtuoso runs of the clarinets and strings, the roll on the cymbals, and the marcato accompaniment of the third stanza. The accompaniment is more densely harmonized, and features a greatly expanded range.

Example 6.11. Revueltas, *No sé por qué piensas tú*, mm. 73-76.

As he did in *Caminando*, Revueltas utilizes the trumpets—in alternation with the trombone—to double the vocal part throughout the piece (see Figure 6.6). However, the only time all three brass instruments double and/or harmonize the vocal part is at the beginning and during the last two verses. In the first case (“We will soon meet, I and you,”), the brass and the E-flat clarinet double the voice at the octave (see Example 6.12). At the
end, a forceful reiteration of the opening of the poem (“I don’t know why it seems to you, soldier, that I hate you!”), the brass harmonize the vocal part as a trio (see Example 6.13). This is an effective manner to highlight the forceful delivery of the text, as it matches the only time in the poem when full verses are accompanied by an exclamation mark.

Stanza 1
vv. 1-2 — trombone
vv. 3-5 — trumpets (duet)

Stanza 2
vv. 6-7 — trombone
vv. 8-9a — trumpets (duet)
vv. 9b — trombone

Stanza 3
vv. 10-13 — trombone

Stanza 4
vv. 14-15 — trumpets (duet)
vv. 16-18 — trumpet 2/trombone (duet)
vv. 19-20a — trumpets (duet)
vv. 20b — trombone

Stanza 5
v. 21 — trumpets (unison)
v. 22 — trumpets (duet)
vv. 23-26 — trombone
vv. 27-28 — trumpets/trombone (trio)

Figure 6.6. Sequence of brass instruments doubling the vocal part.

Example 6.12. Revueltas, *No sé por qué piensas tú*, mm. 77-79.
At the very end, the military topic is once again juxtaposed to the popular. The returning flourishes of the brass, clarinets, and strings are answered by the only instance of the Cuban *tresillo* in the piece (see Example 6.14). Not only is the military gesture rooted in the popular, as we discussed before, but the popular has the last word: at least in the piece, the worker affirms equality of class with the soldier.

As it has been demonstrated, in No sé por qué piensas tú, Revueltas effectively conveys the meaning of Guillén’s text by brilliantly juxtaposing and overlapping two topics (the military and the Cuban son and rumba), which in turn, represent the opposite groups or “semantic actors” of which the poet speaks in his poem —the soldiers and the people. Like the Cuban son, the rumba was a very popular dance that originated in the late nineteenth century in the docks of Havana and developed in the slums among the poorest blacks and mulattoes. Due to its similar origins and associations, the rumba carries the same social, cultural, political, and racial connotations of the son, effectively representing the proletariat.

On the other hand, the old military topic is effectively exploited by Revueltas, but with a twist. Indeed, said topic was usually associated with the “manly, heroic, adventurous” and evoked “noble deeds and reckless courage.” However, Revueltas contradicts these associations by exposing as ignoble the actions of the military against their own people. Furthermore, by simultaneously utilizing military band instruments and Afro-Cuban percussion instruments, Revueltas emphasizes the strong bond between his two characters. By endowing the military topic itself with popular characteristics, Revueltas reinforces the main theme of the poem by revealing the common roots of the soldiers and the people, and thus, proclaiming their equal status as members of the same brotherhood.


189 Monelle, 142.

190 Not a far-fetched idea, as some scholars suggest that Cuban orquestas típicas (popular orchestras, featuring clarinet, bassoon, bugle/cornet, trombone, violins, double bass, and sometimes piccolo) developed from black and mulatto military bands (batallones de pardos y morenos). It is, however, unclear if Revueltas was aware of this connection. For more on this topic, see Carpentier, La música en Cuba, 146-147; Galán, Cuba y sus sones, 218; Ezequiel Rodríguez Domínguez, Iconografía del danzón (La Habana: Sub-Dirección Provincial de Música, 1967), 14; and Alejandro L. Madrid, and Robin D. Moore, Danzón: Circum-Caribbean Dialogues in Music and Dance (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 27-28.
Chapter 7. Sensemayá: “The ruin of the master and the victory of the slave”

The orchestra slithers, suggests, evokes, reiterates, suspends, insinuates, fulfilling its hypnotic function impeccably. Sensemayá, like most magic music, aspires to the condition of incantatory formulae, by means of the ad infinitum repetition of the charged states of mind, until they reach a ritual eruption.

[La orquesta repta, sugiere, evoca, reitera, suspende, insinúa, cumpliendo de manera impecable su función hipnótica. Sensemayá, como la mayoría de las músicas mágicas, aspira a la condición de formulas encantatorias, mediante la repetición ad infinitum hacia las cargas anímicas, hasta hacerlas llegar a la erupción ritual.]

—Juan Antonio Alcaraz

Poem Background: The poem, published as part of the collection *West Indies, Ltd.* (1934), was originally dedicated to Gilberto Ante, a physician from Manzanillo, Cuba.

Work Background: Revueltas composed the chamber version on May 10-15, 1937, and dedicated it to Juan Marinello and Nicolás Guillén. Several photocopies of the autograph exist as well as original instrumental parts made by the composer. In addition, there is an original draft signed and dated May 11, 1937 but without the dedicatory — this manuscript is the basis for the version for full orchestra of 1938. Sensemayá is scored for piccolo, E-flat clarinet, B-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, two trumpets in C, trombone, xylophone, tom-tom, suspended cymbal, *claves, maracas, güiro*, and strings (violins and double bass only). Compared with *Caminando* and *No sé por qué piensas tú*, Sensemayá features the largest instrumentation, although it shares with both pieces a common ensemble of clarinets, bass clarinet, bassoon, trumpets, and double bass (see Figure 7.1). The work is about five minutes in length.

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Figure 7.1. Comparative table of instrumentation.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the primary inspiration for Guillén’s “Sensemayá” was the dramatic ritual killing of a snake reenacted by the *comparsas* of African slaves during the carnival celebrations on the *Día de Reye*s — the Feast of the Epiphany — in Cuba and Haiti.\(^\text{193}\)

Kubayanda explains:

Sensemayá is a reenactment of a magical snake rite by the Cuban Mayombe sect who, like the Congo, is historically of central African Bantu origin. Since time immemorial snake dances have been common practice in Africa, from Benin in the West to Tanzania in the East, and to Tangier in the North. But if the ideophone sensemayá can be seen as a combination of sense (providence) and Yemayá, it may be further inferred that we could also be dealing with a ritual panegyric in honor of Yemayá, the Afro-Cuban Venus of Yoruba origin, Goddess of the Seas and Queen Mother of the Earth. In the Cuban Yemayá ritual, the *batá* drums are usually deployed, with the *iyá* [mother] drum playing a dominant role. From the ideophonic

\(^{193}\) María Herrera-Sobek, ed., *Celebrating Latino Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Cultural Traditions*, Vol. 1: A-D (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 9. The ritual killing of an animal is also found in other cultures, for example, the *tarasca* [a ritual monster] is “carried in religious processionals in Spain” (see Roberto González Echeverría, *Cuban Fiestas* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), n.d.).
title alone, Bantu and Yoruba traditions and their Cuban modifications seem simultaneously echoed and strung together by one poetic mind. The point of this poem is to communicate an extraordinary ritual experience.\textsuperscript{194}

Besides the title “Sensemayá,” the estribillo —¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!— also carries strong ritual connotations. Although these ideophones have been widely dismissed as jitanjáforas, they actually carry a meaning.\textsuperscript{195} The word “mayombe” is of Bantu origin, and refers to the name of an area north of the Zaire River, specifically the region that was formerly known as the French Congo along the coast. Most significantly, it is also the name of the Cuban sect Palo Monte (Regla Conga) or Palo Mayombe, and actually signifies black magic and its associated practices and sacrificial rituals. Additionally, the practitioners (paleros) of said religion —specifically the priests, sorcerers, or ritual doctors— are called mayomberos, a word derived from the term “mayombé.”\textsuperscript{196} Finally, according to Thomas F. Anderson, the word “bombe” is “an invocation of the majá, the Cuban boa that is held sacred by every Afro-Cuban religion and cult,” which is “the guardian…of the mayombero” and “is present (either in body or spirit) at plantes [Abakuá rituals and ceremonies], bembés [religious feasts], toques [ceremonies with batá drums], and other similar celebrations.”\textsuperscript{197}

\textsuperscript{194} Kubayanda, 106. See also, Anderson, 88; Antonio Benítez Rojo, \textit{The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., trans. James Maraniss (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 297; and Ruscallada, 76.

\textsuperscript{195} Augier, Nicolás Guillén, Vol. 1, 211-212; Cossío, 29; Ellis, 83; Ruffinelli, 47-48; Smart, 37; Monica Kaup, “Our America That is Not One: Transnational Black Atlantic Disclosures in Nicolás Guillén and Langston Hughes,” \textit{Discourse} 22, no. 3, Imperial Disclosures, Part I (Fall 2000): 87-103, accessed November 6, 2015, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41389587; and others.

\textsuperscript{196} Anderson, 81-84, 88. See also Benitez Rojo, 297-298; Sublette, 179-180; and Patrick Taylor, \textit{The Encyclopedia of Caribbean Religions}, Vol. 1 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 669.

\textsuperscript{197} Anderson, 85. In the Congo vocabulary, bumbema is one of the names of the sacred snake —the Majá de Santa María, a boa linked with the Yoruban deity Yemayá.
Here is Guillén’s poem in its entirety, describing the dramatic ritual in which Sensemayá the snake is killed by the *mayombero*. Note the repetition of verses “in the manner of a litany” (the estribillo and the title, as well as the partial repetition of verses), which is a stylistic device characteristic of the Yoruba *ofo* genre, or incantatory poetry.¹⁹⁸

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXT</th>
<th>TRANSLATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!</td>
<td>¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!</td>
<td>¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!</td>
<td>¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La culebra tiene los ojos de vidrio;</td>
<td>The snake has eyes of glass;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la culebra viene y se enreda en un palo;</td>
<td>the snake comes and curls around a stick;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>con sus ojos de vidrio, en un palo,</td>
<td>with its eyes of glass, around a stick,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>con sus ojos de vidrio.</td>
<td>with its eyes of glass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La culebra camina sin patas;</td>
<td>The snake walks without feet;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la culebra se esconde en la yerba;</td>
<td>the snake comes and hides in the grass;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caminando se esconde en la yerba,</td>
<td>walking it hides in the grass,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>caminando sin patas.</td>
<td>walking with no feet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!</td>
<td>¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!</td>
<td>¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!</td>
<td>¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tú le das con el hacha y se muere:</td>
<td>You hit it with the axe and it dies:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¡dále ya!</td>
<td>hit it now!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¡No le des con el pie, que te muerde,</td>
<td>Do not kick it with the foot, it will bite you,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no le des con el pie, que se va!</td>
<td>Do not kick it with the foot, it will flee!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensemayá, la culebra,</td>
<td>Sensemayá, the snake,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensemayá.</td>
<td>Sensemayá.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensemayá, con sus ojos,</td>
<td>Sensemayá, with its eyes,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensemayá.</td>
<td>Sensemayá.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensemayá, con su lengua,</td>
<td>Sensemayá, with its tongue,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensemayá.</td>
<td>Sensemayá.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensemayá, con su boca,</td>
<td>Sensemayá, with its mouth,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensemayá.</td>
<td>Sensemayá.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La culebra muerta no puede comer,</td>
<td>The dead snake cannot eat,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>la culebra muerta no puede silbar,</td>
<td>the dead snake cannot hiss,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

29 no puede caminar, it cannot walk,
30 no puede correr. it cannot run.
31 La culebra muerta no puede mirar, The dead snake cannot see,
32 la culebra muerta no puede beber, the dead snake cannot drink,
33 no puede respirar, it cannot breathe,
34 no puede morder. it cannot bite.

35 ¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé! ¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!
36 Sensemayá, la culebra … Sensemayá, the snake…
37 ¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé! ¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!
38 Sensemayá, no se mueve… Sensemayá, does not move…
39 ¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé! ¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!
40 Sensemayá, la culebra … Sensemayá, the snake…
41 ¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé! ¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!
42 ¡Sensemayá, se murió! Sensemayá, it died.

The poem begins with an initial description of the qualities and actions of the snake
(“eyes of glass,” / “curls around a stick,” / “walks without legs,” / “hides in the grass”)
bookended by three continuous iterations of the estribillo. This repetition of the estribillo
“serves as a musical-ritual background and augments the excitement and creates the
environment to kill the snake.” After the mayombero is instructed or encouraged to kill
Sensemayá (“you hit it with the axe…” / “hit it now!”), the snake is mentioned again,
describing the results of the deadly encounter as a progressive decline in vital functions and
actions. First, some of the body parts of the snake are mentioned (“eyes” / “tongue” /
“mouth”) followed by a list of actions it cannot perform any more (“eat” / “hiss” / “walk” /
“run / “see” / “drink” / “breathe” / “bite”), which represents a complete reversal of the
beginning of the poem. Finally, as the incantatory phrase is chanted four more times, the
definitive proof of the death of the snake is given: “Sensemayá does not move,” / “it died!”

Since “Sensemayá” is deeply rooted in Afro-Cuban religious rituals, it seems natural
that Revueltas would incorporate stylistic elements associated with Afro-Cuban ritual music.

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199 Luz Elena Zamudio, “En torno a ‘Sensemayá’ de Nicolás Guillén,” in Homenaje a
Nicolás Guillén, ed. José P. Díaz, et. al. (Xalapa, México: Instituto de Investigaciones
The most salient stylistic elements we will discuss are: 1) rhythmic language, 2) texture, 3) form, 4) instrumentation, and 5) meter. However, before delving into those, it is essential to explore the critical role that text plays in Revueltas’ *Sensemayá*.

As can be observed in Figure 7.1, *Sensemayá* is the only work among the three we have studied for which Revueltas did not require singers. Nevertheless, the composer wrote the first verse of the first two stanzas in his autograph score (see Figures 7.2 and 7.3), a choice that indicates that the text was essential to the conception of the work. In this regard, Peter Garland observed that “the structure of [Sensemayá] was literally influenced by the character of the poem —both on the immediate thematic/onomatopoeic level, but also in terms of over-all form.”

![Figure 7.2. Estribillo annotated on the autograph of Sensemayá (mm. 97-100): “Mayombe—bombe—Mayombé”](image)

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201 Garland, *In Search of Silvestre Revueltas*, 190.

Moreover, Roberto Kolb affirms that in contrast with his other songs, where numerous sketches reveal that Revueltas set the poem to music “by first elaborating a melodic-rhythmic line for the verses and then writing the accompaniment for piano or instrumental ensemble,” *Sensemayá* “is an exceptional case...in that, even though [the setting] takes advantage of musical resources, [it] rests directly on the entire text of the poem, from where it derives both its structure as well as its metric, rhythmic, melodic, dynamic, timbric, and even semantic components.”

The above assertions are significant because, as we have discussed in previous chapters, both *Caminando* and *No sé por qué piensas tú* could also be performed effectively without the vocal parts, as several instruments double the vocal parts—trumpets and clarinets in the first case, and trumpets and trombone in the latter. However, in *Sensemayá* the poem and the music seem to be especially intertwined, as “the phrases and words of the

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203 Ibid.

Lucumi rhythm, of the black peoples of the Caribbean, are utilized in the building of the ostinati that characterize the work.” Indeed, in contrast with Caminando and No sé por qué piensas tú, the song-like themes that represent the main characters in Sensemayá—the snake and the mayombero (witch)—are not derived from Guillén’s text, but are superimposed over a matrix of rhythms directly derived from it.

Four ostinati conform the most prominent building blocks of Sensemayá. The bass clarinet introduces the first one—two quickly alternating pitches a minor second apart (see Figure 7.4). The legatissimo marking alludes to the smooth motions of the reptile while the minor second interval and low register is a device to represent tension and danger. This ostinato, which is closely related to the snake, appears throughout most of the piece, being interrupted after the deadly hit has been dealt (fifth stanza, mm. 209-251) and ending definitely when the snake is finally dead. In certain sections of the work, the B-flat and E-flat clarinets play melodic variations in conjunction with the original ostinato (see Figure 7.5).

Figure 7.4. First ostinato, played by the bass clarinet.


207 González Aktories, and Kolb Neuhaus, Sensemayá: entre rito, palabra y sonido, 13; and Zohn-Muldoon, 148.
The tom-toms introduce the second ostinato—which “represents syllabically the title of the work”—joined by the *claves* twenty measures later (see Figure 7.6). Trumpets, violins, and piano sporadically interject with variations of the original rhythm (see Figure 7.x). In the section that corresponds to the fifth stanza (mm. 209-240), the violins and xylophone play a rotated ostinato—occurring on the upbeat (see Figure 7.7).

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In measure thirteen, the bassoon introduces the third ostinato, joined by the double bass starting on measure twenty-nine. Like the first ostinato, the third also appears throughout most of the piece, is interrupted after the deadly hit has been dealt to the snake (fifth stanza, mm. 209-251) and periodically stops for one measure in the section preceding the sixth stanza (mm. 252-322). Charles Hoag states that this ostinato derives from the estribillo ¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé! (see Figure 7.8). However, since the introduction is concerned with the snake, I argue that the bassoon/double bass ostinato reinforces the idea of the snake rather than introducing a new element. I propose that the third ostinato is

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209 Hoag, 174.
only an embellishment of the second in that the emphasis continues to be on the downbeats—on account of their natural accent, and pitch height—and therefore, the word “sensemayá” is better suited than the estribillo. Although in every other instance Revueltas favors a strictly syllabic setting of the text, in this case, for all practical purposes, the word “sensemayá” matches the pitches that are most easily perceived by the ear: the accented beats and the highest pitches on every bar (see Figure 7.9). Later in the piece, the piano and violins introduce harmonic variations of this ostinato (see Figure 7.10).

Figure 7.8. Double bass ostinato and text as interpreted by Charles Hoag.

Figure 7.9. Double bass ostinato and text as interpreted by the author.

Figure 7.10. Harmonic variations of the third ostinato.

The estribillo (¡Mayombe—bombe—mayombé!) generates the fourth, which is played by the violins and taken up by the brass at the end of the piece ostinato (see Figure 7.11). In the first part of the work, the estribillo is repeated three times, matching the first and third
stanzas. Later, at the end of the piece, it appears more often, even overlapping with itself as well as in counterpoint with other ostinati as we shall discuss later. Mayer-Serra regarded this ostinato as “the fundamental rhythmic cell from which all the musical elements of the score [were] derived.”

![Figure 7.11. Two examples of the fourth ostinato.](image)

As mentioned above, it is this matrix of *franjas timbricas*—a technique previously discussed in connection with the Cuban *son* but also found in all types of African-derived music—what provides the background on which two themes and the transliterated six stanzas of the poem are superimposed. The first theme—representing the snake, or “evil”—is introduced by the first trumpet, playing muted in its lowest register (see Example 7.1). The octatonic theme is repeated soon afterwards (mm. 65-92) with the E-flat clarinet doubling the trumpet two octaves and a minor second above. Notice that the first theme loosely resembles the first and third ostinati in its undulating, snake-like shape.

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211 Zohn-Muldoon, 147.
Example 7.1. Revueltas, *Sensemayá* (autograph), mm. 29-56. First theme.

The pentatonic second theme — representing the opposing character, the *mayombero*, or the “good” — is introduced by the E-flat clarinet playing in its high register, highly contrasting with the first theme in register, dynamic, and character (see Example 7.2).\(^{212}\) The second theme is soon repeated once more, doubled by the xylophone (mm. 283-302).


Nowhere is the rhythmic relationship between the text and the music more evident that in the transliteration of the stanzas. Since this topic has been extensively researched, two or three examples should suffice to illustrate this point. Stanzas two and six depict the snake in entirely opposite circumstances: on the one hand, the snake alive, moving smoothly and stealthily (see Example 7.3), and on the other, the dead or dying snake, no longer able to perform basic functions (see Example 7.4). The rhythmic language accurately matches the contrasting nature of the stanzas: in Example 7.3, the flow is smooth and consistent, while in Example 7.4, it is often disrupted by rests and by the irregular 7/16 measures. Register is also significant in that even though both stanzas are played in a similar tessitura, the low

\(^{212}\) Ibid.
register of the trumpet typically evokes “evil and death” in Western music, while the high
register of the trombone is linked to the “brilliant and triumphant.”

Example 7.3. Revueltas, Sensemayá, mm. 113-146. Second stanza (trumpet).

Example 7.4. Revueltas, Sensemayá, mm. 309-335. Sixth stanza (trombone and flute).

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For the first four stanzas, the rhythmic matrix conformed by the first three ostinati continues uninterrupted (see Example 7.5), its texture varying in thickness by the addition or subtraction of *franjas* or horizontal planes. The relentless repetitions of superimposed layers of ostinati mimics the sonic atmosphere produced by the overlapping drumming patterns and the monotonous chant of incantatory phrases typical of Afro-Cuban religious rituals—all designed to “engender obsession, a fixed idea that brings about ecstasy.”


An important textural change occurs during the fifth stanza (mm. 209-251), where a sustained “chord” built over a pedal G suddenly replaces the busy ostinati and sounds against the brass playing a transliteration of the text (see Example 7.6). A similar case occurs

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214 Carpentier, *La música en Cuba*, 301.
in mm. 339-357, where the second ostinato persists in the piano, sounding against the glissandi of the violins and the “speaking” of the trombone.

Immediately after, in a recapitulation of sorts, the layers of ostinati resume as background for the second theme (mm. 283-302) and the sixth stanza (mm. 309-335).

However, as the snake has been mortally wounded, the forward motion is interrupted by frequent pauses — by means of a single 7/16 measure every few bars (see Example 7.7).

Example 7.7. Revueltas, Sensemayá, mm. 273-279.

As he did in Caminando and No sé por qué piensas tú, Revueltas brings all the elements of the piece back for the climactic ending, but with much greater intensity. Both themes and the estribillo (which appears not four, but sixteen times), appear in counterpoint with one another, still accompanied by the relentless ostinati (see Example 7.8). This time, however, the second theme is the most prominent — by virtue of its dynamic marking and of the
timbric quality of the E-flat and B-flat clarinets, the piccolo, and the xylophone played in their highest register—and signals that the mayombero has succeeded in killing the snake.

Example 7.8. Revueltas, Sensemayá (autograph), mm. 370-380.

As in Afro-Cuban rituals, where the songs and dances that accompany the ceremony “develop in a crescendo until they culminate in a paroxysm of rhythm and sonic intensity,” for twenty measures (mm. 406-425), rapid figurations derived from the two themes and the
estribillo (see Example 7.9) sound against the four ostinati reaching the climactic point of the piece before the final victorious statement is made: “Sensemayá died!”

Example 7.9. Revueltas, Sensemayá, mm. 422-425.

Besides the clear allusions to Afro-Cuban ritual music, the influence of the son (and other popular music) can be discerned in Sensemayá as well. As the above examples illustrate, stylistic elements in Sensemayá common to both popular and ritual Afro-Cuban music

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215 Fernando Ortiz, La africana de la música folklórica de Cuba, 2nd ed. (La Habana: Editorial Universitaria, 1965), 292.
include: polyrhythms; ostinati; hemiola (Examples 7.5 and 7.6); use of multiple superimposed rhythmic and timbric layers; the incorporation of traditional Afro-Cuban instruments (claves, maracas and güiro) and drums; the use of string, wind, or percussion instruments in drum-like roles (bassoon, violins, and xylophone for example); call-and-response form (Examples 7.6 and 7.7); and use of a timeline or clave. Regarding meter, the asymmetric 7/8 in Sensemayá (notated as 12/16+2/16=7/8, but written as four bars of 4/16 plus one of 2/16) could be regarded as Revueltas’ variation of the classic beat of the Cuban son 8/8. The same can be said about the equally asymmetrical 7/16, as in both cases, the grouping of the eight quavers—or semi-quavers—changes from the typical 3+3+2 to 2+2+3 (see Figure 7.12).

Figure 7.12. Classic son 8/8 grouping (3+3+2) compared to Sensemayá 7/8 (2+2+3).

By incorporating stylistic elements drawn from both religious and popular Afro-Caribbean musical practices, Revueltas imbued his Sensemayá with multiple layers of meaning. He denounced three centuries of Spanish Colonial rule and the cruel institution of slavery under which thousands of Africans died, while on the other hand, he condemned the modern-day slavery under which the working classes—primarily the blacks and mulattoes—continued to struggle. In other words, like Guillén, Revueltas pointed out the fact that, in practice, colonialism was not dead but had only assumed another name: imperialism.

As in Caminando and No sé por qué piensas tú, there is an element of hope in Sensemayá. While a number of differing interpretations exist, the dramatic killing of the snake has been widely understood to represent the eventual defeat of an “enemy or malignant power,”

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216 Estrada, “Silvestre Revueltas,” 26-27; and Rolando Pérez, Lecture, Primer Coloquio “Silvestre Revueltas: hacia el centenario,” México, D.F., 1996, quoted in Estrada, Canto Roto, 62. According to Omar León, the matriz de son is composed of six eight notes and one quarter (see Robbins, 188), which also equal the classic 8/8.
specifically, the overthrow of imperialism.\textsuperscript{217} Furthermore, the association of the piece with the \textit{Día de Reyes}—the only day of the year in which masters temporarily set their slaves free—anticipates the day when “the triumph of the slave”\textsuperscript{218} will be complete and when freedom will no longer be short-lived, but permanent.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{218} Adriana Mendez Rodenas, \textit{Cuba en su imagen: historia e identidad en la literatura cubana} (Madrid: Verbum Editorial, 2002), 222.
\end{itemize}
Conclusions.

Here: The workers’ muscles, the hand that sows, and the proletarian thought.
There: The capitalist thirsty for blood, the group of the bourgeois, puffed up behind the revolver of the general and the saber of the police inspector.
On one side: workers, peasants, soldiers: ignorance, slavery, misery, and more misery.
On the other side: exploiters: rulers, industrialists, hacienda owners: opulence and power.219

[Aquí: Los músculos de los trabajadores, la mano que siembra y el pensamiento proletario.
Allá: El capitalista sediento de sangre, el grupo burgués, inflado detrás del revolver del general y del sable del inspector de policía.
De un lado: trabajadores, campesinos, soldados: ignorancia, esclavitud, miseria, y más miseria.
Del otro lado: explotadores: políticos, industrialistas, propietarios de haciendas: opulencia y poder.]

— Editorial of the first issue of Frente a Frente

The purpose of this paper has been to contribute to the body of scholarship that seeks to further an understanding of Silvestre Revueltas and his oeuvre beyond the narrow and one-sided Mexicanist narrative. Specifically, the goal of this document has been to demonstrate that Revueltas incorporated into Caminando, No sé por qué piensas tú, and Sensemayá stylistic elements derived from Afro-Caribbean popular and ritual music as topics in order to convey a political message. Indeed, even though much of Revueltas’ output was firmly rooted in the mestizo traditions and popular sounds of Mexico, a number of factors support the argument that Revueltas’ motivation to compose his three pieces was political rather than picturesque or exoticist: 1) his encounter in 1937 with Nicolás Guillén and his poetry, an event that led directly to the genesis of the three works in question, 2) his overt political militancy, particularly as manifested in his involvement with the LEAR—an organism closely aligned with the Mexican Communist Party that opposed imperialism, fascism, and war, and aimed to “take a stand in the struggle against the oppressive classes and in favor of the oppressed;” 3) his own writings —letters, diary, and newspapers— where

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219 Deborah Caplow, “LEAR in the Proletarian and Popular Fronts,” in Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 95. Frente a Frente was the official paper of the LEAR.
he decried the oppression of the lower classes, including the exploitation of artists; and 4) the presence of cultural elements in some of his early works—pregones in Esquinas and the characteristic sounds of street vendors in El Afilador, for example—bringing attention to the condition and the reality of the poor people of the streets.\(^{220}\)

Although the presence of the Afro-Cuban theme and Afro-Cuban elements in the three works studied in this paper has been recognized before, said works have never before been approached and studied in depth as a unified group.\(^{221}\) Therefore, the following objectives guided much of the writing of this document: 1) to identify the Afro-Cuban/Afro-Caribbean stylistic elements utilized by Revueltas in his three works, 2) to trace the usage of said elements in popular and ritual Afro-Caribbean music, and 3) to establish, within the framework of topic theory, how the identified stylistic elements function as topics, i.e. how they allude to specific political and social contexts or events.

This study demonstrated that the main rhythmic cells utilized in Caminando and No sé por qué piensas tú, are drawn from the Cuban son and the rumba, while in Sensemayá they derive from vocal iterations and incantations formulae characteristic of Afro-Cuban ritual music. The most representative Afro-Caribbean elements found in all three works are: 1) the use of franjas rítmicas, implying polyrhythms organized around a timeline, as well as contrasting layers of timbre and pitch, 2) the relentless repetition of ostinati to create texture and structure, 3) the use of Afro-Cuban instruments in different combinations, and 4) the use of

\(^{220}\) Ibid., 100-101.

\(^{221}\) For instance, Mayer-Serra stated that Revueltas’ Dos Canciones and Sensemayá provided “a compelling portrait of the enslaved ñañigo” (see Mayer-Serra, “Silvestre Revueltas and Musical Nationalism in Mexico,” 128); and Julio Estrada briefly mentions the “black sound, rhythm, and character” in Caminando and Sensemayá (see Julio Estrada, “Raíces y tradición en la música nueva de México y de América Latina,” 26-27).
the *montuno* form (call-and-response) in a variety of ways.\textsuperscript{222} Additional parallels between the works include 1) a shared instrumental core found in other works by Revueltas and other contemporaries, 2) the use of the brass to deliver the text, either by doubling the human voice or by taking its place, 3) the use of muted trumpets, so characteristic of Revueltas’ music, 4) a formal crescendo or accumulation, where all or most of the elements come together towards the end, 5) a faithful setting of the text, with Revueltas taking some creative license in the second half of *Sensemayá*, and 6) the staging of the main character of the poem, as well as the setting of the atmosphere and the cultural parameters, from the very introduction.\textsuperscript{223}

Without a doubt, Revueltas’ compositions reveal a strong sense of solidarity with the oppressed blacks and mulattoes in Cuba and the Caribbean, with the working classes, and with Guillén, who was at the time censured by the Cuban government because of his leftist political views. As we have discussed, the compositional devices chosen by Revueltas enhance the meaning of Guillén’s text and add new layers of meaning to it. Most importantly, besides joining the social protest in pro of the working classes—an action they saw as their most important duty as artists—both Revueltas and Guillén produced their art as a symbol of social change. While Guillén “project[ed] the image of the *son* as the symbol

\textsuperscript{222} Regarding the use of ostinati in a non-European way, see Graciela Paraskervaidis, “Muy Silvestre, gran Revueltas,” in *Revista Lulí: edición facsimilar*, ed. by Federico Monjeau, 166-170 (Buenos Aires: Biblioteca Nacional, 2009). For more information on Revueltas’ use of linear superimposed layers, as opposed to juxtaposed blocks of sound, see Julio Estrada, *Totalidad desarmada*, 57.

\textsuperscript{223} Other Revueltas’ works featuring a similar instrumental core are: *Colorines, El renacuajo paseador, Planos, Hommage a Garcia Lorca, Cuartetos, Batik, Ocho por radio, Toccata sin fuga*, and the songs for voice and instrumental ensemble (see González Aktories, and Kolb Neuhaus, *Sensemayá: un juego de espejos entre música y poesía*, 36). Regarding procedures of accumulation of juxtaposing and superimposed blocks of sound, see Alejandro L. Madrid, “¿Influencias o elementos de retórica?: aspectos de centricidad en la obra de Silvestre Revueltas,” *Heterofonía: revista de investigación musical*, no. 122 (Enero-Junio 2000): 30-31.
of a racially and culturally integrated society,” Revueltas “links the idea of social
transformation with that of musical innovation.”

In closing, the writing of this paper aims to promote a wider awareness about three
of the long neglected works by one of Mexico’s greatest composers of the twentieth century
and to encourage their dissemination and performance. It aims also to awaken interest in
topics that could be explored more in depth, such as the similarities between the music of
Silvestre Revueltas and Amadeo Roldán or the possible influence from the later on the first,
among other ideas. Most importantly, however, the significance of this paper lies in that the
topic of social protest though art has not lost its relevance. As the world sees in disbelief the
unchecked resurgence of racial discrimination, the hateful rhetoric directed towards
“Others,” the continuous exploitation of the working classes, the disappearing middle class
and the lack of jobs, and the enriching of the few at the expense of the many, the poetry of
Guillén and the music of Revueltas continue to give a voice to the many who have not been
heard.

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224 Dellita L. Martin, “West African and Hispanic Elements in Nicolás Guillén’s ‘La
rending call of the poor, forsaken street crier.’
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Caminando

Measures:

1-4 (piano+voice autograph)
1-5 (score)
11-12 (piano+voice autograph)
11-14 (soprano)
20-21, 25-26, 30-31 (soprano)
22-23 (piano+voice autograph)
25-27 (soprano)
28-32 (cls, tps, SA)
38-39, 43-44, 47-49 (soprano)
45-48 (score)
45-50 (bsn, cb)
52-56 (bsn, cls)
57-60 (cls)
57-61 (bongó, clave)
62-66 (bongó, cb)
67-71 (tp1, bsn, bongó, clave)
72-76 (score)
78-79, 82-83 (score)
92-96 (Score)
99-101 (SA)

No sé por qué piensas tú

Measures:

1-4 (score)
6-10 (score)
11-15 (score)
40-43 (cls)
41-45 (vls, cb, voice)
45-48 (cls, tps, vls, voice)
50-57 (tp)
61-65 (cl2, bcl, bsn, cb, perc, voice)
73-76 (cls, bcl, tps, tb, perc)
77-79 (Ecl, tps, tb, voice)
88-92 (Ecl, bsn, tps, tb, vl, cb)
92-97 (tps, tb, voice)
98-101 (bcl, bsn, tps, tb)
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1-4 (bcl)
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29-56 (tp1, autograph)
61-64 (cl, bcl)
97-100 (vl, autograph)
109-112 (vls)
113-116 (tps, autograph)
113-146 (tp1)
129-132 (cls)
164-169 (score)
181-205 (Ecl, autograph)
217-220 (vls, xyl)
227-232 (score)
273-279 (score)
309-335 (fl, tb)
323-326 (vl, pno, maracas)
344-347 (pno)
352-355 (pno)
361-364 (tps, tb)
370-380 (autograph score)
374-378 (vls)
422-425 (score)
Selected Bibliography

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**Theses and Dissertations**


________. “Cielo de tambores: tradiciones afrocubanas en Sóngoro cosongo, Motivos de son y West Indies, Ltd. de Nicolás Guillén y Viaje a la semilla de A. Carpentier.” PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1999.


Reference


Web Resources

_Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas_. UNAM. http://www.analesiie.unam.mx/index.php/analesiie/issue/archive

_Beinecke Digital Collections_. Yale University. http://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/


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Scores


Digitalized Manuscripts


______.* Caminando*. Autograph score for baritone and piano, 1937.

______.* Caminando*. Autograph score for voice and instrumental ensemble, 1937.

______.* No sé por qué piensas tú*. Autograph score (incomplete) for voice and piano, 1937.

______.* No sé por qué piensas tú*. Autograph score (incomplete) for voice and instrumental ensemble, 1937.

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