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# SHAKE IT, BUT DON'T BREAK IT. THE HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF MARACAS

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## **Shake It, But Don't Break It. The History and Evolution of Maracas**

### **Synopsis:**

PowerPoint presentation detailing the history and anthropological evolution of maracas. Live performance using examples of maracas from centuries past and present will bring the often overlooked "side" instrument to center stage.

Shake It, But Don't Break It:  
The History and Evolution of Maracas

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I have always had a great fascination with maracas-their sound, appearance, the way one manipulates the motion of the maracas to create different rhythms and sounds. In all my years of study I have never seen in print where the Maracas had originated or how different culture(s) evolved them into the instruments we know today. These unanswered questions led to this research.

In the vast family of percussion instruments maracas are probably one of the most disrespected instruments, more often thought of as toys, party favors, and/or tourist mementos. The often slighted maracas can be found depicted on the packaging of tortilla chips. "Maracas" has even been used as the name of restaurants or night clubs.

Just about every culture in the world has or had some form of a rattle/shaker/maraca in their society. It could be a baby's rattle or a shaman's rattle used for religious rites and/or healing practices. It is frequently used as a rhythm instrument in village songs. This versatility shows early man's resourcefulness but the importance of the rattle/shaker/maraca is best shown in the sign language of the American Indian of the plains tribes. The sign for "Rattle" is the same that is used for "Scared" (Peters, 1975).

While maracas are usually associated as a Latin American instrument its origin and the folklore began in Africa. In J. F. Rowbotham's *The History of Music*, in 1893 retells a Guinea legend that Arawoniti, a tribal leader or chief, was walking by the riverside brooding over the troubles and miseries of his people. A Crehu (a goddess) arose from the stream bearing in her hand a small branch which she presented to Arawoniti. She instructed him to plant it and then harvest the fruit. This fruit was a calabash. Later, the Crehu arose from the stream a second time carrying some white stones in her hand. She told Arawoniti to place the stones inside the dried fruit or calabash. By following Crehu orders Arawoniti had made the first rattle/maraca (Blades, 1992).

The selection of materials first used to create the early man's rattle/maraca depended upon indigenous materials. The calabash/gourd does not rot and naturally makes and produces sonorous sounds without any additional materials.

Which now brings us to the fundamental question; what is the difference between rattles/shakers and maracas? The answer is actually quite simple: Maracas are paired rattles/shakers, but with two different tones, one higher in pitch and held in the right hand and one lower in pitch and held in the left hand.

## **Parts of the Maracas**

### **Shells**

Gourds seem to be the most prevalent choice for the making of rattle/shakers/maracas by some cultures, but turtle shells have also been used as receptacles. Dried gourds are prepared by washing then sanding the shell. An oil rub is then applied to the shell that leaves a natural gloss. Other cultures prefer to paint the shell (Peters, 1975).

### **Rattlers (Materials inside the shell)**

The inner rattlers can include a wide variety of materials such as: seeds, pebbles, shells, dried moth cocoons, and even animal teeth (Blades, 1992).

### **Handles**

The first maracas were probably paired handle gourd rattles. Thirteenth century Aztecs were the first to add actual wooden handles to the gourd shakers called Ayacachtli (Weinberg, 1982). This rattle/ shaker was shaped to look like a flower and had tassels and/or feathers attached to the shell. The Ayacachtils were often used to accompany rituals and dances during the height of the Aztec Empire during the 13<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> centuries (Christian, 1976). Similar craftsmanship can be still found today in the Hawaiian Maracas, 'Uli uli. The 'Uli uli and the Ayacachtils are the only two examples of maracas in world that are played transverse or facing the gourd/coconut shell downward and the flowering feathers/handle facing upward.

## **The Voice of the Maraca**

While the origins of the maracas began in Africa, it is the Latin American and Cuban cultures who advanced the performance practices. Maracas began to really find their voice or role in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Cuba. Cuban musicians began experimenting in what would become perhaps the most influential of all of the early forms of Cuban music, called Son. The early Son was a combination of the African music of slaves and early Spanish folk songs. The instrumentation of these early Sons was the Tres, (a three stringed guitar), and later replaced by guitar, the Marimbula (African Thumb Piano) used for the bass lines, and later replaced by the string bass, and a percussion section that consisted of maracas, claves, guiro, and bongos. By the late 1920's the ensembles were called Septetos and included the trumpet. By the 1930's the trumpet-led septetos as well as larger dance or jazz-type big bands played Sons as part of their repertory in the big Havana hotels with the ensembles still employing the percussion section of maracas, claves, guiro, and bongos. The maracas now had its own specialized voice within the rhythmic fabric of Cuban Son and other Latin American music (Payne, 2000).

## **Machito**

This rhythmic voice leads us to not only a pioneer in Latin American Jazz as a bandleader, singer, but also as one of the true pioneers of maraca performance: Machito. Born Frank Grillo, Machito was one of the first authentic Cuban singers from Havana and a great maraca player who became successful on the New York scene in 1937. He recorded with several great Latin American bandleaders including Xavier Cugat before forming his own band. Machito was the first to form a Latin band that combined Latin and Jazz together in New York in the early 1940's. He was also the first to make use of a complete Latin percussion section- a return to the original Son percussion sections (Gordon, 1990). Machito's influence has been felt in the Latin/Jazz world. But his influence can also be seen in the popular or rock music world of the 1960's and 1970's as many front men of this area sang and played maracas. Such as: Davy Jones of the Monkeys, Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones, and Robert Plant.

Maracas are used in traditional Latin-American rhythms/dances such as the rumba, mambo, merengue, and cha-cha, and while maracas are not used in the tango and they may be used as a substitute for the chocallo (tube shaker) in the samba (Brown, 1968). The maracas' role in the Latin-American rhythms/dances is to subdivide the beat into eighth notes, filling in the spaces left empty by the rest of the Latin Percussion section (Maracas, claves, cowbell, and guiro).

## **New Evolution**

The Latin American dance craze that came to the United States via Havana and other Latin America countries also brought Latin percussion instruments to the marketplace. American drum manufactures such as the Leedy Drum Company added a Latin American percussion section including their redesigned model of maracas to their catalogs beginning in 1933. Manufactures experimented with new types of shells. Various plastics and even tightly stretched leather or varnished rawhide were used. Buck shot, BB's, and plastic as rattlers were also employed to increase the volume.

## **Notation**

Methods or "How to Play" Latin-American Rhythms books became popular as early as the 1940's which required publishers to design new ways to notate the rhythmic patterns and the pitch variables for maracas from what was once strictly an aural tradition.

This somewhat standardization of notation enabled maracas to be included in symphonic works such as: Malcolm Arnold's *Fourth Symphony*, Steve Reich's *Four Organs*, and Ricardo Lorenz's *Concerto for Venezuelan Maracas and Orchestra* and Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*. Uniquely, Bernstein scored maracas as both instrument and as timpani mallets in *West Side Story*.

## **Conclusion**

The increasing world popularity of Latin music has brought maracas more attention than ever. Presentations, percussion clinics, recordings, and YouTube performances help preserve the performance practices of maracas' past and hopefully promote further innovation and inspiration.

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Interested. clock. A maraca (pronunciation ), sometimes called rumba shaker, chac-chac and various other names, is a rattle which  
appears in many genres of Caribbean and Latin music. It is shaken by a handle and usually played as part of a pair. Maracas  
(MbaracÃs), also known as tamaracas, were rattles of divination, an oracle of the Brazilian Tupinamba Indians, found also with other  
Indian tribes (Garifuna, Guarani) and on the Orinoco and in Florida. Rattles made from gourds (Lagenaria) are being shaken by the  
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