Chapter 6

PART 3: EXPERIMENTS IN TEACHING

Chapter 6: Activating Improvisational Creativity in the Performance of 'World' and 'Popular' Music by Dr Sue Miller

Keywords: idiomatic improvisation, creative process, vernacular, classical, creative musicianship skills, research-led teaching, analytical study of recordings, Anglocentrism

Abstract:

A critique of current university music provision, Miller demonstrates how placing improvisation at the centre of the curriculum enables the development of creative musicianship skills. Using a practical example of research-led teaching Miller shows how students can develop idiomatic improvisation skills by documenting their creative process whilst simultaneously acquiring historical and cultural information. Miller argues for stylistic improvisation from a variety of traditions to be taught, expanding Historically Informed Performance (HIP) to make full use of audio and visual recordings of the last century. Miller demonstrates how this can be done by merging the analytical study of recordings with ethnomusicological fieldwork and performance. The divisions between vernacular and classical music forms need to be broken down, she argues, in order to foster creative teaching and learning, calling for a more imaginative and less Anglocentric approach to music education where improvisation plays a major rather than minor role.

> World music has been accepted (albeit grudgingly in some cases) within institutions of higher education as a bona fide area of academic study, but it has had relatively little impact to date on core areas of music education as experienced by most students in the United States and Europe: in courses on ear training, music theory, composition, applied performance, and so on. There still seems to be an assumption on the part of many educators that non-canonical music has little or nothing to offer the aspiring 'serious' instrumentalist (Moore, 2014: xiv).

In this chapter I hope to show how the study of a variety of improvisation traditions often labelled as 'world' or 'popular' music can develop students' creativity alongside their musicianship and research skills as part of mainstream university music provision. As Robin Moore states above 'world' music is still at the margins of university provision in terms of core curricula. Using my own practice-based research into Latin improvisation I demonstrate here how research-led teaching in improvisation can be adapted to a wide range of musical idioms leading to both creative teaching of improvisation as well as students' own creative development. Using the example of a specific 'Latin' style of improvisation I first demonstrate how teaching improvisation in the context of a music perceived by some as peripheral (for those unaware of Latin music's influence in the Americas, the Caribbean and internationally) allows for the simultaneous acquisition of core musicianship skills, creative improvisational abilities and contextual knowledge. Through documenting the creative process, I show students how they too can devise their own strategies for learning idiomatic improvisational styles. While courses in ethnomusicology do teach students about a music's history and culture and provide frameworks for 'fieldwork-based' research they do not usually develop core musicianship skills consistently – even transcription skills, once thought essential for budding ethnomusicologists, have fallen out of favour in recent times (see Agawu, 1997: 297-307 for

further discussion of this issue). Where practical courses on 'world' musics do develop performance skills to a higher level there is rarely a chance to develop these beyond the one or two modules or ensembles on offer and there is little attempt to link these practical courses to more historical or analytical modules (outside the usual one/s offered within 'ethno'musicology). For historical reasons music curricula has focused on Western art music and has only offered courses in jazz, folk, popular and 'world' music/ethnomusicology in recent decades (see Tagg, 2012: 83-132 for a critique of Western institutional music aesthetics).

More awareness regarding the hybridity of styles, a realization that Western art forms are present in other traditions (indeed a contributing stream to them in many cases) and the inclusion of a diversity of styles at the heart of the curriculum could lead to music education being organized in more exciting ways. Aural training is beneficial to all forms of music making and analysis – developing these skills within new contexts can only enrich the learning experience. Even when improvisation-based repertoires reside in genres not obviously connected with classical forms, improvisation techniques can be fruitfully applied beyond their local origins. 'Teaching' improvisation creatively at university level involves breaking down traditional barriers in order to demonstrate that there is no real divide between the classical and the vernacular if we put a variety of musics into the core curriculum. As Christopher Small remarks:

> The barrier between classical and vernacular is opaque only when viewed from the perspective of the dominant group; when viewed from the other side it is often transparent, and to the vernacular musician and his [*sic*] listeners there are not two musics but only one (Small, 1987: p. 126).

The purpose of this chapter then is to demonstrate in concrete terms how one can foster creative improvisation at the centre of university level teaching. I will not pursue the reasons for the

divisions mentioned above any further here except to give a brief critique of what is currently the norm in university improvisation provision.

University improvisation: contexts for improvisational creativity

Improvisation is often used in higher music education to teach ideas about composition. It is frequently seen as a participatory way of exploring compositional process but although creative improvisation has compositional processes within it, extemporisation does not necessarily need to be viewed as mainly at the service of written composition. When not used as a compositional tool, improvisation is commonly taught within a free (jazz) improvisation context in order to develop students' listening skills and teamwork. This does produce creative work but often ignores African-American and Latin music forms (not to mention other 'non-Western' genres) which have improvisation at their centre – music traditions which have stylistic vocabulary and creative process embedded within them. These idioms have long histories and are rooted in the cultures that produced them so one would think the music curriculum would make more use of these genres rather than restrict the majority of their course content to the euroclassical tradition. Indeed the Western art music curriculum could be similarly expanded to incorporate improvisation once more as it did up until the mid-to-late nineteenth century (of course, this tradition is maintained in the French organ tradition – see Bailey, D., 1992: 29-38). The decline of improvisation in art music has been discussed in detail by Robin Moore (Moore, 1992: 61-84) and, just as old species of animals (such as wolves, kites and wild boar!) are currently being reintroduced into the wild, improvisation could again form a main part of Western art music pedagogy. Modules in early music do deal with improvisation at university level through figured bass realization, ornamentation and melodic embellishment, mostly based on written evidence of past performance practice (Historically Informed Performance or HIP). This is pertinent to the study of improvisation but one has to ask why, when we have a wealth of recordings from the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, do we not also work with other styles of music to explore stylistic improvisation within the mainstream of university music

provision? Recorded evidence exists, as do live performers of these styles (we could even ask them about their approach!), and study of these musics can be researched through a variety of methodologies including historical musicology, music analysis and fieldwork. A Royal Musical Association (RMA) research conference entitled 'Performing Musicology' with a thematic strand on improvisation held at City University, London on 17 June 2011, for example, made little mention of historically and socially grounded improvisation forms and instead, talks and performances were centred on mainly abstract improvisation games or historical performance. No mention was made at all of jazz, one the most important musical forms of the twentieth century. Historical performance practice at undergraduate level has typically only considered music before the age of recording but needs to expand its relevance to vernacular twentieth- and twenty-first-century forms. Over a century of recorded improvisations could be studied and analysed to see how music is structured and approached using listening and transcription skills alongside contextualization and performance studies (including improvisation as a matter of course). Historically informed performance has now come into the age of recordings – Elgar, Holst, Stravinsky for instance – albeit in the Western compositional sphere, and I am not suggesting historical performance should disappear from the curriculum – rather that it should be *expanded* to include vernacular music of the twentieth century to the present, making full use of the audio and audiovisual material available.

Research-led teaching in music departments is not as widespread as is often claimed perhaps due to specialized work being deemed too complex for undergraduate level students. Seemingly specialized research can, however, be incorporated into teaching if space for students' own ideas and musical backgrounds can be brought into service using a more integrated approach to music studies. In my university teaching I draw on my own practice-led research (in which I have documented the creative processes involved in improvisation), and apply similar techniques to other musical forms (where appropriate). I teach Latin improvisation aesthetics in my courses on Cuban music; outside these courses, I guide students on how to apply similar techniques to other styles of improvisation (such as blues, jazz, and

other popular music forms). Following an example of my practice-led research later in this chapter I will demonstrate how these techniques can be applied to the teaching of creative improvisation at university level within a variety of idioms.

Cuban Flute Style: Interpretation and Improvisation (Miller, 2014a), whilst informed by my practice-led research, gives a social and cultural history of the Cuban flute style from the late nineteenth century to the present, detailing its performance practice within the charanga tradition, and analysing recorded improvisations. It is not a method book but nevertheless contains some pedagogical information outlining a long-term plan of action to guide those wanting to learn the style (chapter 7). Although it may seem obvious it perhaps needs underlining that studying improvisation can lead to greater contextual knowledge about specific musical idioms and the musicians who play them. Many universities run courses such as 'Music in Culture' or 'Music in Context' where the social, political and cultural aspects of music are considered. Some of these connect to other more specific modules or performance groups but they can be a rather disconnected affair. Again, these contextual courses could be attached to both theoretical provision and high level performance modules featuring improvisation, where an understanding of cultural context informs practice. In my own higher education teaching it has been frustrating not to have been able to combine lectures on Cuban and Latin American music history with practical sessions on Cuban and Latin forms (sessions that universities have been happy for me to run as practical ensemble work). It is almost as if those in charge of curricula do indeed consider non-classical forms as less worthy of study. The ghetto-izing of 'world' and 'ethno' provision common at university level sends a message to students that these musics are not as important, that it only takes ten hours or so of study across a semester to master them (typically 'world' musics are taught in short practical skills modules) and that improvisation is not an essential skill. This is not to negate the excellent work undertaken by ethnomusicologists at university level but merely to point out that provision is unequally divided between the classical and the vernacular, the composed and the improvised, the Anglophone and the non-Anglophone. Creativity is presumed to reside in

composition modules and improvisation is most often not a prominent feature of ‘world’ music or ‘popular’ music provision. Ensuring that improvisation, transcription and analysis of a wide range of musical idioms are included in taught musicianship skills and placed at the centre of the curriculum would redress this imbalance and foster creativity across subject areas.

I have demonstrated how Western art music has contributed to the development of the Cuban flute soloing style in my own research and this work can be used with students to show that the barrier between the vernacular and the classical is not as impermeable as commonly believed. Analysis of most film music similarly illustrates this point. In the classical field William Kinderman’s account of Beethoven’s playful improvisations in the form of cadenzas and fantasias (Kinderman, 2009:.296-312) has parallels not only with solos by Richard Egües in Orquesta Aragón but with African musicians’ practice as exemplified by the role of the trumpet solo in Borborbor performance cited by Professor Kofi Agawu at a talk given at City University London in 2013. In this trumpet solo the waiting note of the fifth is playfully extended as the soloist plays with audience expectation in a similar manner to Beethoven’s performances cited by Kinderman. Improvisation courses could incorporate these ‘suspension’ techniques, alongside covering classical improvisation in the form of cadenzas, preludes, impromptus and fantasias. Certainly injecting improvisation skills into the traditional classical curriculum would enable creativity beyond the usual interpretation of the score (some contemporary composed music of course does incorporate improvisation in performance but the focus here is on idiomatic improvisation).

A general introductory course on improvisation that was both theoretical and practical would be useful if it was to then lead to more specialist courses which allowed for further development of improvisational skills where creativity is developed imaginatively within specific stylistic parameters. Connections between traditions could also be made leading to more interdisciplinarity. Why not, for example, include West African drumming and a study of ‘African Minimalism’ (as outlined by Agawu) alongside the usual coverage of minimalism (as exemplified by Riley, Reich, Glass and Eno et al)? Students could then apply techniques

and processes to both areas (after all contemporary minimalism has one of its roots in West African music). Imitating solos by ear is a very useful skill, as is transcription for all music students. Both are essential for the study of improvisation and could be an integral part of aural training and general musicianship. In terms of performance skills, to be creative within a style requires learning that idiom's language; learning the stylistic vocabulary and syntax through imitation is a prerequisite to innovation. The rules governing different types of improvisation need to be learnt through intensive immersion in those particular styles. Classical traditions such as North Indian *raag* have many rules governing performance; other more vernacular styles may have more freedom in this regard. What unites many styles containing improvisation as a major component of performance, however, is the necessity for oral transmission, and a return to oral modes of teaching (in addition to notation-based ones) could only enrich provision. Interestingly, saxophonist Dave Liebman, in a jazz conference talk at Leeds College of Music in March 2010, rejected the now outdated Aebersold approach to jazz education he helped to create, in favour of copying solos by ear and via transcription. Aural training and memory are exercised this way and stylistic elements are absorbed naturally in the learning process. The ability to analyse solos and take ideas from them to generate new ones within the style thus develops musicianship skills creatively. These processes also enable students to find out how the music is structured and provide musical and cultural insights into the style studied.

In the short example below I outline how analysis of two improvised solos of the same Cuban *son* piece (1) *Sabroso como el Guarapo* (and live performance of it with the original band in Havana) enabled me to create my own arrangement and solo of the piece using ideas gleaned from close study of these originals. I will then explain how this work can be applied to the creative teaching of improvisation at university level. Before looking at the wider application of these techniques I therefore provide an example of a research-led project to demonstrate how the study of a non-canonical piece of non-Anglophone music can produce new creative work. Transcription skills, ear training, stylistic awareness, cultural and social knowledge, ethnomusicological methodology, analytical skills – all these are involved in this

study which has, as its final outcome, a new improvised solo. Documenting the creative process forms part of this work and it is key to the subsequent examples on research-led teaching for creative improvisation.

Sabroso como el Guarapo (Tasty as a Sugar Cane Drink): Practice-led research and its pedagogical application

1. Sabroso como el Guarapo	Orquesta Sublime: *Sabroso como el Guarapo*– ***A La Pachanga Con La Sublime***, Artex Canada, 1956-1960 recordings, 1994,EGREM License reissue.
2. Sabrosa como el Guarapo	Pacheco, Johnny: *Sabrosa como el Guarapo* – ***Pacheco y su Charanga***, Fania Records 773 130 219-2, Emusica Records, Reissue on CD, 2007.
3. Sabroso como el Guarapo	Orquesta Sublime with Sue Miller, *Sabroso como el Guarapo*. Performance at the Cabaret Nacional, Havana, 6 April 2009. Available online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zg1CKIBRgGY> [accessed 23 January 2014]
4. Sabroso como el Guarapo	Sue Miller and her Charanga Del Norte: *Sabroso como el Guarapo*—***Look Back in Charanga***, CDN00CD10, 2010.

Figure 1: Recorded versions of *Sabroso como el Guarapo*

Figure 1 shows the chronological order in which I studied recordings of *Sabroso como el Guarapo*, culminating in my own live and studio versions as a creative way of demonstrating my research findings (solos 3 and 4). The Orquesta Sublime mid-twentieth-century recording (solo 1) features a flute solo by Melquiades Fundora who I met in 2006 and performed with on several occasions in Havana. The band was founded by Melquiades and his brother Rolando in

1959, the year of the Cuban Revolution. On the other side of the cold war divide Johnny Pacheco recorded his version in 1961 at the height of the New York *chachachá* (2) and *pachanga* (3) craze (solo 2). He is better-known as a bandleader and founder of both Fania records and the inventor of the 'salsa' marketing term in New York (for more information on the origins of the 'salsa' label see Berríos-Miranda in Waxer, 2002: 23-45). Originally from the Dominican Republic, Pacheco is said to have been very influenced by the Cuban flute players Richard Egües and Antonio Arcaño. Many Cuban musicians defected to the USA after the 1959 revolution to find work, fuelling a renewed interest in Latin music in venues such as the Palladium in New York. Pacheco gave work to many of them, including Eddy Zervigón from Orquesta Broadway (Zervigón 2007).

The Solos

Solo 1: Orquesta Sublime

In the following annotated transcription (Example 1) of Fundora's flute solo, octave 'bounces' between fourth octave altissimo d^4 to third octave d^3 are clearly in evidence, as are rising figures using a dominant axis (on d^3) and triplet mordent figures and sextuplets around the ninth degree of the scale (a^3). It needs noting that the solo is to be played an octave higher as indicated by the octave above treble clef sign. The solo takes place in the third and fourth octaves and is heavily tongued.

The improvised solo begins with short *inspiraciones* (4) and then transforms into a longer solo continued over a I-V chord progression of Gm and D7. The ninth note a^3 is predominant throughout and acts as an alternative axis to the tonic g^3 and the dominant d^3 and d^4 notes. The texture gradually increases through semiquaver and sextuplet figures and an increased frequency of octave 'bounces'. Many of Fundora's phrases draw upon elements in the composed introduction and semiquaver motifs are a main feature of the solo.

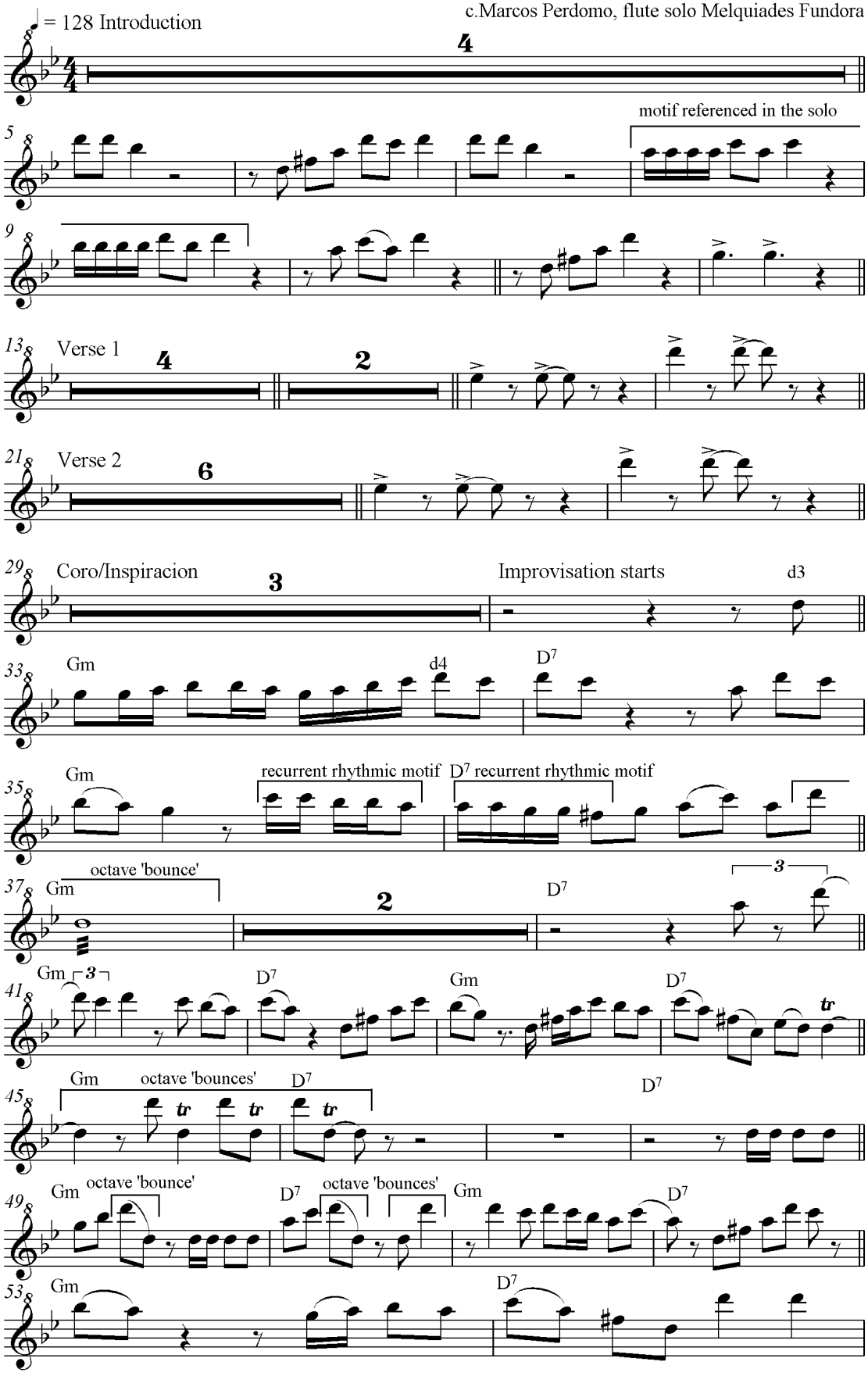
Figure 2: Melquiades Fundora from Orquesta Sublime, Havana, Cuba, 2006. Photograph courtesy of Sue Miller

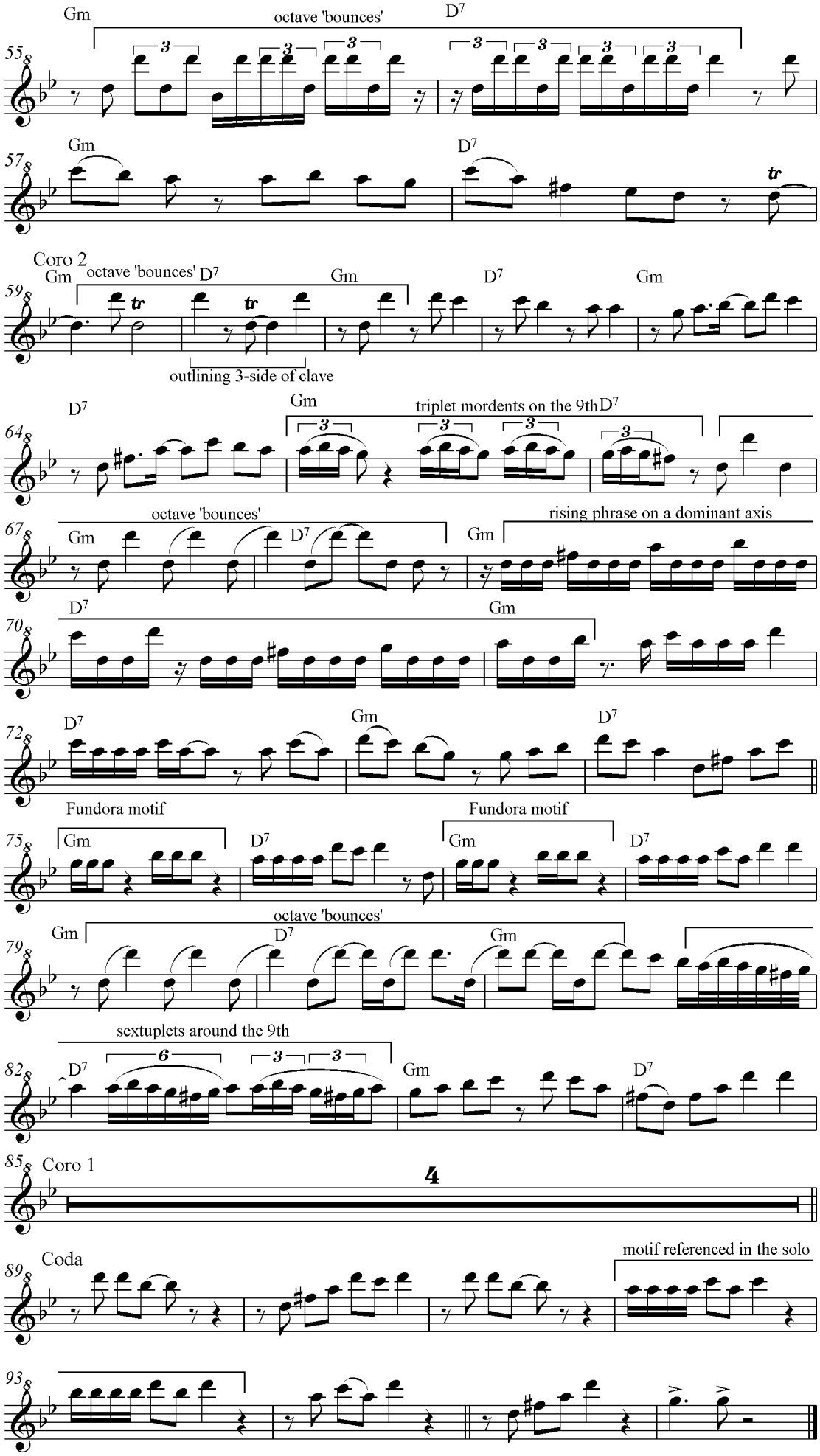
Sabroso Como el Guarapo

son montuno

clave 2-3 clave

c.Marcos Perdomo, flute solo Melquiades Fundora




Gm
octave 'bounces'
D7
55
Gm
D7
57
Coro 2
Gm
octave 'bounces'
D7
Gm
D7
Gm
59
outlining 3-side of clave
D7
Gm
triplet mordents on the 9th
D7
64
octave 'bounces'
rising phrase on a dominant axis
67
Gm
D7
Gm
D7
Gm
70
D7
Gm
D7
72
Fundora motif
Fundora motif
75
Gm
D7
Gm
D7
octave 'bounces'
79
Gm
D7
Gm
sextuplets around the 9th
D7
Gm
D7
82
Coro 1
85
4
Coda
motif referenced in the solo
89
93

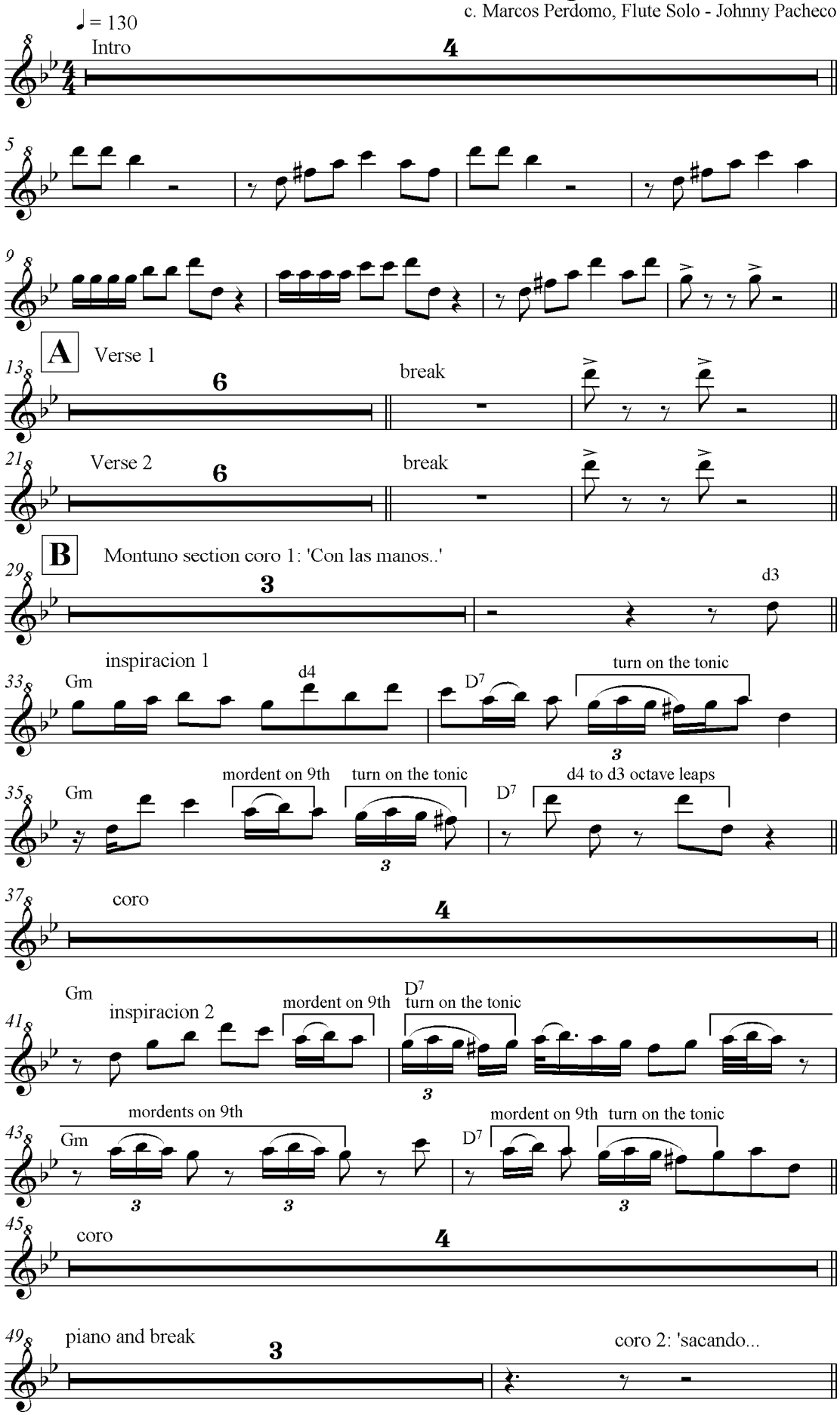
Example 1: *Sabroso como el Guarapo*, flute solo – Melquiades Fundora, transcription by Sue Miller

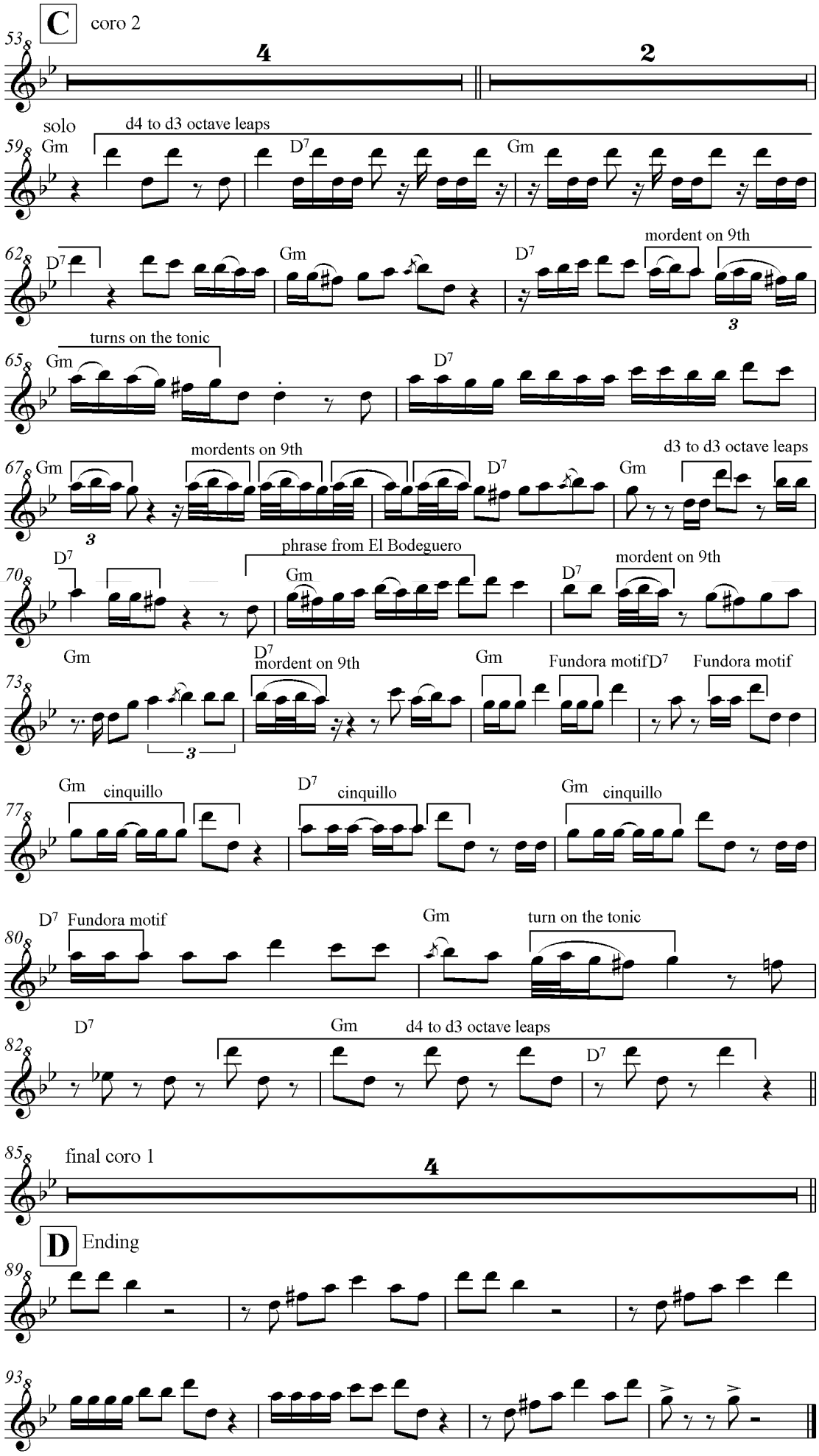
Solo 2: Johnny Pacheco's *Sabrosa como el Guarapo*

Pacheco's solo (as transcribed in Example 2) is also played characteristically in the third and fourth register on the five-key wooden flute with a one octave tessitura between d^3 and d^4. His improvisation is similar to Fundora's in that he uses the dominant note d^3 as an axis note around which turns and phrases are based, alongside triplet mordents and sextuplets on the ninth, and turns around the tonic. Like Fundora he uses octave 'bounces' and semiquaver motifs. In contrast his solo contains the five-beat *cinquillo* (5) rhythm played several times (Example 2: bars 77 and 79), a stylistic feature more common in charanga players of the 1940s (see Miller, 2014: 65-97). Inspired by both Antonio Arcaño, a player who was innovative in the late 1930s and '40s and by Richard Egües, the famous Aragón flutist who rose to fame in the mid-1950s, it is not surprising that Pacheco has a mix of influences here. The *cinquillo* patterns derive from the Cuban *danzón* (6) and the part quotation/adaptation of Egües's composition *El Bodeguero* (Example 2: bar 71) thus demonstrates both players' influences here (this piece is analysed in Miller, 2014a: 222-243). Due to the similarity of Pacheco's solo to Fundora's it would not be surprising if Pacheco had based his solo on the earlier Sublime version. Both solos are energetic and strongly articulated but the Pacheco solo is a little more continuous with fewer discrete call and response phrases, perhaps betraying a brasher New York flavour.

Sabrosa como el Guarapo

c. Marcos Perdomo, Flute Solo - Johnny Pacheco

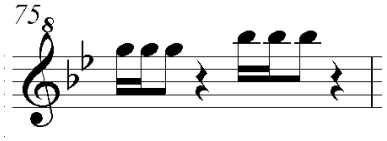



C
coro 2
53
4
2
solo
d4 to d3 octave leaps
59
Gm
D7
Gm
62
D7
Gm
D7
mordent on 9th
3
turns on the tonic
65
Gm
D7
67
Gm
mordents on 9th
D7
Gm
d3 to d3 octave leaps
3
D7
phrase from El Bodeguero
70
Gm
D7
mordent on 9th
Gm
D7
mordent on 9th
73
Gm
Fundora motif
D7
Fundora motif
3
Gm
cinquillo
D7
cinquillo
Gm
cinquillo
77
D7
Fundora motif
80
Gm
turn on the tonic
D7
Gm
d4 to d3 octave leaps
82
D7
final coro 1
85
4
D
Ending
89
93

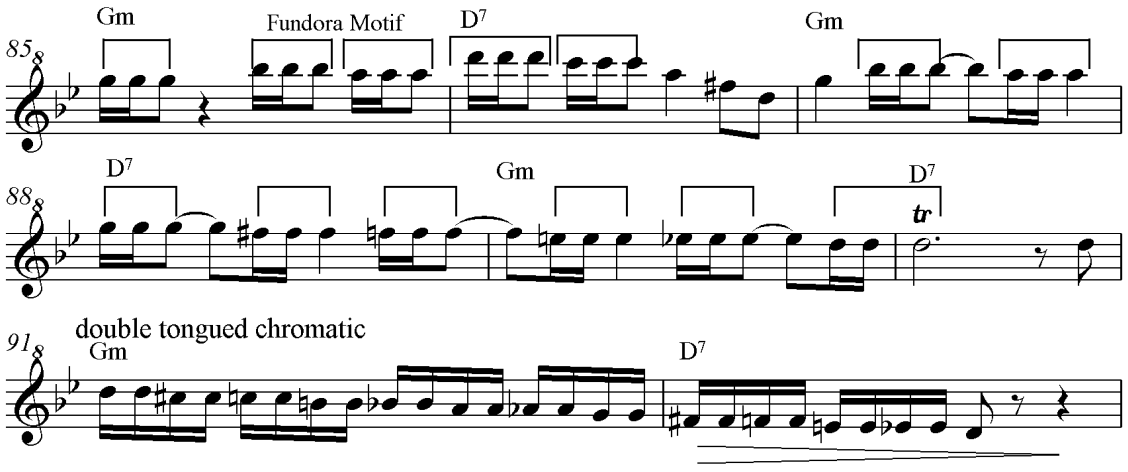
Example 2: *Sabrosa como el Guarapo*, flute solo by Johnny Pacheco, transcription by Sue Miller

Solo 4: Taking ideas for a walk – the Charanga del Norte version

I have been playing *Sabroso como el Guarapo* since 1999 in my own band Charanga del Norte and have performed the song on several occasions with the original band, Orquesta Sublime. I had learnt the flute solo by Melquiades Fundora by ear before transcribing it later in 2001. I performed the song again with Orquesta Sublime in the Cabaret Nacional, Havana in April 2009 to pay homage to Fundora who died on 14 February 2009 (solo 3). My own version for the album *Look Back in Charanga* is a deliberate homage to Fundora and I incorporated (exaggerated, even) his particular stylistic traits in my own solo. I transcribed Johnny Pacheco's solo on *Sabrosa como el Guarapo* in order to inject additional stylistic vocabulary into my playing. Pacheco's solo is very similar to Fundora's and the elements I took from both players blended well in my own improvisation. The aim was to produce a new creative solo which was nevertheless in keeping with the original style. My solo was mainly an exercise in creative motivic development and from the outset I wanted to highlight Fundora's use of the rhythmic motif of two semiquavers and a quaver (Example 3) derived from the composed melody and so set about experimenting with various ways to develop sequences using this and other double-tongued motifs (as in Examples 4 and 5).

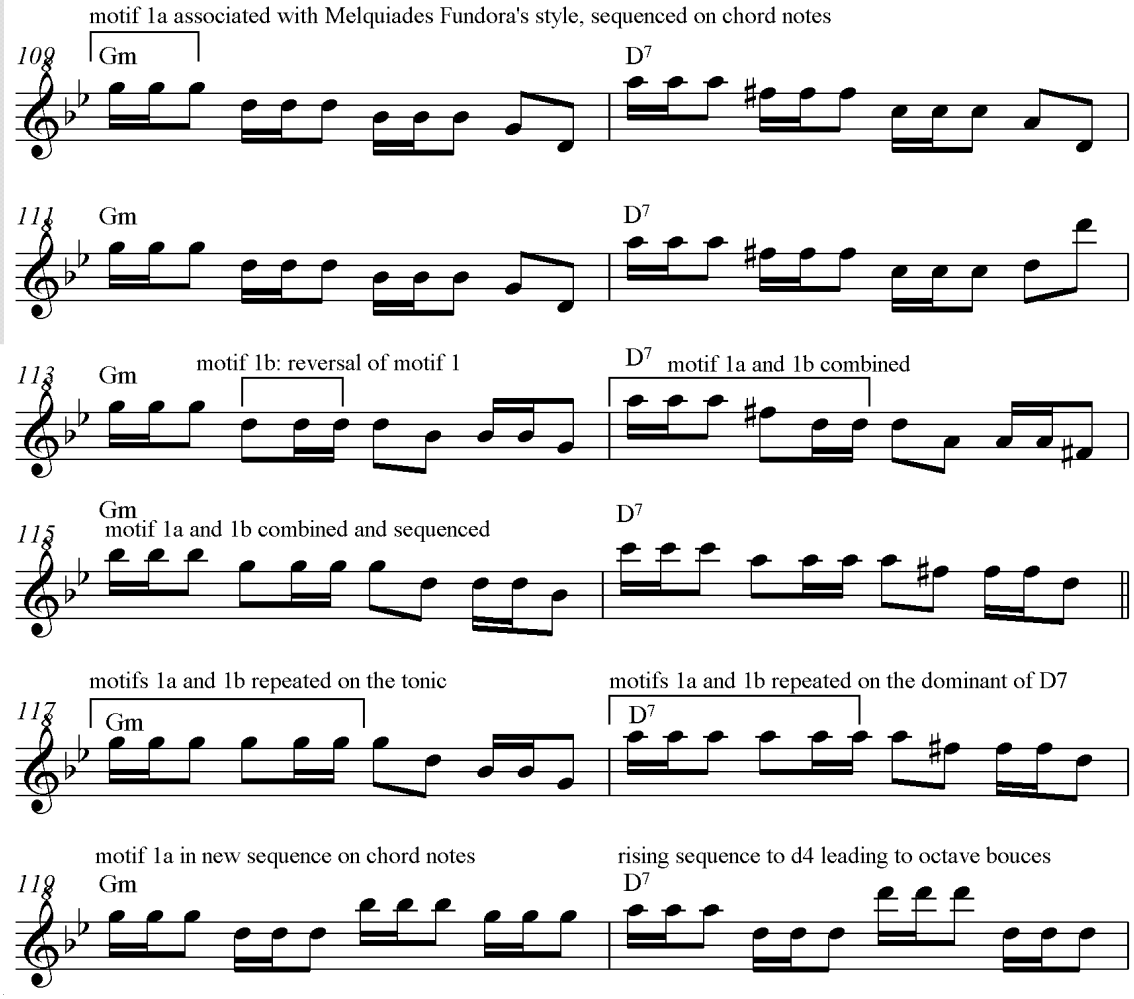


Example 3: *Sabroso como el Guarapo*, flute - Fundora, bar 75: characteristic motif



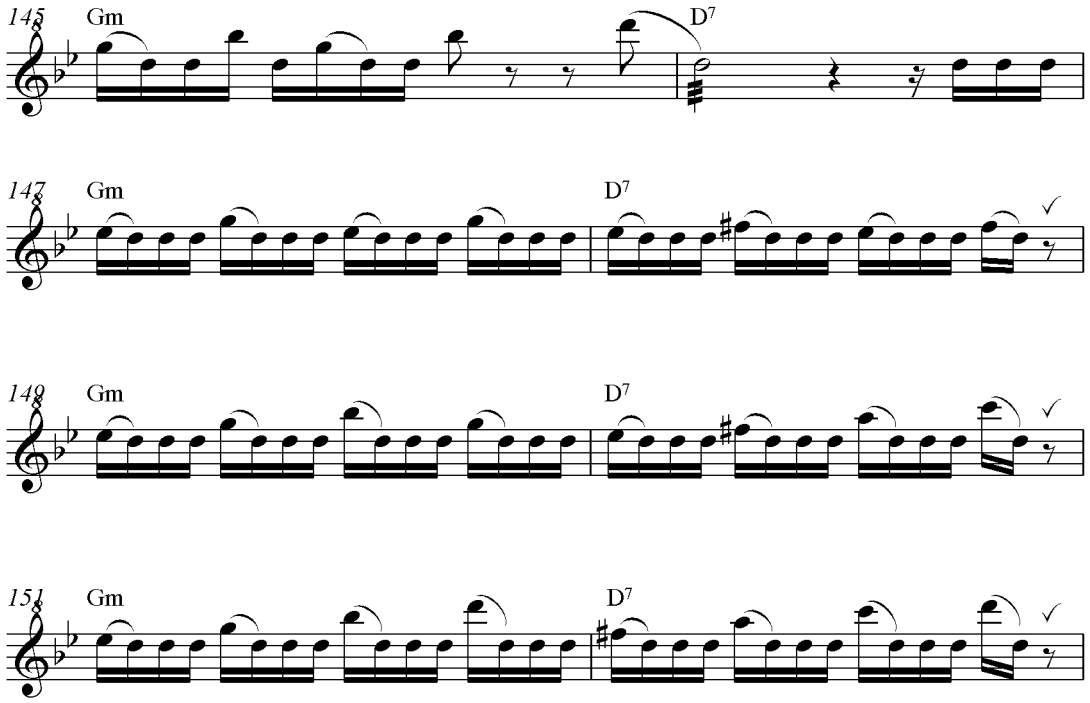
Example 4: *Sabroso como el Guarapo*, flute - Sue Miller: developing the Fundora motif

This is further extended through sequencing on chord notes, motif reversal and combinations of both variations:



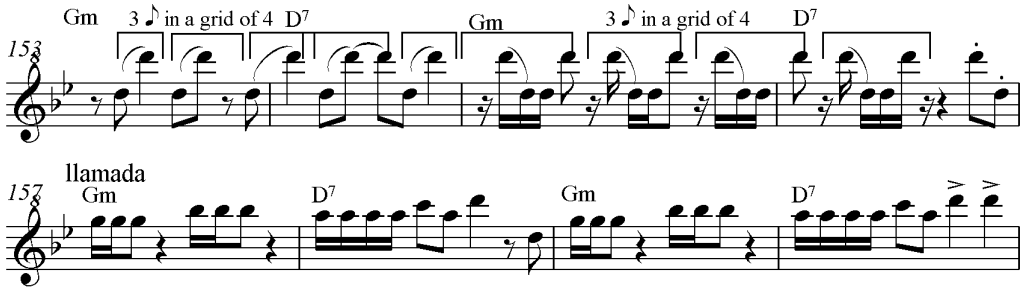
Example 5: *Sabroso como el Guarapo*, flute - Sue Miller, developing the Fundora motif further

This solo builds gradually in intensity from the Fundora-Pacheco blendings of the early *inspiraciones* to the motivic development of the second section and then to the more intense and densely packed finale. Additionally I incorporated a rising sequence on the dominant similar to that used by Fundora as transcribed in example 6:



Example 6: *Sabroso como el Guarapo*, flute - Sue Miller: rising sequence on a dominant axis with a tessitura of d^3 to d^4.

This increased texture, based on the Fundora model, is followed by a series of octave bounces, a stylistic element common to both Pacheco's and Fundora's solos, leading to a *llamada* (7) or 'call phrase' which I took from Fundora's melodic phrase in bars 75-78 (Example 1) which functions as a cue into the final *coro* (8) as coda (Example 7)



Example 7: *Sabroso como el Guarapo*, flute - Sue Miller: octave leaps ('3 in a grid of 4' cross rhythms) leading to a melodic 4-bar call phrase (*llamada*)

The piece is about the sugar drink extracted from the sugar cane called *guarapo* and is full of sexual innuendo (with lyrics translating roughly as 'your kisses are tastier than *guarapo* and this is how you make the mixture – with your hands and your hips, like this, like this'). I therefore wanted to build the solo gradually from elements borrowed from the solos studied. Seeing the solo as a 'seduction in three movements,' I added a new *coro:* '*ruñame papa, aprietame por dios*' ('squeeze me tight daddy o' for god's sake') to the final section to underline this 'from kisses to tight squeezes' intention.

Teaching improvisation: demonstrating and fostering creative improvisation

The previous example serves as one of many models used to encourage students to choose a solo (either from a Latin music tradition based on *clave* (9) or, if for a more generic improvisation module, from another tradition) and apply similar analysis techniques to their own chosen music (adapting their approach to each idioms' stylistic and structural elements). The motivic variation above thus demonstrates how a handful of ideas can be expanded creatively within stylistic rules. It also reveals cultural meanings which in turn affect the approach taken in a solo. Building to a climax, for example, may underlie the improvisation's direction as in *Sabroso como el Guarapo* where the seduction in three parts moves from the flirtatious to the consummatory. Indeed, increasing the texture of a solo is a common phenomenon (in North Indian classical *raag* (10) for example) but not all solos build in this manner, and stylistic parameters need to inform the approach taken. Copying elements by ear and memorizing them are only part of the process and learning how to develop ideas gleaned from recordings and live performances are key to improvisational creativity. In the Cuban flute example above the idea of motivic development is foregrounded but other aspects of the style, such as the top octave tessitura, rising figures on a dominant note axis, '3 in a grid of 4' cross-rhythms, octave 'bounces' and heavy articulation are made overt through transcription and

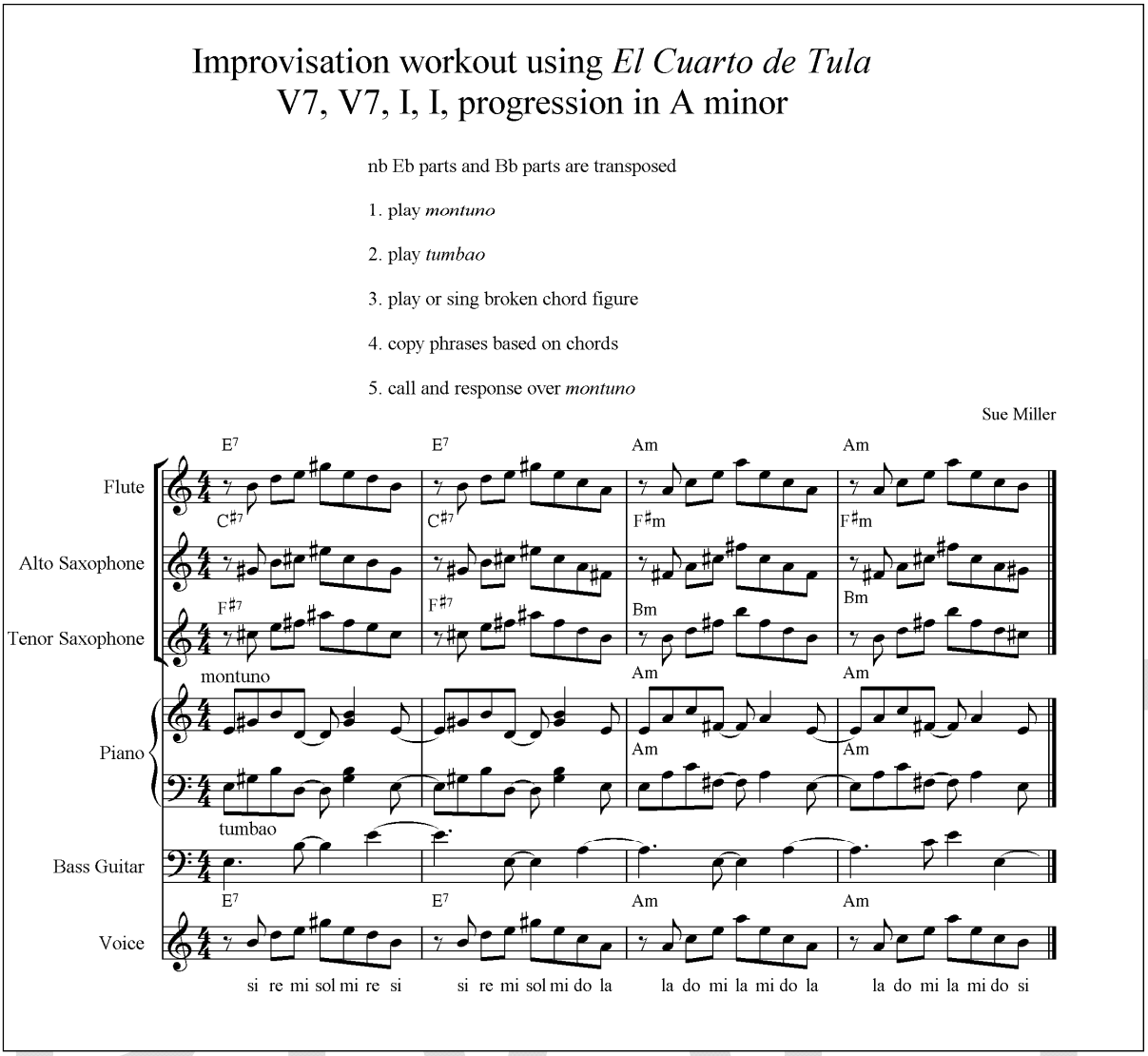
analysis. I teach students aspects of this style in Cuban music practical courses by giving them motifs or ideas, and encouraging them to incorporate these into their own improvised *inspiraciones*. I also hone in on ideas presented in students' improvisations and playfully demonstrate the potential of their ideas, stretching their improvisational abilities in real time in a fun, relaxed environment (nurturing beginner improvisers whilst making more demands on the more experienced). In these practical ensembles a simple idea is repeated until imitated exactly and then developed progressively towards more virtuosic phrases and/or techniques. I often listen out for ideas they produce which can be 'Cubanized' to fit the two-bar *clave* organizational principle, spontaneously inventing games and idiomatic riffs derived from their ideas which are then shared by the group.

When workshopping other styles of improvisation in more composition-focused seminars students' ideas are picked out and shown to be 'pregnant' with possibilities. By the end of a course in improvisation students are then more able to identify and develop good ideas (not leaving them too soon) and pay more attention to the content of their own improvisations through increased stylistic awareness.

Student work can be both theoretical and practical, taking the form of written dissertation, listening exercises, transcriptions, analysis and performance. I have led modules where I can introduce some teaching and analysis of improvisation (often smuggled in) including modules on ethnomusicology (North Indian Classical Music, Cuban music and Latin music styles in general), musicology (African American musical forms including jazz and Latin jazz history), composition (including improvisation) and performance (Cuban music and popular music styles). Past students of mine have studied Latin styles of piano, timbales, trumpet, violin, flute and guitar improvisation, Brazilian bossa nova-styled drum solos, and various blues (Robert Johnson/Eric Clapton), jazz (Nina Simone, Ella Fitzgerald), Indo-jazz fusion (Mahavishnu Orchestra and Shakti) and heavy rock improvisations (Van Halen). Cultural contexts of chosen recorded solos can be examined and linked to analytical and performative processes and indeed need to be contextualized for deeper understanding.

Students are taught stylistic vocabularies and strategies to develop idiomatic ideas in a variety of contexts. Creativity is thus developed through imitation and innovation where originality is not emphasized but rather exemplified in practice. In composing and improvising modules with a practical focus students have created their own backing tracks and performed their own improvisations to them, drawing on what they have learnt from studying related recordings.

In the context of a Cuban music big band I teach students about the music through the performance of arrangements in a variety of Cuban styles where there are opportunities not only to improvise but to learn about approaches to improvisation. I teach students to play the underlying harmonies and demonstrate the stylistic vocabulary myself, ensuring students learn the chord progressions and rhythmic elements which underpin the associated improvisations, which they learn by ear and through notation. An example of a preparatory improvisation exercise I devised for the piece *El Cuarto de Tula* is below in Example 8:



Example 8: Preparatory Exercise for Improvisation on *El Cuarto de Tula*.

The above exercise not only teaches students the underlying harmonies, but also *clave* direction (through the tie over to the three-side of the *clave* in the piano *montuno* (11) pattern) and the anticipated chord change on beat four as emphasized by the bass *tumbao* (12) pattern. It also introduces students to the idea of sol-fa as practiced by Cuban musicians. Arpeggiating the chords makes students aware of the harmonic progression (and the importance of tonic and dominant chords) so that they can concentrate on melodic and rhythmic ideas rather than worrying about pitch choices. I often play ideas using notes from the chords for students to repeat, gradually adding variations, and this call and response demonstrates how they can experiment with these musical ideas idiomatically. Listening skills are developed as phrases

have to be either copied exactly or responded to using ideas from other soloists. I encourage students to learn complete recorded solos by ear and, if they are able, to transcribe improvisations from audio recordings, reflecting on this process in listening diaries and commentaries. In performance settings such as in the Cuban music big bands I direct, the call and response structure of Latin music has enabled many students to take their first steps into improvisation. Video and audio resources alongside scores and other online course materials are used to foster and inform this practical approach. Reading lists which link to this practical work are also designed to link to lectures on Latin American musical forms (wherever possible).

In more general ethnomusicology seminars on North Indian Classical music I have introduced students to the concept of *bol* (13) and *sargam* (14) improvisation within the *taal* (15) rhythmic cycle. Students have enjoyed marking the tabla beats on the fingers, singing the composed '*gats*' and fitting in their improvisations in different *laykari* (16) rhythmic groupings in the prescribed gaps. Here, creativity within the rules of North Indian *raag* and *taal* introduces students to rule-bound idiomatic improvisation and simultaneously links theoretical and contextual matters to experimentation in performance.

Assessing Improvisation

Learning to improvise is a messy process and improvisation skills are developed over a long period of time. It is not easy to 'measure' progress for university assessments but there are ways of doing this that allow for diversity and creative freedom. Opportunities to improvise need to be plentiful (to learn a language one needs to be around people who speak that language) but this should not be confused with 'teaching improvisation'. Idiomatic improvisation is borne of socially and culturally grounded traditions (whether classical in an Indian *raag* sense or vernacular as in blues, jazz or Latin styles). Learning to improvise need not be divorced from context, and studying the nuts and bolts of a solo can lead to cultural information being revealed in subtle and interesting ways. Through combining the theoretical

with the practical one can learn about the hybridity of styles and specific improvisational aesthetics, and use this knowledge to create new performances and recordings. Learning to improvise is a slow process and any assessment needs to take note of this, using forms of assessment which encourage listening, analysing and performing. Assessment of practical improvisation skills ideally requires live performance after a series of workshops to ensure that improvisation is constantly revised and developed. That is not to say that students should not prepare some composed material, particularly as solos typically draw on elements from the composition/arrangement and the wider repertoire on which they rest. If taught creatively students will be armed with strategies for generating new material from stylistic ideas – this then avoids the assessment becoming a performance of rearranged memorized chunks of pre-composed material. There is a fine line between memorized performance and live improvisation and allowing for risk-taking will ensure this particular pitfall is avoided (for example, by emphasizing that risk-taking based on solid preparation will improve the performance and be more likely to gain a good mark). In my improvisation classes students choose a solo to study and learn by ear, keep a related listening diary, create their own backing tracks and practice improvising to these backings using ideas gleaned from their chosen recordings. They subsequently workshop these solos and are given feedback on how to develop their ideas. The final assessed performance is then the culmination of all this study, with written work surrounding the live solo forming an integral part of the whole. By the end of a course such as this, students are then aware that improvisation is not simply 'made up' but is based on musical traditions which have their own stylistic rules. Interviews with improvisers by Derek Bailey (1980) and Paul Berliner (1984) respectively have also emphasized the importance of immersion in a particular idiom to learn these overt and covert rules.

Of course none of these ideas are new but nevertheless I hope to have shown that research-led teaching of improvisation in both practical and more theoretical settings can inform the creative teaching and learning of improvisation. *Sabroso como el Guarapo* is just one example of how working with recordings can lead to the development of creative

improvisation whilst building on core musicianship skills, creating a desire to learn about and research the cultural, social and political contexts in which the idiom originated. There is a need for more analytical 'ethno'musicology at the heart of music higher education provision, one that links to all aspects of music studies and one which puts improvisation centre-stage. In the twenty-first century we can no longer maintain the trichotomy of ethnomusicology, musicology and popular music with its outdated divisions and Anglocentric outlook. Creative improvisation in a variety of contexts can lead to new and exciting university-level curricula which encompasses historical musicology, music analysis, performance and many other interdisciplinary areas in a more inclusive and stylistically rich environment. As Patricia Shehan Campbell states:

> …as the realisation grows that it is 'human to improvise' the way ahead in music courses and programs is to allow the incorporation of improvisation exercises so that students may develop a deeper and more comprehensive musical understanding. In schools and in higher education, a more thoroughgoing musical education may be achieved by setting aside time for imitating various musical styles, experimenting with a variety of sound sources, and improvising on predesigned motifs and materials (Shehan Campbell, 2009: 139).

With the example of *Sabroso como el Guarapo* I hope I have demonstrated how this can be achieved in practice. I look forward to a time when the mainstream music curriculum at university level fully supports the teaching of creative improvisation, one where the study of improvisation (both theoretical and practical) is considered fundamental rather than peripheral to a well-rounded creative musical education.

Endnotes

1. *Son*

A popular Cuban form traditionally comprising a line-up of maracas, *claves*, bongo, guitar, *tres* guitar, double bass and vocals. This influential style was the foundation for salsa music in the USA. For more information see Miller, S. (2014b) 'Cuban Son' in D. Horn and J. Shepherd et al (eds), *The Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World (EPMOW): Part 3 Genres: Caribbean and Latin American genres*. Bloomsbury Press.

2. Chachachá

A style created in the Cuban *charanga orquestas* of the 1950s (the traditional *charanga* formation is piano, bass, congas, *timbales, güiro,* flute, violins and vocals). Although less syncopated than the *son* style it nevertheless incorporates elements from it. For more on the Cuban *charanga* see Miller, 2014a.

3. Pachanga

Cuban popular dance music that developed from the *chachachá* in the late 1950s with the addition of Afro-Cuban rhythms in the congas.

4. *Inspiración*

Short improvisations between sung *coros,* these can be instrumental or vocal.

5. *Cinquillo*

A five-beat rhythm which characterises the *danzón* style.

6. *Danzón*

A late nineteenth-century form of Cuban dance music which has its roots in the earlier *habanera* and *contradanza* styles. Played by both *orquesta típica* wind bands and violin and flute-led *charangas*. For a detailed account of *danzón* in Cuba and Mexico see Madrid, A. L. and Moore, R. D. (2013), *Danzón: Circum-Caribbean Dialogues in Music and Dance*, New York: Oxford University Press.

7. *Llamada*

A call phrase that is often the tune of the main *coro* used to signal the end of a section or solo.

8. *Coro*

Short refrains sung by a vocal section.

9. *Clave*

The organising principle of Cuban music, *clave* takes the form of a two-bar pattern or timeline which can run in both directions as a 2-3 or 3-2 *clave*. See Miller 2014a, glossary and chapters 5 and 6 for more details.

10. *Raag* (*Raga*)

A *raag* is the melodic component which relates to the time cycle or *taal* in North Indian classical music. Many rules govern a *raag*'s performance, from the scale or *thaat* to the composed *gat* compositions, characteristic phrases, types of ornamentation and characteristic

melodic movements known as *varna* or *chalan*. The scale or *saptak* is made up of seven notes (*swars*) some of which can be flattened (2nd, 3rd, 6th and 7th) and the fourth which can be raised. The tonic or 'sa' is moveable and therefore comparable to the solfège system and is known as *sargam*. See Bailey (1992, pp.1-11) for more information on *raag* performance.

11. *Montuno*

A piano *montuno* pattern is based around *clave* and can be in 2-3 or 3-2 *clave* direction. The *montuno* open section is where call and response *coro/inspiración* and solos take place.

12. *Tumbao*

A term mainly used to refer to the bass and conga patterns in popular Cuban dance music.

13. *Bol*

'*Bol*' means 'speak' in Hindi and the *bol* syllables in North Indian classical music are used to verbalize and improvise rhythmic patterns where Thom = 1 beat, Ta Ka = 2 beats, Ta Ki Ta = 3 beats, Ta Ka Di Mi = 4 beats and Ta Di Gi Na Thom = 5 beats.

14. *Sargam*

The notes used in *raags* Sa, Re, Ga, Ma, Pa Dha, Ni Sa. (See *raag*)

15. *Taal* (*Tala*)

A *taal* is a rhythmic cycle of a set number of beats and accents. The *taal* is played on the *tabla* and has a spoken form called *theka*.

16. *Laykari*

Rhythmic feels created by grouping notes in threes, fours, fives, sixes etc, playing with accentuation by fitting improvised runs and patterns (*taans, sapats, alankars, tihayis*) to the *tabla* cycle.

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All transcriptions, analyses and musical examples are by the author.