

The Rhythmic Language of the Chacarera

by Adam Rapa

On my first trip to Argentina some years ago, I fell in love with the Chacarera, one of Argentina's great folk music & dance traditions. The music has a very strong and distinctive rhythmic feel, which in a way can be counterintuitive to those of us who already have a strong relationship with African-based rhythms in 6/8 or 12/8, including Swing and some common Afro-Cuban rhythms like Bembé (*sometimes referred to in Jazz as "Afro 12/8"*). I've decided to write a little bit about this rhythmic language so that you can join me in appreciating, and maybe even incorporating some of this rhythmic vocabulary into your own musical vernacular.

Let's start by first identifying a common trait among music we're more familiar with. The typical way to feel most music in 6/8 or 12/8 is to feel the duple-based pulse of dotted quarter notes:

$$6/8 = \text{♩. ♩.} \qquad 12/8 = \text{♩. ♩. ♩. ♩.}$$

For example, you can tap your foot to slow Swing with four beats per bar, or "four on the floor". In Swing-time, we usually write music in 4/4 with "Swing eighth notes". But those four beats per bar can also be written as 'dotted quarter notes' in 12/8:



And sometimes that does happen depending on the nature of the rhythms being written. Sometimes it's a lot easier to write a piece with Swing eighths in 12/8 instead, so you're simply writing eighth notes rather than of a tremendous amount of triplets.

When writing Swing in 12/8, the eighth notes are usually grouped into 4 sets of 3 eighth notes, which add up to 12 eighth notes per bar. That's displayed here with accents showing the basic Swing ride-cymbal pattern:



In other words, one bar of Swing, and one bar of 12/8, can both be verbalized by saying, “bippity boppity bippity boppity”, which is 4 groups of 3 eighth notes. And the Afro-Cuban “Bembé” and “Abaquá” rhythms for example are usually written in 6/8, with 2 groups of 3 eighth notes per bar. (“bippity boppity”)

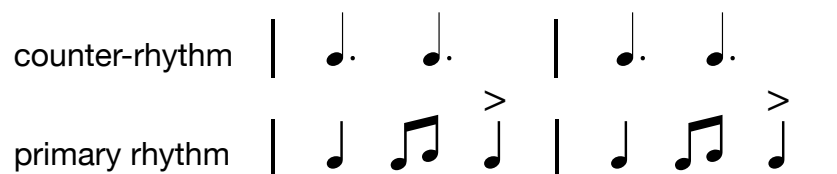
Now with that observation established, here’s how the Chacarera differs: It’s kind of a Waltz, actually. Instead of being written in 6/8, in some cases it might even be *more* accurate to write it in 3/4. While one bar of 6/8 and one bar of 3/4 each have the same number of eighth notes, there’s a big difference in how they’re *felt*. With the Chacarera, instead of 2 groups of 3 eighth notes, it’s felt as 3 groups of 2 eighth notes.



That approach is established by the bass & percussion. The bass will often, and in some cases, *always* be playing with a 3/4 feel, where beat 3 gets the strongest emphasis.



The glue that binds everything together in the Chacarera is the bass, and traditionally a drum called the “[bombo legüero](#)”, holding steadfast to that 3/4 Waltz feel, with the strongest accent coming on beat 3. Sometimes other instruments join in support of that same rhythmic perspective, while others play counter-to (*or “against”*) that base, on the ‘dotted quarter note’ side:



And that leads to the incredible rhythmic interplay in this music!

This is essentially the same “Two over Three” relationship inherent in the other African and Latin rhythms in 6/8 and 12/8. The difference here is that the roles are reversed. With the bass and percussion laying down a base of 3/4, that really changes the feel. This is what defines the Chacarera, and what invites you to explore endless ways of phrasing within it; ideas which might not have occurred to you without that Waltz base.

In my composition, “**Solo For Hoy**”, the first song released by ALDEA, my Argentinian band, there are a *ton* of different rhythmic devices used from phrase to phrase in my solo, as well as the composition in general. This is a really celebratory song written for my girlfriend, Angélica who’s an Early Classical musician, thus the chordal reference to Pachelbel’s “Canon” in the ‘A section’ and my phrasing, complete with grace notes & trills. The lighthearted vibe of this song is enhanced by all of our rhythmic playfulness.

With “**Chacarera del Expediente**”, I took a different approach and mostly kept playing with a Swing time-feel, even while the percussion was in a double-time, 16th note groove. Musically, I find it really interesting to show how these two styles can be superimposed. Sometimes they fit together easily, even harmoniously, while in other moments I chose to “double-time” my Swing feel, which creates a bit more rhythmic tension, because in that case, my notes no longer fit neatly onto the 6/8 grid. That creates a more complex juxtaposition. Even still, the way we’re all communicating musically creates the opportunity to fit even the most complex rhythmic figures together in a coherent way.

For sure, what we’re creating with ALDEA is a fusion of Argentinian folk music (*such as the Chacarera*) with Jazz, Rock and other influences. And while it’s easy to simply lump these songs into the category “Latin Jazz” (*albeit a strange type*), most Argentinians will still hear them as Chacareras with some less traditional elements mixed in. This is an important distinction because it means we’re not just re-appropriating source material from a type of folk music, borrowing its basic ‘sound’ to make music that can no longer be considered part the actual tradition. *This, by the way, is something that happens in Commercial music far too often.* What we’re doing is playing music which is still authentic to its folkloric tradition, while turbo-charging it with other elements such as Rock (*in timbre, especially with the electric guitar*) and Jazz (*with the addition of improvisation and certain melodic & phrasing elements*). In this way, we’re paying equal respect to every genre that we’re referencing, which is very important to me.

“Chacarera del Expediente” by Cuchi Leguizamón is a song about injustice, specifically the injustice of how the ruling class so often creates a system that sets up the poor to fail. It’s a story about a young man living in poverty who’s thrown in jail, with lyrics such as, “His aunt sold his bed to pay the lawyer. If one day he goes free, he’ll have to sleep standing”.

Considering this content, which speaks to an infuriating type of injustice that's rampant the whole world over, I wanted to make our rendition very forceful; downright hostile. But how to express those feelings through music, all while staying within the boundaries of a particular folk tradition? That's an interesting question indeed! And in this case, I found it natural to play in a really aggressive Blues style that's long existed in African-American music, complete with growling, wailing, harsh articulations, etc. Bubber Miley, Roy Eldridge and Cootie Williams are great examples of Jazz trumpeters who've famously used this type of aggressive distortion in their sound.

I find it fascinating that it's possible to mix this type of Blues playing with a folk music & dance tradition from Argentina, although it's not entirely surprising. There are lots of distinct styles of music that do share common ground, whether rhythmically, harmonically and/or melodically. In this case, multiple styles of music are being combined which have a shared rhythmic foundation in 6/8 or 12/8, and also a shared vocabulary of traditional Western harmony. And here, we've turned up the emotional intensity level of the music to 11, which opens the door for another commonality within the human experience that's represented in countless styles of music and other art forms around the world: Anger. And while most Chacareras are "good-natured", this one is a brazen song of protest.

So go ahead and *ROCK OUT* to "Chacarera del Expediente" and open your heart with "Solo Por Hoy". You'll find videos of both songs on AdamRapa.com & YouTube. To expand your own rhythmic vocabulary, set aside some time for purely analytical listening, and watch out for all the wonderful effects that come from that rhythmic interplay between the time-feels of 3/4 and 6/8, how they can also fit within a larger frame of slow 4/4 Swing, and all the tasty ways we manage to play around with the countless options that opens up.

The final pages in this PDF are my melody & solo transcription of "Solo Por Hoy".

Thanks for reading this and for being interested in our music. Please consider helping spread the word about this amazing band on social media. The more people that know about us, the more we can get out and play!

Un abrazo,

Adam



B \flat Trumpet

Solo Por Hoy

Melody & Solo Transcription

Composed by: Adam Rapa

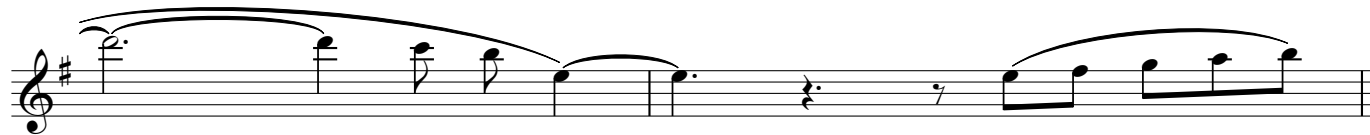
$\text{♩} = 160$

2

A SECTION

B SECTION

C SECTION

D SECTION**A SECTION****B SECTION**

C SECTION



D SECTION



A SECTION



The musical score consists of nine staves of music. The first seven staves are in a key with four flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat, D-flat) and a common time signature. The eighth staff changes to a key with four sharps (F-sharp, C-sharp, G-sharp, D-sharp). The music features various melodic lines with slurs, ties, and trills. The final staff ends with a double bar line.

Staff 1: Melodic line starting with a half note, followed by a series of eighth notes and a final eighth note.

Staff 2: Melodic line starting with a half note, followed by a series of eighth notes and a final eighth note.

Staff 3: Melodic line starting with a half note, followed by a series of eighth notes and a final eighth note.

Staff 4: Melodic line starting with a half note, followed by a series of eighth notes and a final eighth note.

Staff 5: Melodic line starting with a half note, followed by a series of eighth notes and a final eighth note.

Staff 6: Melodic line starting with a half note, followed by a series of eighth notes and a final eighth note. Trills are marked above the final notes of the first and second measures.

Staff 7: Melodic line starting with a half note, followed by a series of eighth notes and a final eighth note. A trill is marked above the final note of the first measure.

Staff 8: Melodic line starting with a half note, followed by a series of eighth notes and a final eighth note. A trill is marked above the final note of the first measure. The key signature changes to four sharps.

Staff 9: Melodic line starting with a half note, followed by a series of eighth notes and a final eighth note. A trill is marked above the final note of the first measure.