Introduction
A Brief Outline of Cuban Music

The roots of Cuban music lie in the fusion of Spanish and African cultural elements. Very little is known of the music of the aboriginal Indo-Cubans, whose aríetos (festivals) were conducted to the accompaniment of maracas, horns, flutes, and drums. These indigenous groups were destroyed by genocidal settlers, and their music was lost to history.

The Afro-Spanish heritage, on the other hand, helped establish a rich and transcendent Cuban musical expression whose beauty and authenticity are now admired throughout the entire world. The fusion of Spanish and African influences, contrary to popular belief, didn’t have to wait for America’s discovery to take place; already in Spain, there had been a centuries-long interaction between artistic forms from the African continent and those generated with vitality and extraordinary color in the Peninsula. The first blacks came to Cuba on Columbus’s own ships, and from 1510 onward, with the conquest of Cuba led by Diego Velázquez, Africans were brought to the island in successive migratory waves as slaves for manual labor. Soon, music of Yoruba, Congo, Carabalí, and Arará origin would resonate in the island along with the ballads and dances of Hispanic origin, beginning what Fernando Ortiz refers to as transculturación. The pulsating string and the vibrating drum, along with Andalusian or Canarian song, melted together in the Antillean earth.

In a process that evolved alongside the remarkable development and growth of the island’s sugar and coffee plantations and peaked at the end of the eighteenth century, a new indigenous music took shape, enriched by elements of Italian song and of African-French music, which was brought by refugees who were fleeing the Haitian revolution. The quadrille, which evolved into the Cuban danzón, son, clave, guajira, habanera, rumba, and conga, are all genres that encapsulate the Cuban spirit. In the classical sphere, the island saw the birth of Miguel Velázquez in the sixteenth century and Esteban Salas in the eighteenth century, both learned musicians in the European tradition.

The nineteenth century produced a great flowering of Cuban music. Manuel Saumell, followed by Ignacio Cervantes and others, began what might be called musical nationalism. In 1879, Miguel Falíde created the first danzón, “Las Alturas de Simpson” (Simpson Heights), which opened the door to other innovative contributions. Genres like the danzón and the son were melded through the works of Raimundo Valenzuela and others and came to be epitomized in 1910 by the song “El bombín de Barreto,” by José Urfé. The son made its way down from the mountains of the province of Oriente to such cities as Guantánamo, Santiago de Cuba, and Manzanillo, and later spread throughout the island. Finally, the essence of traditional Cuban song (canción) was set in the voices and guitars of the troubadours of Santiago de Cuba, led by Pepe Sánchez, Sindo Garay, and others.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Municipal Band of Havana and similar institutions in other cities and provinces helped to disseminate a universal repertoire across the island, thereby helping to promote the development of national composers. Guillermo Tomás, Eduardo Sánchez de Fuentes, and Jorge Anckermann updated the Cuban sound. The work of the pianist Ernesto Lecuona soon became universally popular. In 1922, the Havana Symphonic Orchestra was founded under the direction of Gonzalo Roig; two years later, the Havana Philharmonic Orchestra emerged, under Pedro Sanyúán. Soon thereafter Amadeo Roldán, along with Alejandro García Caturla, began incorporating the basic elements of Afro-Hispanic Cuban folklore into symphonic music. All subsequent national musical expression in this area had as its primeval source the admirable work of these two outstanding figures, who pointed the way to the future by fusing the island’s music with the most advanced universal trends.

In the 1940s, in the arena of música culta (classical music), the Grupo de Renovación Musical strove to establish technical and expressive excellence. In popular and dance music, great rhythms emerged—rhythms such as the mambo, created by Israel and Orestes López and made popular by the Orquesta de Arcaño, and the cha-cha-cha, invented by Enrique Jorrín. These were undeniably rooted in the son, which had been popular since the 1920s, not only with the general populace but also with the middle class. Jorrín’s innovative rhythm inspired new musical trends, both within Cuba and abroad.
Figures of equal importance in other genres included the guitarist and composer Leo Brouwer. Brouwer forged a movement of new Cuban identity, in which folklore and popular music were entwined with the best of universal musical culture to create an art form that, in its historical significance and high achievements, matched the political importance of the Cuban revolution. Similarly, the *nueva trova* (new song) movement included notable soloists and groups, as well as brilliant and creative composers, who, like the folkloric and popular music groups, moved Cuban music forward. At the Concurso Long–Thibaud in Paris the young pianist Jorge Luis Prats was honored for his interpretation of Rachmaninov’s Concerto no. 1, and Ernesto Lecuona performed his *danzas* to great acclaim at the García Lorca Theater in Havana.

The 1980s brought further innovations from established and recognized composers of classical music, who employed fresh perspectives. Choral music was performed all over the island, and light instrumental music was also popular among audiences. On the popular music scene, groups and soloists began creating music in nontraditional ways, with new and experimental forms that now appeared alongside the more traditional *son*. *Bolero* gained a new flavor, and song writing in general was pushed beyond its former frontiers. Meanwhile, Cuban folk music, representing the different Cuban origins, continued its strong tradition. And with the fusion of rumba and conga with jazz and rock, *timba* was born, as performed by such groups as Irakere, Opus 13, Afro-cuba, Charanga Habanera, and José Luis Cortés’s NG La Banda.

In the 1990s, we saw these various forms of musical expression developing and intermixing even further. In the postmodern age, we can listen and dance to old and new forms—*trova*, *canción*, *son*, *salsa*, *rumba*, *danzón*, *bolero*, *timba*—all co-existing together. Thus, Cuba, the Island of Music, has entered the twenty-first century, sharing its sound and musical flavor with the world, just as it has done in past centuries, and winning the favor and fervor of listeners from all latitudes.