

Contra Campana Variations

in Cuban popular music

by Eric Pancer

The bongo bell and contra campana are two cowbells used in salsa, timba and other styles of Cuban popular music to drive a band forward during louder sections of a song (vocal choruses, instrumental solos, etc). They are generally played on large-mouth instruments with the contra campana pitched lower than the bongo bell.

Traditionally the bongocero would play a repeated pattern on a handheld bell and the timbalero played an opposing ("contra") pattern on a bell mounted on the timbales. Eventually drummers consolidated both parts into a single player and also moved them from timbales to the drum set.

Below is an outline of the basic pattern and variations that may change the feel of a song. Practice them first as written making sure to lock in with clave. Once the patterns feel comfortable, mix variations together to begin creating your own.

Notation Key

The notation key shows two staves. The top staff is labeled 'Contra Campana' and the bottom staff is labeled 'Bongo Bell'. Both staves have a double bar line at the beginning and end. The top staff has two upward-pointing triangles labeled 'mouth' and 'shoulder'. The bottom staff has two upward-pointing triangles labeled 'mouth' and 'shoulder'.

Patterns

The patterns section contains five musical examples, labeled (1) through (5). Each example consists of three staves: Clave, Contra Campana, and Bongo Bell. The Clave staff shows a 2/4 rhythm with a 2-3 clave pattern. The Contra Campana and Bongo Bell staves show rhythmic patterns using upward-pointing triangles for 'mouth' and downward-pointing triangles for 'shoulder'. Pattern (1) is labeled 'Basic'. Pattern (2) shows a variation where the Clave is 2-3 and the Campana/Bell patterns are more complex. Pattern (3) shows a variation where the Clave is 3-2 and the Campana/Bell patterns are more complex. Pattern (4) shows a variation where the Clave is 2-3 and the Campana/Bell patterns are more complex. Pattern (5) shows a variation where the Clave is 3-2 and the Campana/Bell patterns are more complex.