Music Engraving for Congas (Cuban Tumbadoras)

by Eric Pancer | March, 2021

The Problem

Engraving music for congas has traditionally used membranophone notation with a layer of text labels above, or below, each note head that describes the type of stroke to be used ("o" for open, "s" for slap, etc.). Although many valuable instructional texts have been written using this method, I believe it is deficient for a number of reasons.

First, the engraver requires extra space on the page in which to place the text. When adding "stickings", should the text go under the sticking? Opposite the sticking text (above the note head)? Between the sticking and notation? This issue is further compounded when double-stops are notated with different strokes on each drum!

The second, more critical, problem with conga notation to date is that the performer is forced to read and interpret an arbitrary list of text labels. Ultimately, we want the performer to have a clear transcription in front of them that can be sight-read from practice room to band stand.

A Solution

The solution that I propose is listed below and incorporates distinct noteheads commonly available in modern engraving software to notate seven of the most common playing techniques.

1. **Palm (bass)** - an open notehead.
2. **Finger** - triangle notehead, pointing up.
3. **Open tone** - round notehead.
4. **Muff** - circled round notehead.
5. **Closed slap, supported** - "X" notehead.
6. **Closed slap, unsupported** - triangle notehead, pointing down.
7. **Open slap** - open diamond notehead.

Graphically, these symbols are summarized as:
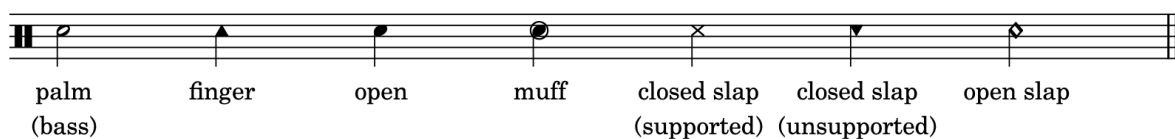
Example Usage

The following figure shows the system in use, with stickings, to transcribe a Havana-style Columbia rhythm with and *floreo* (embellishment).

Multiple Drums

The proposed system also quickly allows the player to visualize a melody between multiple drums and sight-read double-stops easily without having to discern various text labels and correspond them to noteheads within the staff.

Here is an example of an Abakuá rhythm for two drums using the proposed system.

Notating the Manoteo

The manoteo is one of the important movements in conga technique. The movement is a palm-to-finger stroke. When joining this movement together, maestro José Eladio, head of the percussion department at the National School of Art (La ENA) in Havana, Cuba, uniquely notates it with a slur in his book *"Afro-Cuban Percussion Workbook"* [1]. This is an elegant method to engrave the movement and I have chosen to continue using it within the proposed system. An example follows.

The Closed Slap

There are (at least) two distinct methods by which to execute a closed slap:

1. The performer may "close" the drum by holding the opposite hand on the skin of the drum. This technique may also be referred to as a "supported closed slap".

2. The performer "grabs" the drum as part of the movement without the opposite hand on the drum. This movement is referred to as an "unsupported closed slap".

When engraving using the current proposed system we differentiate with a "X" (cross) notehead and "▾" (triangle down) specifically to give the composer/engraver more control over the transcribed music. An example of a modern tumbao using these symbols follows:

Summary

Any system of information delivery is only efficient if the recipients of the information understands the system. As the popularity of congas and Cuban music continues to grow, I hope that the proposed system in this document may be used as a common engraving system to facilitate clear transcriptions that are easily sight-read.

Works Cited

[1] Eladio Amat, José; Lanoue, Curtis. "Afro-Cuban Percussion Workbook",
    Create Space, 2011.