



Música Típica: Cumbia and the Rise of Musical Nationalism in Panama. By Sean Bellaviti. New York, NY, 2020; oxford university press. 328 pp. ISBN: 9780190936464

Reviewed by León F. García Corona, Assistant Professor, USC Thornton School of Music

Studies of Latin America and its cultural expressions are often framed under ideas of tri-cultural heritage (Indigenous, African, and European). These studies also deal with the ways and proportions in which the elements of this heritage combine and contend in order to provide a sense of national identity within the former colonies, such as the use of membranophones in African-derived music, or the incorporation of European-derived instruments such as the

accordion in vallenato. In musicology, these formulations contributed for many decades to a “stable” understanding of music in Latin America based on matching certain genres with certain countries: Mariachi with Mexico and Samba with Brazil, for example. For a little more than a decade now, post-national studies of Latin American music have explored in what ways musics transcend nationalist frameworks of music and its practitioners. They have also explored how musical genres and their elements permeate across other musical soundscapes and nations.

In *Música Típica: Cumbia and the Rise of Musical Nationalism in Panama* by Sean Bellaviti (Oxford University Press, 2020), the author explores the rise of musical nationalism driven primarily by cumbia, a musical genre typically associated with the neighboring country of Colombia. In doing so, Bellaviti unveils the intersecting musical and social ideologies, which analogously synergized with Panama’s geographic and geopolitical intersecting position. This is beautifully illustrated by showing how musical terms and terminology (sometimes ambivalently) mirror identity constructions in a class-divided Panamanian society, and how musical style helps negotiate social membership. Interestingly, his exploration of Panamanian music begins in Toronto, Canada, providing a clear example of the transnational musical and social implications, and the importance of Latin American music among Hispanics in Canada. Throughout the chapters of the book the author successfully weaves nationalistic efforts, musical and social tensions, and neo-colonial practices coming from



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

the United States. The author highlights the importance of music in Panama while contesting with US imperialistic policies.

The book is structured chronologically, and it begins with a recount of Panamanian recent history and nationalism, and how these relate to Panamanian musical life, by tracing the rise of liberalism and its connections with the goal of becoming a *punte del mundo* (bridge of the world) country (23). The book explores early interpretations of *música típica* and highlights the importance of the Azuero peninsula. In doing so, the author introduces the importance of the violin, its ensemble configurations (*conjuntos*), percussion instruments such as the triangle and the cowbell, and important early dance patterns such as *apersogados*, *agarrados*, *amonajado*, and *pegado* (66). Central to the discussion and exploration of Panama's own *música típica* is the overwhelming presence of the cumbia and its crosspollination with other musical genres. Framed under a contested musical and national space, cumbia informs and "misinforms" musical practices, depending on political views. As it has been the case in many other nation-building projects, cumbia and its African derived musical elements are often suppressed in an attempt to negate or obliterate African heritage. As Bellaviti shows, the ethnic makeup of the country as a whole was misrepresented and suppressed in early music research and literature (43).

Today's reader might be familiar with processes of hybridization and musical syncretism as part of most musics' transformations. In this book, however, the reader will find a fascinating history of contested musical space. On the one hand, driven by technology and processes of commodification, and on the other by folklorist and nativist rhetoric. For some, the incorporation of a "bastardized form" of cumbia in Panamanian musical life was an intrusion into the Panamanian national project (48). Bellaviti, however, shows the fascinating transformations of cumbia into many cumbia-derived musical genres such as: "cumbia-zapatea," "porro-cumbia," "son-cumbia," and the most popular, "danzón-cumbia" (69). This not only brings to the front the social implications of African and Indigenous-derived musical elements, but their social implications as well. Emphasis is placed on the "danzón-cumbia" and the musical rhythmic pattern known as *cinquillo*. In discussing the overwhelming presences of other musics in Panamanian musical life, the author accounts for the crucial role of the recording and broadcasting industry, the incorporation of other instruments such as the accordion and electric chordophones, and the musical and archetypical influence from other countries (i.e., Cuba, Mexico, and Dominican Republic). Through his discussion of the continued commodification of the music, the author highlights the U.S. political and commercial influence in a contested musical (*música típica*) and physical (the Canal) space. In his narrative, the author also accounts for the national liquor companies and their influence in music creation and performance. Within the increase of commodification, he shows the importance of the accordion and the incorporation of instruments such as timbales, conga, and a scraped idiophone called *churruca*. The musical transcriptions provided are a quick and effective pedagogical resource (142-148).

The book not only benefits from a solid historical research approach, but it also provides a window into the professional musicians' lives and their struggle to succeed in the music industry. Colourful

ethnographic accounts let the reader get immersed in real life experiences such as touring and *baile* (dance) performances (184). Accounts of the author's own playing in the bands he describes provides a fascinating vantage point, filled with music and cultural insights.

Bellaviti's style of writing is clear with helpful subsection headers. Pictures of musicians, instruments, and performances complement the reading. As expected in the Oxford University Press's *Currents in Latin American and Iberian Music Series*, the book incorporates musical scores, lyrical analysis, and some music theoretical discussions.

The book in some ways ends where it began, with a detailed exploration of the complicated process of naming the music. Bellaviti places particular emphasis on the term *pindín* and of derogative perceptions among middle- and upper-class Panamanians and the tension and complication between terms such as *pindín* and *música típica* (226). Musics in Latin America have gravitated around issues of class, race, ethnicity, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and how all of these inform performance practices. *Música Típica: Cumbia and the Rise of Musical Nationalism in Panama* adds to this discussion and provides an interesting and clear example of musics converging with identify politics and nation-building projects.

Framed under the complicated history of Panama and the tensions between elites and the working class and nativist/xenophobic rhetoric, the book successfully shows how musical and social hybridity and syncretism contributed to the Panamanian national project. It is a solid ethnographic and historical resource, a must read for anyone interested in Panamanian history and music.