

Tambor y Mejorana: Roque Cordero's *Rapsodia Panameña*

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Abstract: Panamanian composer Roque Cordero (1917-2008) is known for his use of twelve-tone technique but also for the incorporation of Panamanian music into his compositions. However, his methods for doing so have largely remained unstudied. This article examines the methodic juxtaposition of dodecaphonic technique and Panamanian elements in Cordero's *Rapsodia Panameña* (1988) for unaccompanied violin. An analysis of the work, informed by a survey of Panamanian traditions and previous works for violin by Cordero, reveals how the composer weaves together a twelve-tone row and diatonic material built from deconstructed traditional elements through a series of strategies guided by a unified pitch center. The article further discusses Cordero's "musical Panama" and how his youthful experiences with popular music and the study of Narciso Garay's transcriptions contributed to his methods.

Keywords: Roque Cordero; Latin American Composers; Violin; Dodecaphony; Panamanian music.

TITLE: TAMBOR E MEJORANA: A RAPSODIA PANAMENHA DE ROQUE CORDERO

Resumo: O compositor panamenho Roque Cordero (1917-2008) é conhecido por seu uso da técnica dodecafônica, mas além pela incorporação da música panamenha em suas composições. No entanto, seus métodos para este fim não foram ainda amplamente estudados. Este artigo examina a justaposição metódica da técnica dodecafônica e dos elementos panamenses na *Rapsodia Panameña* de Cordero (1988) para violino solo. A análise da obra, informada por um estudo das tradições panamenhas e de obras anteriores para violino de Cordero, revela como o compositor tece juntos uma série dodecafônica e material diatônico composto a partir de elementos tradicionais desconstruídos através de um conjunto de estratégias guiadas por um centro tonal unificado. O artigo discute ainda o "Panamá musical" de Cordero e como suas experiências juvenis com a música popular e o estudo das transcrições de Narciso Garay contribuíram para seus métodos.

Palavras-chave: Roque Cordero; Compositores latinoamericanos; Violino; Dodecafonismo; Música panamenha



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1. Introduction

The music of Roque Cordero (1917-2008) has been the subject of more than a few scholarly works, though mostly motivated by the fact that the composer was perceived as the main representative in the otherwise seemingly barren compositional landscape of Panama. Much of the early writing on Cordero, though praising his work, discusses his methods rather superficially, as the work of a composer who applies the twelve-tone technique "freely rather than dogmatically" (Chase 1959, 25). As Jeremy Orosz has recently pointed out, however, Cordero was indeed quite disciplined and aware of the procedures of his technique as taught by Ernst Krenek, with whom he studied upon arriving in the United States in the early forties. Cordero's twelve-tone music displays consistent adherence to the methods of dodecaphonic composition—it is "neither free nor loose" in its methods (Orosz 2018, 140).

The composer, despite writing most of the music in his catalogue using the twelve-tone technique, never did abandon the melodies and rhythms of Panama. Much of his most widely performed music is the result of the marriage of the two. The subject of Panamanian influences in Cordero has been discussed in a handful of masters' and doctoral theses (Guevara 2001, Cruz 2002, Casal 2006). Guevara concludes that "[g]enerally speaking, Panamanian folk elements are well rooted in Cordero's music," though he joins earlier writers in describing Cordero's approach to dodecaphony as "free," which in Guevara's view contributes to a "distinguishable sound" when paired with Panamanian materials (Guevara 2001, 58). In speaking about Cordero's use of Panamanian elements, writers frequently mention that the music has "folk influence," but rarely analyze how actual song and dance turns into method in his compositions.

The present study examines how dodecaphonic technique and Panamanian elements are methodically juxtaposed in Cordero's *Rapsodia Panameña* (1988) for solo violin. His only work for unaccompanied violin, the *Rapsodia* offers a unique opportunity to study Cordero as a disciplined serialist as well as a traditional music enthusiast. The former is clearly seen in the consistent deployment of a single twelve-tone row throughout the piece; the latter, through his thoughtful construction of folk-infused tonal melodies and rhythm patterns which are of deep structural significance for the piece. In this article, I analyze the ways in which Cordero achieved a seamless coexistence of the two. I will propose that the composer developed a process based on a unified pitch center in order to provide structural unity, unfolded through the weaving of a single tone row and a diatonic melody built from traditional mejorana and tamborito elements. In addition to presenting a structural analysis of the piece itself, I will also view it in the context of the

composer's output for violin and how Panamanian material is organically incorporated into his repertoire. Through this discussion, I will further address how Cordero deconstructs traditional melodies and rhythms in order to create raw material for his compositions. The *Rapsodia* is, as will be shown, a display of compositional craft as well as a tribute to a musical culture which the composer loved.

I will begin with a brief overview of the musical traditions that lend stylistic and structural material to Cordero's violin *Rapsodia* and which frequently appear elsewhere in his music. While Cordero was not a practitioner of these traditions, he did make the conscious decision to study them, mostly through Narciso Garay's *Tradiciones y Cantares de Panamá*, published in 1930.

2. The Panamanian genres in the *Rapsodia Panameña*

2.1. The mejorana

The two Panamanian traditions which most frequently appear in Cordero's musical vocabulary are the mejorana and the tamborito. The *Rapsodia* has examples of both, as I discuss below. The mejorana or socavón is a Panamanian genre which stems into of sung and danced currents. The terms refer to the music as well as the instruments used within it: the mejorana and the socavón are both chordophones of the lute family, both with four courses (Brenes 1999, Zárate 1962).¹ Both danced and sung mejoranas use a repertoire of harmonic-rhythmic accompaniment patterns called *torrentes*, neither includes drums or any other percussion, and both use distinct melodies according to each *torrente*. In the case of danced mejoranas, melodies are played on the rabel² or on the violin, while in the sung type they are primarily left to the singers, or *trovadores*.

References to the *mejorana*—both the music and the instrument—appear in the historical record from the nineteenth century. Belisario Porras, who would later be president of Panama, mentions the tradition by name in his 1882 essay *El Orejano* (Porras 1944, 14). Canadian Physician Wolfred Nelson describes what appears to be a danced *mejorana* in his chronicle *Five years at Panama* (Nelson 1891, 60). Elsewhere, the mention of an "indispensable" "guitar-like" instrument in a dance setting seems to also point out to either the mejorana or the socavón. When Garay conducted his study during the late 1920s, the mejorana was already a long-standing tradition in the central provinces, though it had indeed been performed in the city since at least the late 19th century. In a letter sent to the president of the Municipal Council of Panama in 1890, the council member from Santa Ana proposed that "serenades and mejoranas" be taxed the same way events at dance halls were subject to tribute (Arberola 1890). The tenor of the proposal suggests that these were somewhat novel occurrences, which the city could benefit from as it did via taxation of formally established public dances. Between this proposal and the time Cordero was born in Santa Ana, a civil war occurred (1899-1902), Panama became independent from Colombia (1903) and the Panama Canal was completed (1904-1914)—all significant, transformative events. Many people who lived in Panama City and

¹ The mejorana has five strings, two of which are octaves paired in a course. The socavón has four strings. Zárate (1962), Garay (1930) and Brenes (1999) provide descriptions and common tunings.

² The rabel is a three-string bowed chordophone of Iberian origin, descendant of the rebec. Artisanal rabeles in Panama resemble the shape of the violin, but retain a performance style similar to Spanish and Portuguese ones. For more, see Garay 1930 and Brenes 1999.

its hinterland moved to the central provinces, where the mejorana tradition thrived and remained much the same until Garay (1930) and Zárata (1962) described it in later decades.

2.1. The tamborito

The tamborito (literally "small drum") is a Panamanian social tradition which involves call-and-response singing accompanied by complex rhythmic patterns performed on various membranophones and idiophones. While the mejorana occurs in organized settings and is often performed by professional musicians and singers, the tamborito is a largely spontaneous and communal affair and will occur in a variety of settings. One woman takes on a leading role singing improvised verses while all respond with a refrain. A ring forms and couples dance in its center one at a time while the singing continues. Drums used in the tamborito usually include two single-headed conical drums: a high-pitched singing drum called *repicador* and the lower-pitched *pujador* which plays the rhythmic base. They are accompanied by a *caja*, a two-headed rimmed indirect membranophone modeled after European military drums.

While it is not the purpose of this study to discuss the origins of the tamborito in depth, it is still relevant to note that the tradition—and presumably its rhythms—are deeply rooted in Panama's global history as a maritime hub even from before the nineteenth century, containing elements from several cultures woven into its fabric through negotiation, appropriation and adaptation. Cordero's early training in Panama, as I discuss below, mirrors Panama's global history of cultural exchange and negotiation. Records from the 1700s describe social events conducted by free subjects in the coast of Nueva Granada called *Bundes* which are strikingly similar to today's tamborito.³ Drumming is mentioned as a communal practice in Panama City and its hinterland by travelers all through the nineteenth century.⁴ Forty-niner Theodore Johnson describes an impromptu street party in Gorgona: "In front of one of the houses were seated two of the men, strumming a monotonous cadence on drums made of cocoa-tree, half the size of a common pail, held between their knees" around which a circle formed with couples taking turns in the center (Johnson 1849, 37-38). The aforementioned letter by Alberola also mentions "tamborito dances" among his proposed new music taxes (Alberola 1890), which suggests popular tamborito events were held in Panama City with some regularity during the Colombian period.

The tamborito and the mejorana are the most representative and widely practiced of the musical traditions of central Panama, and still part of the country's daily life, albeit mostly in the provinces. Together, they represent centuries of adaptation, negotiation and appropriation of cultural elements from several origins, a status these traditions share with many aspects of Panamanian culture. Their popularity notwithstanding, how deeply was Cordero himself immersed in the mejorana and tamborito traditions? In the following section, I will briefly survey Cordero's relationship with the traditional music of Panama, both through his own words and by examining how it appears in his music after 1939, when the *Capricho Interiorano* for

³ Descriptions of *bundes* appear in records from Cartagena, Santa Marta, and other settlements along the coast of Nueva Granada, including Royal Decrees from Charles III, letters from the governor general of Cartagena and episcopal decrees by local bishops. For more, see Monroy y Meneses (1719) and Corrales (1889, 452-453).

⁴ Another interesting early description is furnished by Royal Navy Captain Basil Hall, who arrived in Panama in February of 1822, where he witnessed locals playing coconut drums in large circles in the main square in celebration of the newly-acquired independence from Spain (Hall 1825, 152-153).

orchestra was composed. These will be analyzed in the context of actual mejorana and tamborito practice and with consideration to the debate on "nationalism" among Latin American composers of Cordero's generation.

3. Cordero's "musical Panama"

3.1. Early training⁵

Roque Cordero spent his youth in Panama City at a time when there was no institutional music instruction. An earlier instance of the National Conservatory had been founded by Narciso Garay (1876-1953) in 1904 but closed a couple of decades later. It was through outdoor band performances that Cordero became familiar with music (Cordero 1987). Although Gilbert Chase (1959) has characterized these as the unlikely beginnings for a composer with an "absolute command of technical resources, past and present",⁶ I would like to put forward that musical activity in Panama was far from null. Three symphonic bands played weekly concerts, whose programs included opera overtures and arias, arrangements of popular songs and new compositions such as waltzes, marches and danzones. The Republican Band had been doing so at least since the late 1880s. Music notables in Panama during Cordero's early years included Garay (who studied with D'Indy and Fauré), Pedro Rebolledo (a disciple of Julián Carrillo), Máximo Arrates Boza (Cuban emigré and Havana Conservatory alum) and Paris-trained Herbert De Castro, just to name a few. The National Theatre, erected in 1907, held frequent performances of world-renowned artists, including full-length operas and zarzuelas (Charpentier 1975). Complementing the concert scene, Panama's trade and commerce had produced a vibrant popular music milieu, where styles from Europe, the U.S. and the Caribbean coexisted and evolved into local variants. This was the soundtrack of Cordero's youth.

Cordero learned clarinet and violin as a teen and studied privately with Boza—a prolific composer of danzones and marches—, Rebolledo and De Castro. He served for ten years as copyist for the Fire Department Band (Guevara 2001, 3), where he became knowledgeable in every musical style in the Band's wide-ranging repertoire. It didn't take long for his talent as arranger and composer to be noticed. Myron Schaeffer, recently arrived in Panama, soon recognized Cordero's potential and helped him to obtain a scholarship, which led to studies in the U.S. under Ernst Krenek (Cordero 1987, 18). Cordero's disciplined study of dodecaphonic technique with Krenek soon yielded much success in terms of commissions, international prizes and grants. Despite mischaracterizations as a "loose" or "free" serialist, Orosz observes that Cordero's twelve-tone output "has more in common with that of Schoenberg (in terms of row development) than do the respective twelve-tone outputs of Igor Stravinsky, Aaron Copland, or even Alban Berg" (Orosz 2018, 155). That said, the composer did not write dodecaphonic music exclusively. Cordero

⁵ Although there is still no definitive biographical work about Cordero available, Marie Labonville is currently working on a comprehensive biography with the help of the composer's family and access to his library and personal archive (see Labonville 2011).

⁶ Chase wrote that in Cordero's Panama, "*todo apuntaba hacia una larga trayectoria antes de que el terreno estuviera listo para un compositor de gran estilo con un dominio completo de los recursos técnicos del pasado y del presente. Sin embargo, este compositor apareció en Panamá en la persona de Roque Cordero*" (Chase 1958, 98). While calling attention to what was lacking in Panama, Chase's observation does a disservice to what did exist not only in terms of instruction, but also in quantity, quality and variety of music performance.

never lost contact with Panama and the popular music of his upbringing and elements of it are clearly audible in his early works, such as the *Ocho Miniaturas* (1944, rev. 1948), as well as in his later ones, such as the *Rapsodia*.

3.2. Garay, Cordero and "Musical Nationalism"

Just how much Roque Cordero was familiar with the culture and performance practice of the mejorana and tamborito is unknown to us. We do know that Cordero first became interested in the study and creative possibilities of Panamanian traditional music after reading Narciso Garay's *Tradiciones y Cantares de Panamá*, a fact he clearly remembered as a watershed moment (Townsend 1999). This suggests that, although mejorana and tamborito were indeed performed in the city as mentioned above, Cordero was not acquainted with them through his immediate family, as was (and still is) common in the central provinces. The mejorana in Garay was rather a discovery for him. We do not know exactly when *Tradiciones y Cantares* (printed in Brussels in 1930) reached Cordero's hands, but he certainly knew of it by 1939, when he quoted the mejorana *La Chorrerana* verbatim from its transcriptions in the *Capricho Interiorano*. As for his philosophy concerning the use of folk quotes and/or Panamanian materials in his compositions, Cordero did mention quite frequently that, even though he almost did not quote from Panamanian folklore directly, he did use "some rhythmic elements and some melodic design" from the music of Panama (Townsend 1999).

The fact that Cordero did not talk about his relationship with *Tradiciones y Cantares* early in his career⁷ and that he referred to Garay without actually saying his name in Townsend's 1999 interview, could be explained through his tense attitude towards "musical nationalism." As was the case with Stravinsky (Kuss 1998, 136-137), Cordero consciously avoided association with the term, though he always signed his correspondence "Roque Cordero, Panamanian composer" and, in doing so, he resisted categorizations other than his nationality.⁸ Cordero strived for universality in music, so that it would stand on its own regardless of the origin of the composer or the materials they used. "[I]t matters not," he wrote in response to a dispute on the subject of nationalism, "whether it has native elements or not, or that this or the other technical procedure is in use, what matters in order for the work of art to achieve universal scope is that it expresses itself with absolute honesty of purpose and that it is said in a language characteristic of the times of its author." (Cordero 1959, 29).⁹ Later in the same source, he uses the phrase "festival music color"¹⁰ and borrows Revueltas' "postcard music" to refer to the aesthetic advocated by some of his contemporary Latin

⁷ Cordero gave a lecture in Panama City about the Panamanian elements in his work in 1995, when he was in his late seventies. The text has remained unpublished, and is one of Labonville's main sources in regard to his use of Panamanian materials (Labonville 2011).

⁸ Speaking with Townsend (1999), Cordero stated that "I will insist always to be recognized as a Panamanian composer. I am not an American composer, I am not Afro-American, I am not Afro-Panamanian, no, I am not Afro-anything. I do not have anything to do with Africa, I have to do with Panama [...] I am a Panamanian—period."

⁹ "[N]o importa que tenga o no elementos nativos, no importa que se use este procedimiento técnico o aquél, lo importante para lograr la obra artística con alcance universal, es la creación de algo que lleve el sello inconfundible de lo personal, que se exprese con absoluta honradez de propósitos, y que se diga en el lenguaje propio de la época del autor" (Cordero 1959, 29).

¹⁰ "color de música de feria" (Cordero 1959, 30).

American colleagues (Cordero 1959, 29-30). His frequent use of musical elements from Panama cannot be ignored, though, but should be, I suggest, viewed in conciliation with the composer's goal of universality.

It is apparent that after quoting from Garay's collection in *Capricho*, Cordero's interest in assimilating the distinctive elements of folk dances so as to avoid quotation became a priority, particularly when he discovered dodecaphony. He saw the technique as a means to realize his wish to be a *universally* acknowledged *Panamanian* composer. In fact, he quoted *La Chorrerana* also in the "Mejorana" from *Ocho Miniaturas*, his first dodecaphonic work for large ensemble, perhaps as a conscious departure from the practice of quoting and as a bookend to *Capricho*. I would like to suggest here that Cordero did not want to be absorbed into discussions on whether his music sounded "folk" enough, or to have his work neatly divided into "stages" as had been the case with Alberto Ginastera, whom he knew closely.¹¹ I further propose that the avoidance of quotations as a strategy prompted in Cordero the need to absorb Panamanian music in such a way that he could then *produce* it through compositional technique, making the output both unequivocally Panamanian and highly sophisticated while remaining honest and personal.

3.2. The Panamanian Violin

The violin is an important instrument in Panamanian musical culture. Its arrival on the isthmus goes back as long as the instrument exists, though it became spread among the wide population during the nineteenth century, when travelers report on religious services and street performances outside Panama City featuring the violin (White 1868, 184; Nelson 1891, 60, 73). The popularity of the instrument arrived in the provinces where it became a fixture in dance music, sacred music and mejorana events (Moreno de Arosemena 2004, 161). In the Azuero peninsula, particularly in the towns along the Eastern seaboard, a musical style developed from the adoption of the Cuban danzón and subsequent negotiation with local dance rhythms and performance practice. The resulting danzón-cumbia dance genre became widespread from the 1930s onwards through the work of violinist-composers such as Clímaco Batista, Escolástico Cortez and Francisco Ramírez, who wrote hundreds of dance pieces, many of which were subsequently recorded by popular accordion *conjuntos*. The violin has become inseparable from Panamanian traditional music since.

The instrument was also important in the Panamanian classical music scene. Artists such as Narciso Garay and Alfredo De Saint Malo were the heirs of a long-standing violinistic tradition on the isthmus. Saint Malo is considered the finest Panamanian violinist, having achieved world acclaim as a touring partner of Maurice Ravel. Garay, on the other hand, founded the first conservatory and trained several violinists from both the city and the provinces, including Saint Malo. A renowned composer as well, Garay is the author of the first known Sonata for Violin and Piano by a Panamanian, composed in 1901.¹²

¹¹ For more on musical nationalism and Ginastera, see Kuss 1998. Cordero met Ginastera in 1946 and remained in touch until the latter's death.

¹² The Sonata is preserved in manuscript at the Panama Canal Museum, Garay Collection.

The image displays a musical score for Violin and Piano, measures 17-22, marked *Allegro*. The score is written in D major and common time (C). The Violin part (top staff) begins with a *mf* dynamic and features a melodic line with triplets and slurs. The Piano part (bottom staff) also begins with a *mf* dynamic and features a rhythmic accompaniment with triplets in both hands. The score is divided into two systems, with the second system starting at measure 20. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C).

Figure 1 – Narciso Garay, Sonata for Violin and Piano in D major, I: mm. 17-22. Source: Garay Collection, Panama Canal Museum.

Garay's works for violin and the popular/sacred violin music of Panama are the direct predecessors of Cordero's violin oeuvre. A violinist/violist himself, Cordero certainly knew the popular music written by his teacher Máximo Arrates Boza and his colleagues, and also knew Garay's compositions. In 2018, Cordero told his interviewer that Garay's work "sounded like French music," and that although he had published *Tradiciones y Cantares*, "his transcriptions were not exactly right because he couldn't understand the subtle rhythmic elements of our music" (Townsend 1999). However, even though Cordero later recalls how travels through the country with the Firemen's Band allowed him to study and understand Panamanian music better by himself, he always relied on Garay as a point of reference for traditional music and the only direct quotes in his pieces come from *Tradiciones y Cantares*. Garay, aside from having studied with D'Indy and Fauré, was a classmate of George Enescu, Florent Schmitt and Maurice Ravel. He opened the doors of Panama to the international music stage, and no doubt Cordero was aware of this.

When Cordero met Ernst Krenek, he had to convince the master to teach him twelve-tone technique in spite of the latter's initial reticence (Labonville 2011, 5-6), Cordero set himself on a path where he could unveil ways in which the Panamanian music he studied in Garay and the popular music he learned in his early years could be deconstructed, developed and used convincingly through the serial idiom and within vibrant rhythmic environments. He did not need to rely on direct quotations or a specific harmonic/melodic pattern to *appear* Panamanian. Through dodecaphony, I propose, Cordero found a way to *be* Panamanian while avoiding what he perceived as simplistic nationalist compartmentalization. The *Rapsodia Panameña* is a somewhat unique piece, where Cordero indeed shows command of the twelve-tone technique, but chooses to declare his *mejorana* themes through tonal harmonies. Before I explore this in depth, I will provide an

overview of two earlier violin works where dodecaphony and Panamanian elements coexist, in order to provide context.

4. Popular dance and song in Cordero's work

In this section, I will briefly discuss how Cordero approached the use of Panamanian materials through dodecaphony in two pieces featuring the violin: the *Sonatina* for Violin and Piano (1946) and the *Concerto* for Violin and Orchestra (1962). I will build upon the analyses of these works by Guevara (2001) and Orosz (2018), respectively. Although Cordero's twelve-tone methods are clear and largely adhere to the precepts of the technique, it will be fruitful for the present purpose to explore the strategies Cordero designed in order to organically incorporate Panamanian elements in various degrees of deconstruction. The analysis of these pieces will serve as representative examples of those strategies.

4.1. *Sonatina* for Violin and Piano

The *Sonatina* was composed during his residence at Hamline University with Krenek. When the teacher saw the finished piece, he said that Cordero "had achieved what he did not think could be achieved, a Latin-American serial piece" (Guevara 2001, 20). It is one of the first of Cordero's explorations of twelve-tone technique, and as if making a declaration to mark the event, Cordero solemnly delivers the row on the unaccompanied violin at the beginning (see Fig. 1).¹³ This melodic material will be transformed into the music of the first theme group (m. 19) and developed throughout the movement. Cordero uses the same row in all three movements, but it is through his use of rhythm where his childhood Panama is audible in the *Sonatina*.



Figure 2 – *Sonatina* for Violin and Piano, opening violin solo presenting both the row and the melodic material.

Guevara notes that "the first Latin American rhythm" appears in the *Sonatina* at measure 49, one which he interprets as a "generic Latin American sound, rather than a specifically Panamanian one" (Guevara 2001, 32-33). I suggest, however, that the composite rhythm Cordero used to accompany the second group material is actually found in the earliest instances of the Panamanian genre called *danzón-cumbia*, which developed, as mentioned above, as part of a process of cultural negotiation and adoption incorporating local *cumbia* rhythms into the Cuban *danzón*, which was well-liked in Panama. Both the Cuban *danzón* and the *danzón-cumbia* were conspicuous in Cordero's musical landscape—his Cuban teacher Máximo Arrates Boza and his family were prolific *danzón* composers and arrangers. The fourth-position syncopation in the bass at the eighth- and sixteenth-note levels is characteristic of the *danzón-cumbia*, as is the rhythm outlined by the

¹³ Interestingly, Garay's *Sonata* also begins with a solemn declaration on the unaccompanied violin.

right hand starting from measure 50. Figure 2 shows this rhythmic pattern in Cordero together with an excerpt from *Los Sentimientos del alma* (1927) by Francisco Ramírez, arguably the most popular danzón-cumbia piece in Panama.

The figure contains two musical excerpts. The top excerpt is for piano, measures 50-51 of a Sonatina, in 2/4 time with a tempo of quarter note = 96. It features a right hand with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and a left hand with a bass line. The bottom excerpt is for violin, an excerpt from Ramirez's *Sentimientos del alma* (1927), in 2/4 time with a tempo of quarter note = 88. It shows two staves of violin music with a similar rhythmic pattern.

Figure 3 – Sonatina, mm. 50-51 (piano), and an excerpt from Ramirez's *Sentimientos del alma* (1927).

A further instance of the danzón appears from m. 87 where, as Guevara points out, the piano delivers the clave pattern (Guevara 2011, 33-34). Critically relevant, though, is the cinquillo rhythm on the right hand, which then appears regularly in the remainder of the first movement and is recalled in the third (eg. mm. 31-35; 95-97). The cinquillo paired with the clave is a clear reference to the Cuban danzón, and is furthermore ubiquitous in danzón-cumbia melodies of Cordero's musical Panama (see Fig. 3).

The figure shows a musical excerpt for violin and piano, measures 87-88 of a Sonatina, in 2/4 time. The violin part is marked *mf* and features a melodic line with a cinquillo rhythm. The piano part is marked *mp* and features a bass line with a similar rhythmic pattern.

Figure 4 – Sonatina, mm. 87-88.

Cordero had already referenced the danzón more overtly two years prior in the fourth of the *Ocho Miniaturas*, "Danzonete", using the very same rhythmic and melodic devices. The opening of the movement incorporates all the rhythms in mm. 50 and 87 of the Sonatina into a clearer danzón context. The cinquillo rhythm also appears throughout the "Danzonete" both melodically and rhythmically (eg. mm. 24; 32). This use of similar procedures in a labeled context is valuable in order to understand how deeply embedded the

danzón was in Cordero's creative process at the time of the *Sonatina*, and that he likely associated its rhythms to his childhood Panama and to his beginnings as a musician.

The musical score for the Violin Concerto, III, shows the scoring of the ostinato. It is in 6/8 time with a tempo of quarter note = 144. The score is divided into three systems. The first system includes horns (hns.), timpani (timp.), and violin/cello/bass (vc., cb.). The second system includes clarinets 1 and 2 (cl. 1, cl. 2) and vc., cb. The third system includes viola/clarinet 2 (vla., cl. 2), bassoon 1-2 (bn. 1-2), and vc., cb. Dynamics include forte (f) and piano (p).

Figure 5 – Violin Concerto, III: scoring of the ostinato.

While the *danzón* is not originally a Panamanian genre, it was very much a part of Panamanian culture during Cordero's youth, both in the capital as well as in smaller urban centers such as Los Santos. The fact that Cordero's first formal instruction as a musician came through the hands of a Cuban emigré who penned several *danzones* throughout his long career partly explains why the *danzón* was in the composers' foreground when in search for his "universally Panamanian" style. The budding popularity of the *danzón-cumbia* from the 1930s, a music which displays several of the same traits as its Cuban cousin, helped to weave this Caribbean tradition into the fabric of Cordero's musical landscape. In the *Sonatina*, Cordero incorporates *danzón* and *danzón-cumbia* rhythms and melodic characteristics into the very structure of the work within a disciplined twelve-tone framework.

4.1. Concerto for Violin and Orchestra

One of Cordero's major musical achievements, the Violin Concerto is also one of his best-known pieces. He received the Koussevitzky Recording Award in 1974 for it and is still one of his most widely performed works. Orosz provides an analysis of the twelve-tone procedures as well as a critique on previous explorations of this oft-studied work (Orosz 2018, 148-152). Cordero used mostly one row but for a few segments in the second movement, as Orosz shows. In spite of this apparent departure from dodecaphonic orthodoxy, the rows are indeed related and the result of procedures that Arnold Schoenberg himself used, even though avoided by his disciples and later followers of dodecaphony (Orosz 2018, 151-152).

The Concerto has been cited as an example of Cordero's use of Panamanian material, but rather loosely. Casal mentions Cordero uses "folk rhythms" in the concerto (Casal 2006, 45). Guevara presents single-line transcriptions of "Panamanian rhythms" with hemiola ("a combination of 6/8 and 3/4 meter") as the rhythmic material which can be found in Cordero (Guevara 2001, 24).¹⁴ Panamanian rhythms, however, are

¹⁴ Casal also mentions the occurrence of hemiola in Cordero's work as a Panamanian feature by linking the device to the rhythmic basis of the *mejorana* (Casal 2006, 46).

not linear by nature due to the use of subtle timbre combinations over three drums, and their characteristic makeup is more complex than a 3:2 rhythmic ratio expressed linearly.

I will use the ostinato which frames the third movement as an example of Cordero's working of this three-level rhythm into his raw materials. Not only does this ostinato act as a structural signal, it also lends tonal and rhythmic material to the entire movement (see Fig. 5). Cordero divides the ostinato rhythm into several instruments whenever it is presented,¹⁵ so as to take advantage of the variation in colors and articulations. The organization of the tetrachord in the ostinato produces a further distinction into three pitch levels, which complement and emphasize the distinct timbres. Cordero's use of these three pitch/timbre levels resembles the ways in which Panamanian drummers articulate the timbres of their *pujador*, *repicador* or *caja*, always in three levels. In the former two instruments, hand-picked timbres are produced by a high-pitched slap, a middle strike and an open-stroked bass. In the *caja*, the sticks produce a high-pitched hoop (or side) shot, and two different head sounds. Figure 5 shows how these come together in a *tambor corrido*, a 6/8 drumming pattern which serves as the basis for several Panamanian genres and styles.

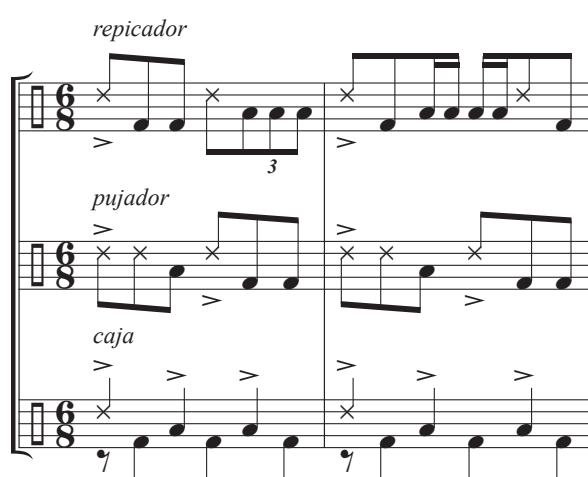


Figure 6 – *Tambor corrido*, a popular Panamanian drumming air. Realization by the author.

A reading of the ostinato of the third movement under the light of this rhythmic pattern reveals deep connections which are creatively scored. In keeping with his "universally Panamanian" goal, Cordero does not use folk drums or linear simplifications of a rhythm. The analysis rather shows that Cordero deconstructs a particular Panamanian pattern into elements that he can then translate and organize into orchestral colors. I suggest this process results in the structural incorporation of the tamborito into the composition by transforming the traditional source material into workable elements which then generate pitch collections, tone colors and rhythms used in the construction of the piece. The same procedure can be heard in pieces where Cordero's "Panamanian intentions" are declared such as in *Ocho Miniaturas* and *Symphony No. 4 "Panamanian"* (1986),¹⁶ as well as in less obvious contexts, as is the case with the *Quintet* (1949) and the second *Symphony* (1957).

¹⁵ Cordero's use of 5 timpani helps to emphasize the timbral distinctions of the other instruments, by virtue of the timpani's own tension and color distinctions from one drum to another.

¹⁶ The Fourth Symphony is another case of Cordero's rare use of a quotation of preexisting material, whose source is also found in Garay's transcriptions (*Vaquero*, transcribed in Garay 1930, 163-164).

5. The *Rapsodia*

Composed in 1988, the *Rapsodia Panameña* is one of Cordero's later pieces and his only work for unaccompanied violin. It was recorded by Rachel Barton Pine (Cordero 1988a), who worked with Cordero on the piece shortly before his death (Barton Pine 2011). The piece has since enjoyed frequent performances and has even been published in transcription for marimba solo (Cordero 1988b). Despite this comparative popularity and uniqueness within the composer's catalogue, the *Rapsodia* has gone virtually unnoticed in music scholarship. Casal mentions it in a footnote in his dissertation about Panamanian works for violin and viola (Casal 2006, 3) and Brawand's thesis on Cordero's music for violin was completed before the piece was composed (Brawand 1985). Even reviews on Barton Pine's recording which label the *Rapsodia* as "complex and rewarding" (Vittes 2014) or "serious-minded" (Rickards 2011) tend to focus on audience favorites in the CD such as the Piazzolla or the Albeniz. This lack of commentary on the *Rapsodia* provides an opportunity to approach the piece in an exploratory perspective. My analysis will take into consideration our knowledge of Cordero's use of twelve-tone technique, his early relationship with traditional and popular music, and his methodical incorporation of deconstructed Panamanian material in his compositions. I will discuss the relationship between the work's tone row and the tonal episodes, as well as the relationships between the structure of the piece and the mejorana tradition. Additionally, I will address elements from the tamborito heritage which appear both melodically and rhythmically throughout.

5.1. Materials

Cordero uses a single row, declared at the beginning of the piece in a grand attention-calling gesture. The row is segmented into two hexachords which are often treated independently, reversing their order in a procedure which has been studied elsewhere in his repertoire, and which is consistent with the treatment Schoenberg gave to his rows (Orosz 2018, 150-152). Figure 7 shows the row with its two hexachords, labeled A and B in this analysis. As in other compositions, Cordero sometimes presents hexachords in apparent independence, "as though they were six-note rows" (Orosz 2018, 149). There are also instances throughout his repertoire when a row appears incomplete in structural articulation points. These occurrences often have symbolic reasons which have been documented, as is the case with the second movement of the 2004 piano concerto (Casal 2006, 26-27). The row is stated quite dramatically in the final measures of the *Rapsodia*, with the hexachords reversed and noticeably missing pitch class E, the last note of hexachord A. The absence is made more conspicuous by the striking high B-natural in m. 188, which is actually completing the previous statement of hexachord A—and also the highest natural note in the piece. I will address this below, as it becomes a key to understanding the pitch organization which links the two harmonic languages.



Figure 7 – *Rapsodia Panameña*: tone row.

In addition to the tone row, Cordero includes diatonic episodes in the piece featuring a melody built from a deconstructed mejorana design. The melody appears first after the opening statement (m. 4), and then throughout the piece, each time in a different key. It appears usually in fragments and somewhat developed, and only delivered in its main form toward the end (mm. 168-177), a fact which is structurally relevant. I will call it the "mejorana melody" for the purposes of this article. There are a number of elements in this melody which I propose Cordero derives from the mejorana and the tamborito, and from his understanding of the essential elements of these traditional practices. First, the falling contour of the melody is consistent with the improvisatory design of the several mejorana *torrentes*, a trait that was observed by Garay (1930) and later by Schaeffer (1944). Second, the emphasis at the beginning and at the end of the melody (when presented complete) is on the dominant scale degree, which is repeated and/or elongated before and after the descent (see Fig. 8). Third, Schaeffer (1944) also observed that this rhetorically emphasized dominant pitch is commonly approached through a descending third or fourth, something we see occur whenever the mejorana melody appears in the *Rapsodia*. Fourth, the rhythmic design of the melody is built from patterns found commonly in tamborito refrains. Garay transcribed several tamboritos, but his rhythmic notation usually ignored syncopation—perhaps one of Cordero's reservations about Garay's interpretation of the "subtle rhythmic elements" of Panamanian music, which he later experienced for himself (Townsend 1999). Figure 9 shows one of the most popular tamborito melodies as transcribed by Garay,¹⁷ then my transcription approximating how these rhythms are usually sung in actual practice, to compare with Cordero's mejorana melody (see Fig. 8).

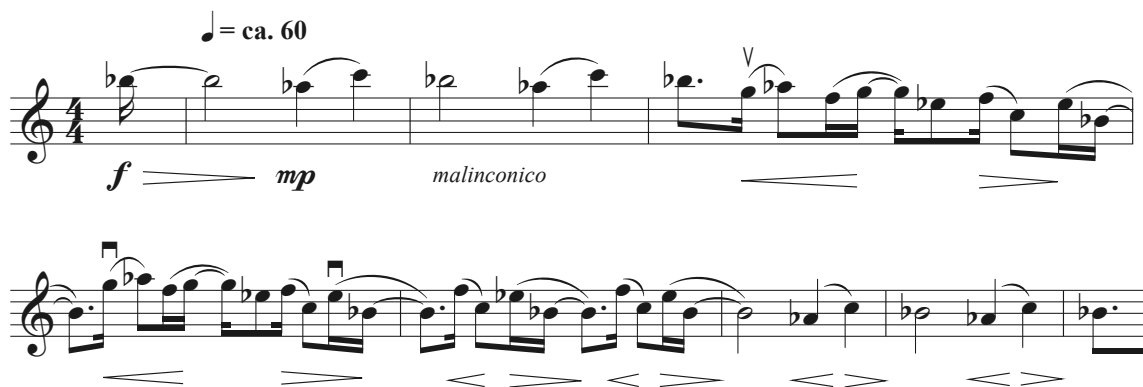


Figure 8 – *Rapsodia Panameña*: mm. 20-26.



Figure 9 – a) *Y Orelé* as transcribed by Garay; b) Transcription by the author.

¹⁷ *Y Orelé* was quoted prominently by Galimany at the beginning of his *Capricho Típico*. The piece is frequently performed by concert bands since its première in 1928 and was certainly well-known in Cordero's musical circles in the 1930s and 1940s.

Both the twelve-tone row and the mejorana melody are developed throughout the *Rapsodia*, and supply the elements which comprise its structure. In the following sections, I will show how both dodecaphonic and diatonic pitch materials are woven together toward a unified tonal center and how the piece's structure is generated through a process of tonal interconnection. The structural design of the *Rapsodia*, as suggested below, is articulated by rhetorical gestures which may be read as reinterpretations of mejorana and tamborito performance practices.

5.2. Structure

As stated above, the piece opens with a grand gesture where the tone row is declared. José Augusto Broce, one of Panama's most esteemed mejorana and folk violin performers, insists that any *torrente* must begin with such a gesture (J. A. Broce, personal communication, June 30, 2022). In an actual performance, the usually unwallied venue is rather noisy before performers start. A loud declaration by the mejorana and violin players achieves two objectives quite effectively: to call everyone's attention to focus on the stage and to clearly state the harmony and melodic design of the *torrente* at hand. Each *torrente* has a signaling violin melody for the opening and/or a formula on the mejorana which guide the singers as they prepare to make their own dramatic entrances. Figure 10 shows the opening gestures for the *torrente de llanto* and Cordero's rhapsody. Both begin with a succession of diads declaring key elements of the harmony, followed by a prolonged chord, and finally a fast improvisatory arpeggiated run.

a) *Lento* *rubato*
 ff

b) *Allegro* (♩ = ca. 144) *Lento* (♩ = ca. 60)
 f mf f 10:8

Figure 10 – Openings of a) the *torrente de llanto* and b) Cordero's *Rapsodia*.

After the introduction, the structure of the piece is then framed by statements of the mejorana melody with a development section in the middle where all materials are fragmented and combined. Table 1 shows a basic structural framework of the *Rapsodia*. I will discuss how these are woven by Cordero into a unifying pitch structure below.

Tab. 1 – *Rapsodia Panameña*: Structural framework (MM=mejorana melody).

Section	Measures	Description	Harmony/Pitch
Intro	1-3	Introduction	Row
Thematic Group	4-12	MM, fragment	D-flat
	13-19	Transitional episode	Row
	20-30	MM, fragment	E-flat
	31-33	Transitional episode based on introduction	Row
	33-36	MM fragment, missing B-natural	Row
Development	37-45	MM fragment	B-flat
	46-167	Development – no modal statements of MM	Row
Recapitulation	168-177	MM complete	B-natural
Coda	178-181	Coda – ends with dramatic statement of row with hexachords inverted, missing B-natural	Row

I suggest that the two systems are linked through their relationship to B-natural—in the case of the tonal episodes, to the key of B major; in the case of the row, to pitch class E. This relationship is explored and woven in the thematic sections as well as in the development. A key strategy used by Cordero is the unfolding of the augmented triad B-flat/D/F-sharp which appears twice in the piece by way of an episode based on the mejorana melody. Since augmented chords divide the octave equally, Cordero takes advantage of this to link both languages together through a deep tonal connection. Figure 11 shows the passage in question, the resulting tetrachords from the division in three equal parts (labeled 1, 2, and 3), and how this division is incorporated into the design of the twelve-tone row. The four three-note sets produced by this organization have each their distinct identity, which are explored by Cordero throughout the piece.

a)

b)

Figure 11 – a) *Rapsodia*, mm. 58-62, repeats in 162-166; b) tetrachord division from B-flat augmented triad and their distribution in the tone row.

The sequential figure serves Cordero as a heralding device. In both cases, the it leads to F-sharp. The first instance, the F-sharp in m. 62 launches a dodecaphonic version of the mejorana melody, whose row statement begins in m. 59. It is not the first instance of this melody using the row—the first time, as in the final measures of the piece, is noticeably missing pitch class E. Measures 62-64 is the only dodecaphonic presentation of the mejorana melody as part of a complete statement of the row. The second instance, the F-sharp in m. 166 begins a transition leading back to the F-sharp which introduces the only complete diatonic presentation of the mejorana melody, from dominant to dominant, as in traditional mejorana.

Cordero also explores deeper connotations of the augmented B-flat triad through its unfolding. It serves as a link between the modal space before the development (on the flat side of the tonality spectrum, B-flat/D) and the final, complete statement of the mejorana melody at the recapitulation (on the sharp side, D/F-sharp), with D as a pivot pitch. Cordero also uses D as a pivot in other important points of rhetorical inflection: a) prominently within the first statement of the mejorana melody in D-flat and then linking it to the dodecaphonic statement which starts in m. 13, b) at the end of the second statement in m. 30 (also the only natural harmonic in the piece), and c) in the first of two parallel drumlike sections in the development, where the dronelike open third string D is repeated consecutively in a single passage more than any other pitch class in the *Rapsodia* (m. 66).

A second strategy used by Cordero is the rather conspicuous absence of pitch class E in key structural points of the piece, and how the first full diatonic statement of the mejorana melody in B major (m. 168) completes this absence. In the Thematic Group, Cordero provides fragments of the mejorana melody in three keys (on the flat side, where there is no B-natural) and also one statement of the melody using the row with a missing pitch class E. During the development, the composer gives a dodecaphonic statement of the mejorana melody using the entire row, as mentioned previously, but no tonal fragments. Finally, the piece concludes with an incomplete statement of the row, whose hexachords have also been reversed so as to leave the B-natural as last pitch, which is omitted in the last, dramatic statement. I would like to suggest that Cordero's strategy of only providing the complete mejorana melody in B major is intended to fulfill this final statement of the row, thereby creating a connection between the two, a *unified* statement woven through both languages.

B-natural is highlighted by Cordero in two key ways in the final sections of the piece:

- Diatonically, B major is the key of the only complete statement of the mejorana melody (mm. 168-177). This melody contains the first whole note in the piece, accentuating the dominant pitch as in traditional mejorana melodies. This is also the only diatonic statement after the development and the only diatonic version of the mejorana melody which actually contains a B-natural.
- Dodecaphonically, the passage starting in m. 178 runs the row several times before reaching a climax on pitch class E—the last note of hexachord A—in m. 188 by reversing the order of the hexachords. B-natural is also the highest fingered note in the piece (Fig. 12)

Figure 12 – Final statements of the row with hexachords reversed. Pitch class E is omitted in the final statement.

By emphasizing B-natural through these rhetorical statements, I propose that Cordero intended to fill the space that had been created by the omission of B-natural in structurally relevant points of articulation. The diatonic/twelve-tone weaving process began early in the piece by utilizing D-natural as a pivot between both environments on the surface. Its deeper interconnections are later revealed through the unfolding of the B-flat augmented triad in the development, and finally fulfilled by means of rhetorical emphasis in the last page of the piece. The result is a harmonic fabric where a melody with a strong rhythmic character lends a common thread for both harmonic languages, and a shared pitch class—articulated by both emphasis and absence—provides the unified goal for interwoven development processes.

6. Final thoughts

Roque Cordero continuously sought to create a unifying “playing field” for the music of his country and the technique he believed would allow him to turn the colorful music of his youth into a style that was as uniquely Panamanian as it was universal. This seemed like no easy task, even to Krenek, who hesitated at first to teach the eager young composer the technique which he had learned from the European masters. But Cordero’s persistence prevailed, and Krenek finally agreed to provide the training which turned into the *Sonatina Rítmica*, *Ocho Miniaturas* and the *Sonatina for Violin and Piano*. These works—particularly the latter—convinced the master that Cordero had achieved his goal. But the road was not over for the Panamanian. Cordero also navigated modal and tonal harmony according to the task at hand, allowed himself to quote folk material whenever he felt he needed to and, toward the end of his career, broadened the ontological “playing field” for the musical loves of his life to partake, so as to have them *coexist* rather than setting them against each other, or to have the simplicity of one hidden beneath the complexity of the other.

The Fourth Symphony and the *Rapsodia Panameña* are two prime examples of this new “playing field,” one his last large-scale work, the other his only solo for his own instrument,¹⁸ and two of only three pieces where he actually included his demonym.¹⁹ The “Panamanian” Symphony (1986) is a piece where Cordero returns to Garay’s *Tradiciones y Cantares de Panamá*, the source that had first led him to study the music of his

¹⁸ Cordero learned the violin and clarinet with Boza, but moved on to viola when he performed orchestral music in Panama.

¹⁹ The other is the *Panamanian Overture* (1944), composed during his formative years in the U.S.

country, and which provided the material for the piece that opened the doors to his distinguished music career in the early forties, the *Capricho Interiorano*. The Symphony's harmonic language is also a return to the aesthetic of the *Capricho*, with modal harmonies and overt dance rhythms. This was a difficult time personally for Cordero, as the aging composer felt nostalgia for the country which he loved dearly, but which had closed the doors on him when he first returned from the U.S. as a public servant (Guevara 2001, 53-57). Even if he could not live in his country again, he would recreate it through his latter works. He declared in an interview with Moisés Guevara that he had actually decided at a certain point not to return to Panama (Guevara 2001, 56).²⁰

The Symphony, and the *Rapsodia* completed two years later, both serve as platforms for Cordero to express how the happy memories of his youth lived together with his nostalgia and the pain of an unfulfilled wish to work, create and teach in his country. This comes through in the strategies Cordero uses in each piece, both involving clear melodic and rhythmic references to Panamanian music. Cordero's musical Panama is deeply rooted in the music he learned from Garay and then witnessed himself in trips to the countryside, but also in the circum-Caribbean and universal genres which contributed to the melodic and rhythmic richness of the mejorana and the tamborito. Panama's music is, by virtue of the processes which created it, global. In seeking a universal platform to create his own Panamanian music, Cordero achieved a style that is truly universal and technically sophisticated as it is evocative, honest and profoundly intimate.

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²⁰ Cordero did return to Panama a number of times after that. He met with young composers, visited the conservatory (named after Narciso Garay), gave talks at the University of Panama and spoke with the media. The National Roque Cordero Competition was instituted in 2018 by the Panamanian Ministry of Culture in order to honor the composer's memory and to promote his legacy.

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