

La Corneta China: A Musical Symbol of Santiago de Cuba

I would like to thank Roberto de Riva González for generously sharing his time, knowledge, and experiences with *la corneta china*. The photos on this poster, as well as the recordings of *conga* were kindly shared by him. His support was instrumental to this project.

Kevin Royle
Department of English

This research was supported by the Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Awards, University of Victoria, and Supervised by Dr. Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier, Anthropology

Introduction

La corneta china is emblematic of Santiago de Cuba. The instrument is actively claimed by Santiago's residents through the tradition of *conga*, creating a unique and rich soundscape of the city. Traditions of education and neighbourhood identity are also unique to Santiago de Cuba. Havana, Cuba's capital, is often assumed to be the center and height of Cuban culture (Boudreault-Fournier, 2008). This perception is reflected in Western academia, which focuses more on Havana than the Cuban East. Through this project, I aim to highlight a small portion of Eastern Cuba's vibrant and unique musical identity.

My Project Objectives:

- Conduct a literature review to understand the historical, geographical and cultural context of *la corneta china*
- Interview a Chinese Cornet Cuban player to seek their expert perspective on the current significance of the instrument, as well as their experiences with it
- Develop on Pérez Fernández's (2014) experimental learning in attempting basic learning of the Chinese Cornet

References

- Boudreault-Fournier, A. (2008). Positioning the new reggaeton stars in Cuba: From home-based recording studios to alternative narratives. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 13(2), 336–360. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1935-4940.2008.00041.x>
- Boudreault-Fournier, A. (2021). *Conga*. In *Aerial imagination in Cuba: Stories from above the rooftops* (pp. 84–100). Routledge.
- Chomsky, A. (2015). *A history of the Cuban Revolution*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Martínez-Fernández, L. (2018). *Key to the new world: A history of early colonial Cuba*. University Press of Florida.
- Milstein, L. (2013). Toward an understanding of *conga santiaguera*: Elements of *la conga de los hoyos*. *Latin American Music Review*, 34(2), 223–253. <https://doi.org/10.7560/lamr34204>
- Montoya González, T. (2023, October 12). *Questions Period* [Film Screening Questions Period]. Latin American Film Week, University of Victoria.
- Pérez Fernández, R. A. (2014). The Chinese community and the *corneta china*: two divergent paths in Cuba. *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 46, 62–88. <https://doi.org/10.5921/yeartradmusi.46.2014.0062>
- Riva González, R. (2024, February 22). Personal Interview.

What is *La Corneta China*?

The Chinese Cornet is a double-reeded instrument and comprises of three to four parts: the bell, the barrel, the pirouette and the detachable reed (Pérez Fernández, 2014). Components are often hand-made by *corneta* luthiers from local materials (R. Riva González, personal communication, February 22, 2024).

What does it Sound like?



Santiago's *Conga* and Havanese *Comparsa*

Conga

- Each neighbourhood in Santiago is associated with a specific *conga* group
- *Conga* players are generally from the neighbourhood, although exceptions do occur. Overall, longstanding membership to a specific *conga* is critical
- Each *conga's* cornetist has a specific playing style. Thereby, each *conga* has a specific and recognizable *corneta* call.
- There is no formal institution to learn the *corneta*. Cornetists learn closely from older mentors, as well as through self-instruction (R. Riva González, personal communication, February 22, 2024)
- A *conga* requires active participation by non-*conga* musicians (Milstein, 2013). Onlookers sing in call-and-response chants, and dance with the *conga* as it parades through the city (Boudreault-Fournier, 2021)

Comparsa

- *Comparsa* is a Cuban musical procession where choreographed dancers, singers and musicians perform a set piece in an organized parade (Milstein 2013)
- *Comparsas* perform Afro-Cuban music, but also Western music, like "Spanish-derived folk dance" (Milstein 2013, pp. 228) or other genres. Their range is broad, and their visuals are spectacular and lavish
- In Havana, the *comparsa* may use other wind and brass instruments, unlike in Santiago (R. Riva González, personal communication, February 22, 2024)



Note: Roberto de Riva González in a conga. Used with permission.



Note: Roberto de Riva González in comparsa. Used with permission

Origin of the Chinese Cornet

Following pressures to abolish slavery in the mid-19th century, Cuban plantation owners indentured approximately 100,000 Chinese labourers (Chomsky, 2015). They would bring the *suona*, a Chinese instrument, to Cuba (Pérez Fernández, 2014). While there are many differing theories on the origin of *la corneta china* to Santiago de Cuba, they largely agree on a few commonalities.

- The Chinese Cornet was first played in Santiago between 1912 and 1916 (Milstein, 2013; Montoya González, 2023; Pérez Fernández, 2014)
- The first neighbourhood to host the instrument was El Tivolí, who won that year's Carnaval due to their unique inclusion of the *corneta* (R. Riva González, personal communication, February 22, 2024)
- *La Corneta* is not originally from Santiago, but was first used in a non-Chinese musical context in that city (Milstein, 2013; Montoya González, 2023; Pérez Fernández, 2014; R. Riva González, personal communication, February 22, 2024)

Pérez Fernández (2014) observes that *cornetas* from Santiago more closely resemble the Chinese *suona* in morphology than examples from other Cuban regions. This may suggest that Santiago's *cornetas* more closely preserve the initial exchange of Chinese and Cuban musical cultures.

Geographical Context of Cuba

From east to west, there are approximately 967 kilometres between Havana, the nation's capital, and Santiago de Cuba (Martínez-Fernández, 2018). As Martínez-Fernández (2018) asserts, Santiago de Cuba orients itself to the Caribbean.

Santiago de Cuba is Cuba's second-largest city. It was the capital of the older Oriente Province, Cuba's easternmost, including the provinces of Las Tunas, Granma, Santiago, Holguín, and Guantánamo.