

Introduction to the *Son Mexicano*

Definition

The *son* is a Mexican musical genre that includes: a) performance on regional instruments such as *huapanguera*, *jarana*, *vihuela* and traditional instruments such as harp, violin, and guitar b) vocal performance of traditional or improvised lyrics, very often in a regional style c) the use of dance (foot-heel tapping) as an acoustic element.

Features

The term *son* (plural *sones*) is applied to several musical co-traditions found throughout eastern, central, and western Mexico. Although these co-traditions exhibit their own idiosyncrasies, they do share some characteristics. These include:

- 1) The use of regional and traditional instruments such as the ones referred to above.
- 2) Syncopation.
- 3) Improvisation in the singing, instrumental performance, and dance.
- 4) Rapid tempo, usually in a six beat pattern.
- 5) Call and response.
- 6) *Coplas* and *décimas*.
- 7) Nonsensical rhythmic fillers.
- 8) Dance as an acoustic element to accent the music.
- 9) *Mánicos*.
- 10) Alternations between instrumental (beginning & end) and vocal sections within a piece.
- 11) Chord progression that includes only the tonic, dominant, and subdominant of any given key.
- 12) Lyrics arranged in loose verse structure and reflecting a wide variety of themes: love, music, birds, horses, occupations, etc.
- 13) Mimetic tendencies.

The *son* derives its uniqueness from peculiar performance technique on generic instruments such as violin, guitar, and trumpet and from the distinctive sound of regional instruments such as the *vihuela*, *guitarra de golpe*, *huapanguera*, *jarana*, *requinto*, and the non-pedal harp. Perhaps the most diagnostic feature of the *son* is its use of specific strumming patterns (called *mánicos*) on the rhythm instruments. Every *son* variety employs its own set of basic patterns and allows for the improvisation of others (called *floritura*). The vocal style used in the *son* varies from region to region. *Son* vocalists sing lyrics in Spanish or in an indigenous language such as Nahuatl or Purépecha.

Brief History

The *son* is the most deeply rooted and widely disseminated traditional Mexican musical genre. Its origins can be traced to a mixture of indigenous and Spanish elements in the early 16th century. It is performed throughout central Mexico and along Mexico's Pacific and Atlantic coasts. In its earliest version, the *son* appeared in the 16th century as a theatrical song and dance form whose most distinctive trait seems to have been its popular and somewhat irreverent tone. By the early 1700's Church authorities found the dancing so suggestive and the lyrics so outrageous that they sought, unsuccessfully, to ban its performance. By the late 1700's the *son* had become part of short musical dramas presented between acts of longer plays in principal theaters in Mexico City. The *sones* (plural form of *son*), with their earthy and upbeat flavor, represented a sharp and welcome contrast to the sometimes overbearing operatic style then prevalent in Mexican theatrical productions. With the rise of the independence

movement in the early 1800's, the *son* acquired even greater acceptability and became one of the symbols of the new national identity. *Sones* were commonly affectionately referred to as *sonecitos de la tierra* (dear *sones* of the land) or *aires mexicanos* (Mexican airs). Regionalization of the *son* occurred soon after in Mexico's countryside where local musicians modified the original *son* orchestra of harp, violin, and various guitar types, and altered lyrics and arrangements to suit their tastes. By the late 1800's several well defined regional contradictions of the *son* had emerged.

Son Varieties

1. The *son huasteco* of the Huasteca region (central and southeastern Mexico)
2. The *son jarocho* from southern Veracruz.
3. The *son de mariachi* from western Mexico.
4. The *son abajeño* from Michoacán.
5. The *son guerrerense* from the state of Guerrero.
6. The *son de marimba* from the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Tabasco.