

Conga

The **conga**, or more properly the **tumbadora**, is a tall, narrow, single-headed Cuban drum with African antecedents. It is thought to be derived from the Makuta drums or similar drums associated with Afro-Cubans of Central African descent. A person who plays conga is called a *conguero*. Although ultimately derived from African drums made from hollowed logs, the Cuban conga is staved, like a barrel. These drums were probably made from salvaged barrels originally. They are used both in Afro-Caribbean religious music and as the principal instrument in rumba. Congas are now very common in Latin music, including salsa music, merengue music, and Reggaeton, as well as many other forms of American popular music.

Most modern congas have a staved wooden or fiberglass shell, and a screw-tensioned drumhead. They are usually played in sets of two to four with the fingers and palms of the hand. Typical congas stand approximately 75 centimetres (30 in) from the bottom of the shell to the head. The drums may be played while seated. Alternatively, the drums may be mounted on a rack or stand to permit the player to play while standing. While they originated in Cuba, their incorporation into the popular and folk music of other countries has resulted in diversification of terminology for the instruments and the players. Ben F. Jacoby's *Introduction to the Conga Drum* holds that the drums are called *congas* in English, but *tumbadoras* in Spanish.^[1] The drums, in order of size from largest to smallest, are the *tumba*, *conga*, *quinto*, the rare *requinto*, and the side-strap mounted *ricardo*. *The Conga Page* agrees with the *congas* vs. *tumbadoras* terminology.^[2] *Music of Puerto Rico* refers to the drums only as congas, but gives the names as *tumba* for the largest and *niño* for the smallest, not providing names for the two middle drums.^[3] Alex Pertout's *The Conga Drum: an Introduction* points out that the names for the individual drums vary even in Cuba, and gives the names of three drums: *tumbadora* (largest), *conga* or *segundo* (middle), and *quinto* (smallest).^[4]

The Glossary Of Latin Music Terms^[5] agrees with *tumba / conga / quinto*, but defines the extra *super quinto* drum, smaller than the quinto. The term *tres golpes* may also be used for the *conga*. Artdrum.com's History of Conga Drums^[6] also agrees with the terms *tumba / conga / quinto*, but allows the synonyms, added a drum *below* the tumba, which he called the *supertumba*.

Conga players are called *congueros*, while *rumberos* refers to those who dance following the path of the players. The term *conga* was popularized in the 1950s, when Latin music swept the United States. Cuban son and New York jazz fused together to create what was then termed mambo, but later became known as salsa. In that same period, the



A pair of congas



Front: A pair of congas.
Back: A pair of bongos.

popularity of the Conga Line helped to spread this new term. Desi Arnaz also played a role in the popularization of conga drums. However, the drum he played (which everyone called a conga drum at the time) was similar to the type of drum known as *boku* used in his hometown, Santiago de Cuba. The word *conga* came from the rhythm *la conga* used during *carnaval* (carnival) in Cuba. The drums used in *carnaval* could have been referred to as *tambores de conga* since they played the rhythm *la conga*, and thus translated into English as *conga drums*.

Playing techniques

Strokes

There are five basic strokes:

- Open tone (*tono abierto*): played with the four fingers near the rim of the head, producing a clear resonant tone with a distinct pitch.
- Muffled or mute tone (*tono ahogado*): like the open tone, is made by striking the drum with the four fingers, but holding the fingers against the head to muffle the tone.
- Bass tone (*tono bajo*): played with the full palm on the head. It produces a low muted sound.
- Slap tone (*tono seco*): the most difficult technique producing a loud clear "popping" sound (when played at fast and short intervals is called *floreo*, played to instill emotion in the dancer).
- Touch tone (*toque de punta*): as implied by the name, this tone is produced by just touching the fingers or heel of the palm to the drum head. It is possible to combine a touch of the palm with a touch of the fingers in a maneuver called *heel-toe* (*manoteo*), which can be used to produce the conga equivalent of drumrolls.



A pair of Latin Percussion conga drums

The *moose call* or *glissando* is done by rubbing the third finger, supported by the thumb, across the head of the drum. The finger is sometimes moistened with saliva or sweat, and sometimes a little coat of beeswax is put on the surface of the conga head to help make the sound.^[7] ^[8] The moose call is also done on the bongos.

To bend the pitch of the congas, a *conguero* sometimes uses his elbow to shift around on and apply pressure to different parts of the head; this causes the note to change. This is not a traditional stroke, but it is common in modern salsa and rumba.

Occasionally sticks are used on congas: some sticks, such as the Regal Tip's ^[9] conga sticks are made to imitate the sound of a hand hitting a conga; even timpani mallets, timbale sticks, etc. have been used on congas, despite the fact that the conga is usually called a hand drum.^[10]

Rhythms

Afro-Cuban

There are various rhythms for the conga, the most well-known being the marcha. This rhythm is commonly played on 1 to 3 congas, but has no true limit for the amount used. The marcha is the most common rhythm in Salsa/Son. Some songs that include the marcha or slight variations (Guajira)(chachacha) of the rhythm are:

- *Oye Como Va* by Tito Puente
- *Pedro Navaja* by Willie Colón and Rubén Blades
- *Se Le Ve* by Andy Montañez and Daddy Yankee
- *Watermelon Man* by Mongo Santamaría
- *Los Dos Jueyes* by Domingo Quiñones and Zion
- *Amor Verdadero* and *A Maria Le Gusta* by Afro Cuban All Stars
- *Quizas, Quizas, Quizas* by Omara Portuondo and Teresa Garcia Cartula
- *Armonias del Romane* by Tomatito
- *Soy Guanaco Salvadoreño* by Bobby Rivas
- *Hoy tenemos* by Sidestepper
- *Ahora Vengo Yo* by Anthonious Meer, Richie Ray & Bobby Cruz
- *Hipocrecía* by Fruko y sus Tesos
- *Escucha el Rithmo* by Spanish Harlem Orchestra
- *Me Voy Pa Cali* by Oscar D'León
- *Boogaloo Chevere* by Sonora Carruseles
- *Virus* by Bamboleo
- *Oye Baila Mi Onda* by Orquesta Aragón
- *El Barrio del Pilar* by Orquesta Broadway
- *Bodas de Oro* by Cheo Belen Puig

Countless other songs use this rhythm.

There is also the bolero rhythm, which goes 1-2-3 1-2 1-2-3. Being very similar to the marcha, it involves a minimum of two congas and can be heard on:

- *Buena Vista Social Club* by Buena Vista Social Club
- *Melodia del Rio* by Ruben González
- *Besame Mucho* by Andrea Bocelli
- *La Puerta* by Luis Miguel

More complex rhythms can be heard in the music of Santería and Abakua rituals, many of which also apply to the bata drums, such as Guarapachangueo and Chacha-lokafun. In Cuba, variants of Guaguanco, Bembe, and Abakua change from province to province, so there is no true stating to what is or isn't correct.

Afro-Dominican

The merengue rhythm, used in orchestral merengue, goes 1 2-1-2. It can also be heard as 1-2-1-2 1-2-1-2-1-2. Essentially, it is the rhythm of the tambora applied to conga. This can be heard on Elvis Crespo's *Suavemente* and Grupo Mania's *Me Miras y Te Miro*. Originally, this rhythm was derived from the trap drumming of African slaves from various animist religions. In merengue tipico the rhythm is usually more complex and less standardized; it can range from simply hitting the conga on a fourth beat to playing full patterns that mark the time.

The rhythm of Palos is also representative of what we can call Afro-Dominican music. The drums are made out of hollowed-out tree trunks, and they are used both for secular and religious music in Santo Domingo and Haiti. The drums are called palos (alcahuete, palo mayor and adulon); the balsie is another drum which is played with both the feet and the hands; the player sits on it and uses a friction technique called 'arrugao'. Panderos are also used in

Dominican folk music, like Congos, Salve and Palos. The Dominican version of the 'clave' is 'la canoita', which are two sticks which are struck against each other, and one of them has a handle. In the Gaga they also use palo drums and in the rhythm called Palo de Muerto, which is played when a member of the cofradia or brotherhood dies. The rhythm of palos is played throughout the Dominican Republic and is the national dance of the country. This music was suppressed and persecuted during Trujillo's rule due to social and racial discrimination.

Afro-Colombian

The cumbia rhythm, simple and slowly played, goes 1-2-2-1, also heard as 1-2-1-2. It can be heard in Fito Olivares's *Mosaico Fiestero* and *La Cumbia Sampuesana y La Cumbia Cienaguera* by Ancieto Molino y Los Sabaneros. It was an important thing to know

Other genres

There are many other kinds of rhythms for the conga. It is constantly applied in new genres of music, therefore taking up the rhythms of that specific style, such as punta, reggaeton, Brazilian forms such as samba and bossa nova, and even reggae, funk, go-go, and country music.

Tuning

Conga drums are tunable to different notes. The original drums were tuned by adjusting knots and tension ropes on the drumhead, or, where the drum-heads were tacked or nailed to the top of the shell, by careful heating of the head. Modern congas use a screw-and-lug tension head system which makes them easier to tune (or detune) this modern type of tension system is attributed to Carlos "Patato" Valdes a popular Cuban Conguero. As was discussed above, terminology for the drums varies. Here, the naming system used is a composite of those mentioned before with those currently in use by major conga manufacturers. The drums are discussed in order from largest to smallest; the sizes of the drumheads given vary considerably by manufacturer, model, and style.

- The **supertumba** can be as large as 14 inches across (35.5 cm).
- The **tumba** is typically 12 to 12.5 inches across (30.5 to 31.8 cm).
- The **conga** is typically 11.5 to 12 inches across (29.2 to 30.5 cm).
- The **quinto** is typically around 11 inches across (about 28 cm).
- The **requinto** can be smaller than 10 inches across (24.8 cm).
- The **ricardo** can be as small as 9 inches across (22.9 cm). Since this drum is typically played while hanging from a shoulder strap, it is considerably shorter and narrower than a traditional conga.

Tuning Systems

Congas, being percussive instruments, do not have to be tuned to any particular note in purely percussive settings. However, when playing with harmonic instruments, they may be tuned to specific notes. Congas are often tuned using the **open tone** (see above). In general, the particular note will depend on the make, model, and size of the conga drum. The drum should be tuned so that the bass tone resonates, the open tone rings, and the slap pierces through the musical mix. If the tuning is too loose, the bass and slap tones will sound "flabby"; too tight, and the drums will sound unnatural and "pinched." With a single drum, it is easy to tighten the drum until it makes a pleasing sound and then tighten a little more to reach a uniform desired pitch. It is very important to ensure that tuning is uniform around the drumhead, which can be checked by placing one finger pad in the center of the head and tapping the head near the edge above each lug location to detect any change, adjusting as necessary. Uniform tightness will help "let the drum speak."

Another important consideration is that head tension can greatly impact the ease or unease of the player, and generally a looser drumhead can lead to hand injury more than a tighter one, because a looser drumhead has less rebound and more muffling effect (hence potentially bruising joints and bones under spirited playing). Also,

producing a crisp slap tone is nearly impossible on a loose head. During tuning it is suggested to "let the drum speak" and to conform tuning reasonably closely to the natural resonance (pitch) that the cavity of the drum interior presents. This resonance can be heard by singing or playing loud notes near the drum opening (this is true of tuning any drum) and noticing which pitch decays slowest (that will either be the fundamental [resonant] frequency or one of its simple overtones).

When two or more drums are used, there is a potential for more variation of which notes are chosen, however tuning between or during compositions is rare in live performance. With only two drums, it is common to find them tuned a perfect fourth apart (the same interval used in "Here Comes the Bride") as is the tradition in western classical music for the timpani. Having three drums (typically the *tumba*, *conga*, and *quinto*) invites experimentation and individual customization. Some *congueros* like using the intervals of a major chord (e.g. F, A, C). Some players use the second inversion of a major chord (e.g. G, C, E); and some prefer a major second between the *quinto* and *conga*, with a perfect 4th descending to the *tumba*. Raul Rekow of Santana often plays five conga drums and tunes them to the opening phrase of a Latin tune.

Notes

- [1] Introduction to the Conga Drum (<http://www.drumdojo.com/learning/congaintro1.htm>)
- [2] The Conga Page (<http://www.rhythmweb.com/conga/>) at Rhythm Web (<http://rhythmweb.com/>)
- [3] Music of Puerto Rico (http://www.musicofpuertorico.com/en/instruments_conga.html)
- [4] The Conga Drum: an Introduction (<http://pertout.customer.netspace.net.au/lcongas.htm>)
- [5] <http://www.salsaholic.de/glossary.htm>
- [6] http://artdrum.com/HISTORY_OF_CONGA_DRUMS.htm
- [7] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ndBcvNX-BU> Moose call (using beeswax)
- [8] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0lqCmpd1PM> Another way to do the moose call
- [9] <http://www.regaltip.com>
- [10] <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conga> Definition of Conga (Hand drum)

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- Dworsky, Alan; Betty Sansby (1995). *Conga Drumming: A Beginner's Guide to Playing with Time*. Dancing Hands. ISBN 0-9638801-0-1.
- Sanchez, Poncho; Chuck Silverman (2002). *Poncho Sanchez' Conga Cookbook*. Cherry Lane Music. ISBN 1-57560-363-2.
- Warden, Nolan (2005). "A History of the Conga Drum" ([http://www.nolanwarden.com/Conga_Drum_History\(Warden\).pdf](http://www.nolanwarden.com/Conga_Drum_History(Warden).pdf)) (PDF). *Percussive Notes* **43** (1): 8–15. Retrieved 2006-07-07.

External links

- Instruments (<http://www.m2musica.com.ar/Percussion>).
- Introduction to the Conga Drum (<http://www.drumdojo.com/learning/congaintro1.htm>) at the Drum Dojo (<http://www.drumdojo.com/switchbo.htm>).
- Plans to build your own conga drum (<http://www.danmahony.com/conga.htm>).
- online community for conga and other world percussion (<http://www.newworlddrumming.com>)
- [http://www.nolanwarden.com/Conga_Drum_History\(Warden\).pdf](http://www.nolanwarden.com/Conga_Drum_History(Warden).pdf) - Information on the Origin of Congas and other facts.
- Percussion Conga Anatomy (<http://www.percussionconga.com/beginners-conga/percussion-conga-anatomy>).

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