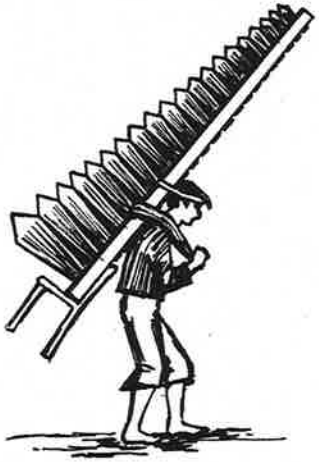
THE MARIMBAS OF GUATEMALA



Vida Chenoweth

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Dedicated to
Dr. Bernardo Del Valle and his wife Clara and the children,
all of whom so graciously accepted me into their household
during my first months in Guatemala

PREFACE

While I was compiling my research notes in Antigua, Guatemala, the houseboy approached and began to question me about my nearing departure. Was New York big? Was it far away? Where was it? With that I opened one of my books which had a map in it and pointed to the city of New York, and while my finger skimmed over the United States he broke in with "Where is Guatemala?" The tip of my finger slid quickly across Mexico and all but hid the country of Guatemala. When he observed the tiny green patch on my map which was supposed to represent his country he drew back and contended, "Guatemala is bigger than that!" I thought, "How right you are."

I had felt the same way as the houseboy when I first became aware of the neglected place of the marimba. As a youngster setting out to write my first term paper, I chose the topic of "marimba" because it was the instrument I was learning to play, and I wanted to know all there was to know about it. As I fingered across the tops of the file cards in the M-N drawer of the card catalog of the local library, however, I discovered for the first time a disenchanting gap between "marigold" and "marine." There was no entry for the marimba, and I responded like the houseboy, "But the marimba is important!"

Filling in that gap between marigold and marine became a pastime pursued for many years and has revealed what was to me an unbelievable paucity of information on an important instrument. What is more, no two references ever seemed to agree; and in one a "marimba" might be a few

rough slabs thrown over a pit and beat upon by savages while in another it would be a fad of the jazz era. In the midst of a vague and confused terminology I made many false starts. For long periods I tried to trace or identify such misnomers as the African *sanza,* which turned out to be a very small instrument with metal tongues and in no way an ancestor of the instrument I played. I browsed through early Spanish accounts which referred to the *tympano,* for a long while assumed to be the Central American marimba, but when I came upon a sketch of the instrument, I found myself no further along than before, for the *tympano* was only a kettle drum.

As a student in Chicago I became further aware of how little most people knew of the marimba and of the commonly held opinion that it was not an "accepted" instrument. It became my intention to end some of the misconceptions surrounding the marimba, and what better way was there than to fulfill a childhood wish to visit Guatemala, where the marimba is the characteristic native instrument. Accordingly, in 1955, I applied for a research fellowship to go to Guatemala to discover what is known of the marimba's origin there and to give a description of the instrument and of its place in native life.

Along the way my quest was encouraged by two friends, Mimi and George Bedell, of New Haven, Connecticut. George, an anthropologist, was employed at the Human Relations Area Files, Inc., and allowed me to go through the anthropological reports of this organization in search of information on the marimba and its counterparts. In the files was much valuable information on the marimba in

Africa, and I was encouraged further on the place of the marimba in Guatemala when the following excerpt from a report was sent to me by the Bedells:

"In all this welter of events on these concert nights there is only one where Indian and Ladino participate as equals. That is the playing of the marimba. It is not uncommon to find marimba crews composed partly of Indian and partly of Ladino men. Indian marimba players are considered generally better than their Ladino colleagues and there is greater demand for their services than for those of the Ladinos. These joint musical efforts result in the closest semblance to fraternity between Indian and Ladino to appear in all of San Luis [Jilotepeque, Guatemala] life."[1]

Appropriately, the day I returned to New York from a weekend with the Bedells in New Haven after my 1956 concert tour, I received in the mail a notice that my application for the fellowship had been successful, and as the grateful recipient of a grant from the Inter-American Cultural Exchange Act, I departed for Guatemala City on February 21, 1957.

Whether it was to give me the directions to a certain village or to listen to a draft of a paragraph, persons too numerous to mention helped me write this book, but I would like here to acknowledge those persons who so willingly allocated time from their own busy schedules to contribute the data which made this book possible and those institutions which they represent.

[1] Melvin A. Tumin, *Caste in a Peasant Society* (Princeton, N.J., 1952), p. 187.

Therefore, to Licenciado David Vela, director of the newspaper *El Imparical* and professor of anthropology at San Carlos University in Guatemala City, to whom I am greatly indebted for bibliographical information and consultation; to Carole Wilson, my good friend, to whom I owe special thanks for explanation of local customs and advice in translation; to the Dirreción General de Bellas Artes, Sr. Mario Alvarado Rubio, Director; to the Museo Nacional, Coronel Rolando Chincilla Aguilar, Director; to the Ministerio de Educación, Dr. Enrique Quiñonez, Director; to the United States Information Service, Paul F. Glynn, Cultural Affairs Officer; to the Instituto Guatemalteco-Americano, Irving S. Lewis and Anthony C. Chapell, Directors; to the Instituto Indigenista Nacional, Sr. Juan De Dios Rosales, Director; to the Biblioteca Nacional, Sr. Benjamín Godoy, Director; and, not least, to the marimberos and marimba-makers of Guatemala, my warm thanks.

V.S.C.

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INTRODUCTION

Increased popular interest in folk music in the United States, an interest not only in the music of this country but in that of other lands as well, has brought with it an increased interest in the marimba as well as in other native instruments. Unfortunately there has been no accompanying increase in reliable knowledge of the marimba or of its antecedents, outside of the specialists in ethnomusicology. One can find the development of this instrument attributed variously to the American Indian, to the Hungarian, or to the Spaniard, to name but a few of possibilities suggested. In addition, the marimba in the United States has long been considered little more than a novelty—from

the days of vaudeville where an exhibition on the so-called xylophone was something akin to legerdemain to the days of the Latin dance band where the marimba was part of an exotic performance which had little intrinsic relation to the instrument. To dispel the mistaken assumptions of the marimba's origin and to show it not as a novelty but as an intrinsic part of a musical culture is the purpose of this study.

The three types of marimbas now found in Guatemala are described, beginning with the chromatic marimba, the one most similar to the marimba manufactured commercially nowadays outside Guatemala, discussing next the primitive gourd marimba, which is most nearly akin to the marimba's African antecedents, and concluding with transitional marimbas, which the Indians still use. Details of construction are given, and the typical musical styles and techniques are discussed. In order that the marimba may be viewed as a part of its culture, some attention is given to local customs and practices in which it figures; this treatment, however, does not aim at completeness. Finally, the last chapter surveys briefly the probable line of development of the marimba in the Old World and examines its history in the New with particular notice to the question of its origin here.

What is a marimba, and how does the Guatemalan instrument differ from those of other countries? In technical terminology, it is a percussion, or struck, instrument based upon the acoustic principles of vibration and amplification. Physically it consists of a series of parallel wooden bars or keys supported by a framework which allows them to vibrate freely and which also supports the resonance chambers that hang beneath each key. It is these resonance chambers that

differentiate the marimba from its close relative the xylophone, which, strictly, does not have them. (A twentieth century innovation, the vibraphone or vibraharp, differs from the marimba and the xylophone in having metal keys and rotating discs inside the resonance chambers which effect a vibrato.)

Manufacturers in North America have confused the distinction by adding resonators to the xylophone to improve its tonal quality while continuing to call it a xylophone. Both instruments, however, continue to be manufactured, thus indicating their distinctiveness, and in practice there is a difference in tuning which serves further to distinguish them. The xylophone, used in large concert ensembles, should be able to penetrate even the massive sound of an entire symphony orchestra; accordingly it is tuned with a predominant partial heard an octave and a fifth above the fundamental tone. With a high register it is all the more penetrating, and low registers are seldom even included on xylophones made in the United States. By contrast, the marimba, as manufactured in North America, is tuned with a predominant partial heard two octaves above the fundamental, and its tone is therefore more consonant than the xylophone's and is easily overshadowed by other instruments unless great care is taken to prevent this.

Among themselves marimbas differ chiefly in the musical scale to which they are tuned and in the type of material used for the resonators. The commercially manufactured instrument in North America always has tubular resonators of metal, but in Guatemala the resonators may be gourds, elongated wooden boxes, or occasionally sections of bamboo.

For tuning, the North American marimba uses the chromatic scale while in Guatemala there are two scales in use. One of these is a seven-note diatonic scale of more or less equal intervals (not unlike the major scale), which is used by the Indians; the other is the chromatic scale, which is used by the ladinos, those people of Indian descent who no longer follow the native customs.

In Guatemala the manufacture of marimbas is done entirely by hand, and each instrument is made to fill a special order. The makers disapprove the use of any metal in their instruments, partly in order to point up the hand workmanship and partly to ensure the mellowness of sound. For the instruments are judged not only by their tone but also by the carving and inlay work which they exhibit.

While the physical differences between the North American and Guatemalan instruments do not appear so great as to affect the playing, in practice this is not the case. A North American player on attempting to play the Guatemalan chromatic marimba is first of all aware of the narrower keys, and as a result, all the intervals are smaller than those to which he is accustomed so that when he intends to strike an octave, for instance, he goes beyond it to a ninth or a tenth. There is another difference which tends to confuse his kinesthetic sense. In the United States the keys of the marimba are arranged like those of a piano, with the sharps raised and centered between the natural or "white" keys; on the Guatemalan instrument, however, the sharps are usually raised squarely over the natural keys. Though the difference is slight visually and structurally, it is an obstacle which is almost insurmountable to the performer whose interval

patterns have become mentally fixed to the keyboard of the North American instrument.

To exchange one type of playing mallets for the other would also be a difficult adjustment on the part of the player, and the difference in weight, resiliency, and length of the mallet are more important to a player's adjustment than a change in timbre. The timbre, or characteristic tone quality, depends upon the amount and kind of material used for the mallet head. In the United States mallet heads may be various gradations of small rubber balls or these wrapped in some kind of yarn, but in Guatemala the mallet head is formed almost exclusively by wrapping raw rubber strands around the end of the stick handle, with some of the Indians occasionally using balls of wax. The handle of the Guatemalan mallet is about 17½ inches long and is stiff. The North American mallet is about 5 inches shorter and is flexible, placing emphasis on the mallet head as a quasi-independent initiator of tone governed by the wrist and fingers rather than as a tone initiator fixed to an extension of the arm. How much of playing technique is determined by the kind of mallets used is a subject worthy of consideration itself, for obviously the North American must be more sweeping and dynamic in the motion of his body when he uses short mallets and is expected to cover the full keyboard in his playing and when there is a constant rebounding of the mallet because of the flexible handle. By contrast, the Guatemalan player has to move very little since he plays with longer mallets on narrower keys and since, because of Guatemalan practice, he covers only part of the keyboard.

A difference in the use of the word "marimba" itself

might well be pointed out here. In North America the word exclusively designates a single musical instrument, but in Guatemala and throughout Central America and Mexico it has an expanded meaning. It may refer to one diatonic marimba or to a pair of chromatic ones whose composite range approximates that of the piano; it may also apply to one instrument of the pair or to the pair *and* their players. In Guatemala the music played on a pair of chromatic instruments is customarily distributed among seven players or *marimberos*—usually men—with four players at the larger instrument and three at the smaller one; even when other instruments are added to this ensemble, such as trap drums, string bass, trumpet, or saxophone, the whole is still referred to as "a marimba" or "the marimba."

The primary materials for this study were gathered on two trips to Guatemala, which took place in 1957 and in 1960. On these trips marimba-makers, marimba players, composers, anthropologists, and archaeologists were interviewed. Numerous trips were made to marimba studios and to Indian festivals to observe the techniques of playing and to note characteristic music and musical styles. Other trips were made to archaeological sites and to museums to gain information on the marimba's history in the New World. In addition to the field work, narratives and original documents of Spanish exploration and colonization were examined for whatever data they might furnish on the marimba and its history in the Americas. Behind this was a pastime, of ten years' duration, of reading the known literature on the marimba, both with regards to the Americas and to the Old World. To gain some knowledge beforehand of the native

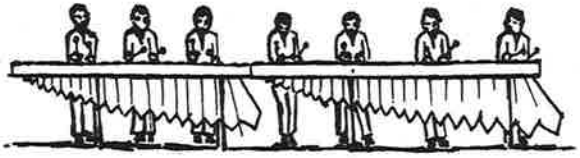
music of Guatemala, numerous private tape recordings and appropriate records from the Yurchenko collection of Latin American Indian music were studied. All of these things contributed their share to this study and its conclusions, but the greater share came from actual contact with the marimbas of Guatemala and with the people associated with them.

All the places named in the book were visited personally during the two trips made to Guatemala, and although a great many other places were visited they added nothing to what was already known. Many of the areas investigated were remote, accessible at times only by foot-trails so that no equipment other than pencil and paper was taken, and the research was carried on alone. It often happened that upon arrival at a village there was no music to be heard because of a miscalculation in the date of a fiesta or because of some apprehension on the part of the villagers. Sometimes a distrust of strangers would cause them to give false information or to deny the existence of their marimba in order to protect it from some unknown danger, and it was not uncommon to have to repeat a journey several times in order to establish the trust needed for communication.

All reports of the Indian gourd marimba were especially investigated, but many of these journeys were to no avail. It should be emphasized that one has opportunity to see and hear the Indian marimba very rarely, only during certain celebrations or during late practice sessions which take place irregularly. The Indians who play the gourd marimba work in the fields during the day and practice at night, but not every night! No plan involving the Indian gourd marimba ever seemed a sure one as regards timing or location, and

although it is reputed to be "heard everywhere in the highlands," four months were devoted exclusively to the quest for a gourd marimba which was still in habitual use.

Wherever the marimba is found, the playing of it and the constructing of it are highly specialized occupations that require an unstinting dedication, and the Guatemalan is exemplary. He is a distinctive artisan not only because of the instruments he produces but because all aspects of their construction fall to him, and such a gross task is necessarily motivated by a genuine devotion to both the instrument and the fabrication of it. After an instrument is finished, some colorful name is given to it, such as "Woods of My Land" *(Maderas de mi Tierra),* "Captive Soul" *(Alma Cautiva)* or "Highland Star" *(Estrella Altense),* in further illustration of the devotion and poetic attitude toward that implement of music for which Guatemala is famous—the marimba.



2

THE CHROMATIC MARIMBA OR *MARIMBA DOBLE*

In Guatemala the marimba that one hears today—playing in the municipal parks on weekends, over the radio, in the hotels, at fiestas—is most likely to be the chromatic marimba or the *marimba doble* or, less commonly, the *marimba cuache.* As the Spanish names suggest, the chromatic marimba actually consists of two separate instruments, one slightly larger than the other, the larger being called *marimba grande,* the smaller known variously as *marimba cuache, requinto* (fife), *piccolo,* or *tenor.*

The construction of these instruments is a slow process, for all of the work is done by hand with the care which befits an object that plays so important a part in the life of its

country as does the marimba in Guatemala. Since orders for marimbas are infrequent, most marimba-makers spend perhaps half their time doing such things as cabinet-making and coffin-making which make use of their skill in working with wood, particularly in carving and inlay work. The *fábrica* or workshop of such marimba-makers is usually no more than a small room and patio heaped with chunks of wood and parts in the various stages of manufacture; more often than not it is a portion of the house. The Barrios family (formerly of Guatemala City) maintained a larger fábrica, employing some five or six workers, and constructed marimbas for a wide market, including Mexico and all of Central America. But, regardless of the size of the fábrica, the instruments are always made to order and the output is small. The fábrica Barrios, for example might produce as many as fifteen marimba dobles (pairs of chromatic marimbas) a year while a small fábrica with only one worker might only complete from one to four marimba dobles in a year's time.

The most demanding task in constructing a marimba is making the keys, as they are tuned while they are being shaped. The first step in the manufacture, of course, is the selection of wood, and in Guatemala, the keys are made from the wood of either of two trees—hormigo (*Platymiscium dimorphandrum* Donn) which produces wood of three kinds, black, red, and white, and granadillo rojo (*Amerimon granadillo),* with hormigo being preferred by most marimba-makers. Strangely, while hormigo grows most plentifully in the coastal regions and in the Petén jungle, most marimbas are made in the highlands of the interior. Amelio García, a marimba-maker of Huehuetenango, customarily ordered his

hormigo from the town of Barillas in the lowlands, a four-day trip on horseback.

Surrounding the choice of wood is much of the folklore that has gathered about the construction of the marimba. One legend has it that the keys of the first marimba were made from a female tree who was cut down and dragged away from her lover and they ever afterward sang her mournful lament. At any rate, common among marimba-makers is the belief that only the female tree may be used in fashioning the keyboard; to justify this belief to those who are inquisitive, they say that the wood of the male tree is inferior because it is full of knotholes, an assertion which has no basis in fact. Amelio García does not believe the knothole superstition, however. According to him, the prime consideration is the age of the wood, the older, darker wood being the best. Workmen at the fábrica Barrios even prefer that the wood be dried for several years after it had been cut as the drier wood is the more resonant.

In making the keys for his instruments Amelio García uses only the heartwood of the hormigo, a wood so hard that an adze is required to shape it. Since the trunk of this tree averages only 1½ to 2½ feet in diameter, more than one tree is needed to furnish the necessary wood for the keys of a marimba keyboard. The wood is fashioned into elongated rectangles, thickest at the ends through which a crosswise hole is drilled for stringing the keys but hollowed out under the center portion. In size the keys diminish gradually from bass to treble; the dimensions of the largest and smallest keys of a typical marimba doble (the "Ave Lira" marimba of Antigua) are shown in Figure 1.

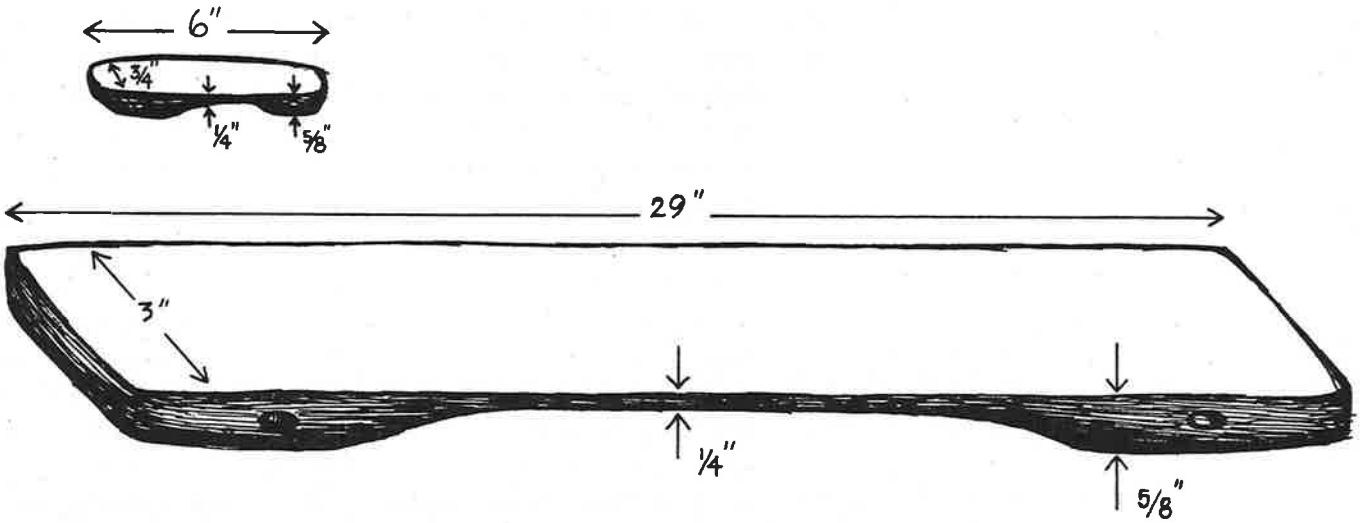


FIGURE 1. Dimensions of the largest and smallest keys of the Ave Lira marimba

Occasionally one may find today (as the author did in a practice studio in Huehuetenango) a marimba doble whose keys have been carved at the ends into a scalloped effect, a style that prevailed during the first quarter of this century. (Fig. 2.)

To tune the keys, a tuning fork (usually *F*) is sounded to find the first pitch, and the rest of the keys are tempered relative to it. It is not standard procedure to tune in octaves, but each pitch is found separately; consequently, a tuner is likely to stray from the original pitch by the time he reaches the extremity of the keyboard. Some, like Mariano Reyes

Andrade of Guatemala City, still use a cherished old bottle (this particular bottle sounds middle *C*) to establish the initial pitch. To adjust the tone finely, the marimba-maker shaves the keys underneath—subtracting in this manner from the center of the key lowers its pitch while shaving the end of the key raises its pitch.

After they are tuned, the keys are rubbed vigorously with a smooth seashell *(concha caracol)* or a smooth bottle in order to close the pores of the wood. This gives such high luster

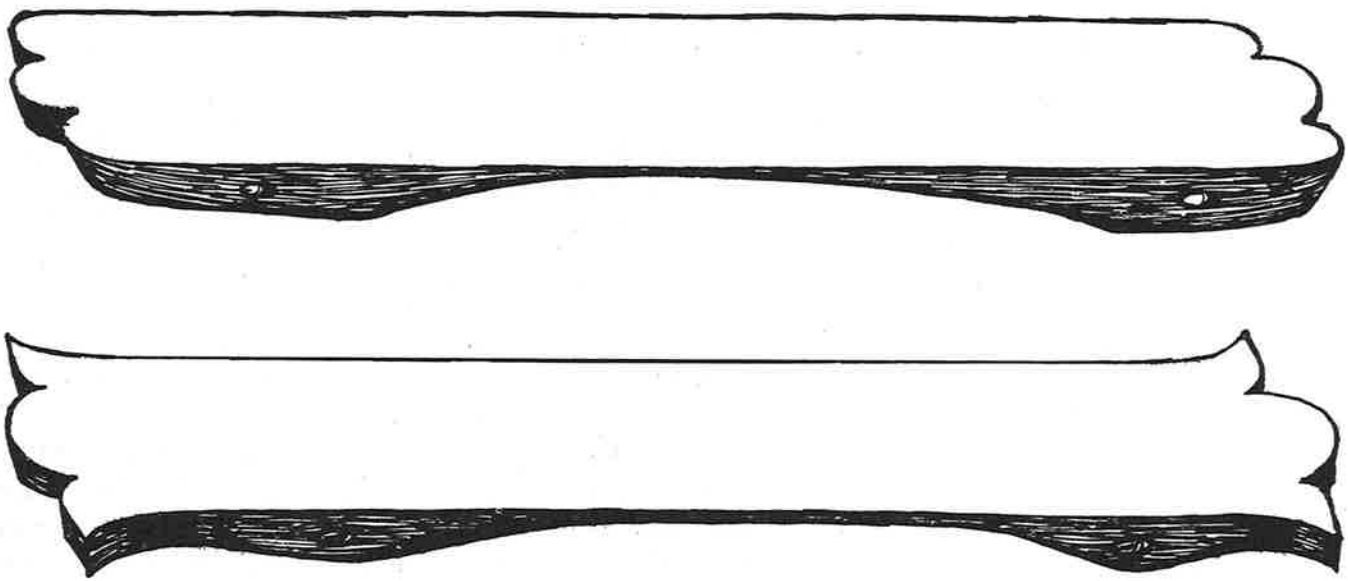
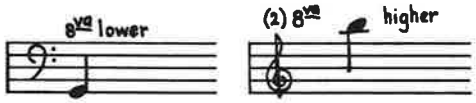


FIGURE 2. Examples of carved marimba keys

to the wood that the keys appear to have been waxed, but no finish or polish is applied to them.

Although it may fluctuate a few notes, the range of the two instruments of the marimba doble generally is:

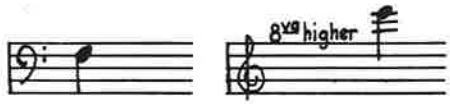
MARIMBA GRANDE



G to B

6 octaves plus 4 semitones

MARIMBA CUACHE



F to E

3 octaves plus 10 semitones

(See music illustration 1 in Appendix B.)

To support the keys so they can vibrate freely and to hold them in place above the resonators, the Guatemalan marimba has between each key a small wooden peg with an eyelet in it. These are inserted into holes drilled along the top of the rails which support the keys and through them is run the cord on which the keys are threaded. This feature of construction, as pointed out in a subsequent chapter, appears to be original with the Guatemalans.

The most distinctive feature of any marimba, both visually and acoustically, is the resonance chambers beneath each key. In general shape the resonators or *cajónes* of the Guatemalan marimba doble are widest near the lower end, tapering upward gradually to a width which does not exceed that of the key whose note they amplify and tapering downward rather sharply to a point. In overall size they increase from the treble to the bass. The dimensions of a

typical resonator at the extreme bass end are 3 feet long and 9 inches through at its maximum width; corresponding dimensions for the smallest resonator at the treble end are 1½ inches and one inch. The increase in size of the resonators gives the Guatemalan chromatic marimba a characteristic somewhat ungainly appearance, for near the bass end of the instrument the resonators become so crowded that they can no longer hang straight down and the last one sticks out approximately 20 degrees from the vertical. The resonators are constructed by gluing strips of wood—native cedar or cypress or occasionally mahogany—at right angles to form an elongated box open at the top. A wooden lip at the mouth of the resonator extends over two rails which support the resonators and keep them in place. (See Fig. 3.)

Since the marimba doble is chromatic, there are two rows of resonators—one row for the "naturals" and one for the

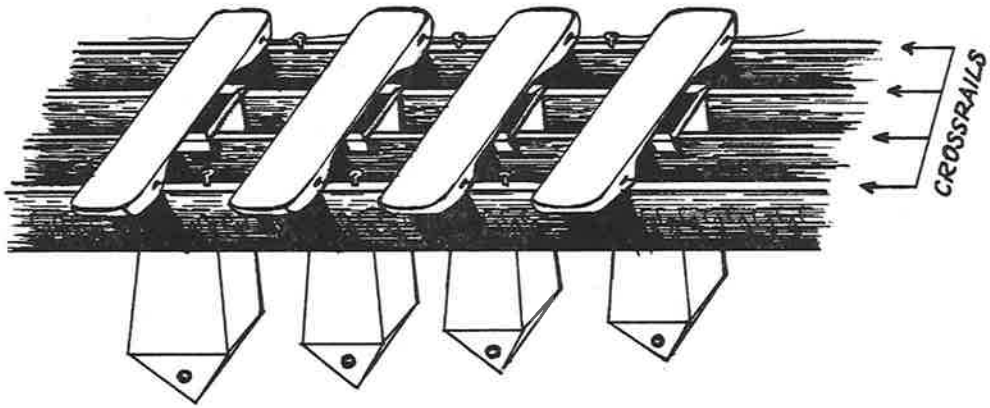


FIGURE 3. Arrangement of keys and resonators of the marimba doble

"sharps." The spaces between the sharps are filled in with nonfunctional resonators in order to give a uniform appearance, to distribute the weight evenly, and to protect the resonators, since damage is less likely to occur when the row is compact. These nonfunctional resonators are sometimes ornamented and made of a different kind of wood.

Characteristic of the Guatemalan marimba is a slight buzzing sound, called *charleo,* which accompanies the notes as they are played. This sound is produced by a delicate membrane, taken from the intestine of a pig, that covers a small aperture located near the bottom of each resonator. The membrane is attached to the resonator with a circle of beeswax, black in color and very pliable; it is the same wax used by the Indians at times to form mallet heads. Here again with this membrane one encounters the "female" superstition of the marimba, for marimba-makers believe that the intestine must be taken from a female pig because the female tissue is the more delicate and sensitive, a belief for which there appears to be no real basis. In the province of San Marcos, however, marimba-makers use a membrane from a plant called *cheché* instead of pig intestine. To the Guatemalans the charleo, or sympathetic vibration, is an extension of the marimba's tone and is viewed as an integral part of its tonal quality.

The function of the resonator is to amplify and sustain the tone of the vibrating key above it so that in a real sense the resonator also must be tuned; that is, it must be constructed so that the air within it will vibrate at the same rate as its key. The precision in tuning the resonators, however, is not so great as it is with the keys. A resonator's volume

may be decreased by cutting down its sides at the open end; correspondence of resonator to key is then tested by holding the key above the resonator and tapping it with a mallet. If the membrane vibrates, the resonator is in tune; if it does not, it may be adjusted by resealing or loosening it. Most marimba-makers copy the dimensions of the resonators from those of another instrument; some have them written down. The late Rosendo Barrios standardized the dimensions of all the resonators made in his fábrica to simplify this stage in the construction of his marimbas.

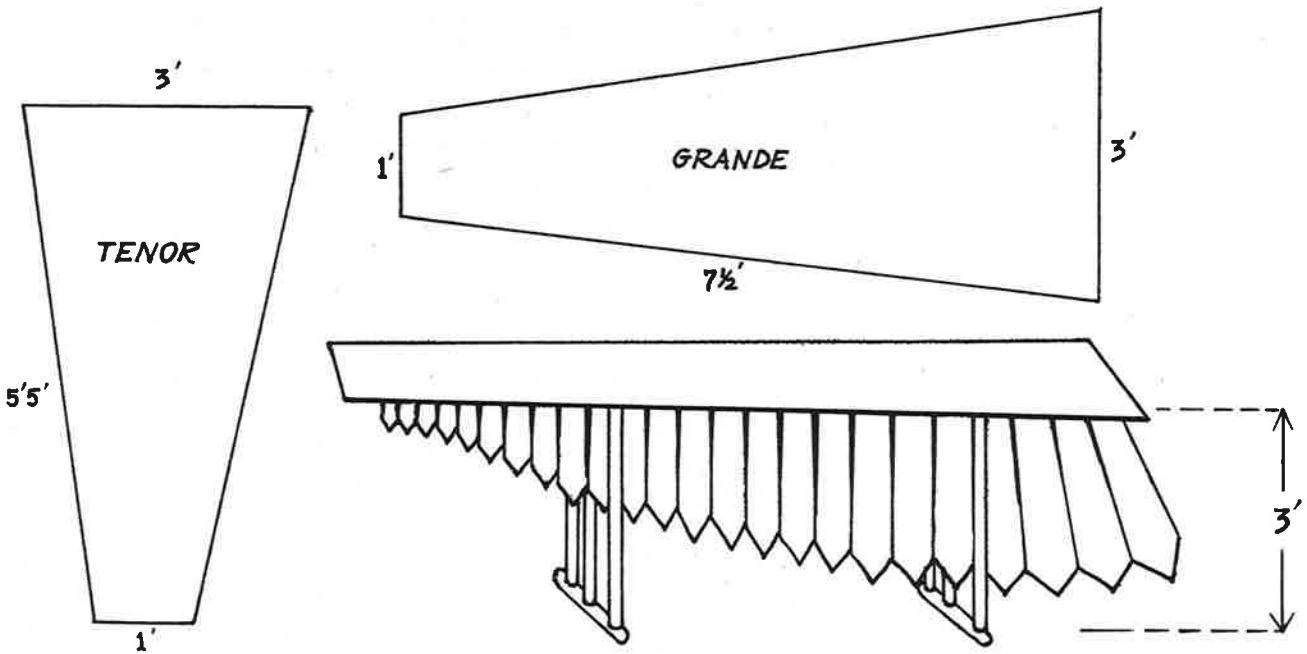


FIGURE 4. Dimensions of the marimba doble

The frame of the marimba doble consists of the rails supporting the keys and the resonators which are fastened by boards at each end. Each instrument has two sets of three legs, located off-center to support the heavier, bass end. (See Fig. 4.) The frame may be Spanish cedar, mahogany, or rosewood, and if there is inlay it appears on the ends of the marimba as well as the side of the rail which the audience sees. There, opposite the players, the name of the marimba may be inlaid as well as geometric designs which resemble the ones woven into the borders of Guatemalan skirts. Instead of using inlay work the marimba-maker may prefer to carve a floral pattern suggestive of tropical vegetation. More often than not the intricateness of the inlay or carving is the strongest factor in pricing an instrument. Traditionally, there are no metal parts in the construction of the Guatemalan marimba, not even a nail, and once the instrument is completed it is not dismantled. In one piece it is transported within a city sometimes by means of a two-wheel cart, or between cities by placing it upside down on the carriage-rack of a bus, but in the interior it is carried on the back of one of the players.

The Guatemalan playing mallets or *baquetas* are wooden sticks, about 5/8 inch wide, with strips of crude rubber wound around one end. They are inflexible and are about 17 inches in length. The most commonly used wood is *huitzicil,* which, like hormigo, grows in the coastal regions and must be imported into the highlands where most marimbas are made. It is a dry, brittle wood that splits easily into long, straight pieces and was formerly used by the Indians for making arrows. The mallet head is made in

varying thicknesses according to the tone color desired. The bass or *bajo* mallet head, for instance, is about 1¾ inches in diameter and produces a soft, nonpercussive tone while the extreme treble or *piccolo* mallet head is only ¾ inch in diameter and produces a brittle sound. The various types of mallets are assigned rather strictly to specific portions of the marimba keyboard and cannot be used elsewhere. The softest mallets, for example, are effective in the bass range, but are inaudible in the treble or piccolo range where the vibrations are short; and unless an especially percussive sound is desired, the piccolo or *tiple* mallets are too harsh for the bass register. In order of hardness, the piccolo mallets come first, followed by the tiple, the *centro,* and the bajo. (See Fig. 5.)

When played, the two instruments that make up the marimba doble are placed either end to end, at right angles to one another, or in a shallow vee. As a rule four men play at the larger instrument while three are at the smaller one. In Guatemala the standard marimba ensemble consists of the marimba doble with trap drums and string bass. When saxophones or trumpets are added, and often the marimba players themselves put down their mallets temporarily to play them, some Guatemalans disdainfully refer to the effect as "beans and mayonnaise" *(frijoles y mayonesa)* contending that the marimba sounds complete without the wind instruments since it is melodic as well as percussive, not unlike the piano.

Players of the marimba doble are traditionally ladino men, but all-women marimbas do exist, such as that of the Belén School for girls in Guatemala City and the marimba

Las Chivitas (little she-goats) of Quetzaltenango. There are however no known ensembles which include both men and women.

Marimba playing in Guatemala is often a family institution with the elder members of the family training the younger ones. It is not uncommon to discover that all seven marimberos of a marimba doble are related, and certain family names such as Ovalle, Barrios, Bethancourt, and Hurtado are famous in the field. It is rare that a player gains fame as a solo performer, for ensemble playing is the custom, and only three persons have become known as soloists of exceptional ability: Celso Hurtado, José Bethancourt and Efraín Tánchez. Hurtado is unequalled in his interpretations of the Indian folkstyle called the *son,* and he adds to his repertoire transcriptions of European works by such composers as Paganini and Liszt. José Bethancourt champions Guatemalan popular music, and Efraín Tánchez plays in a relaxed, jazz manner.

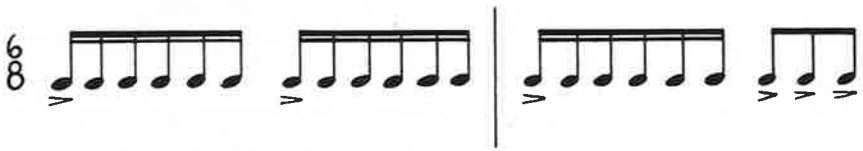
The average marimbero is a skillful technician whose entire repertoire is learned by ear. His formal music background is naturally limited or completely lacking, and his repertoire consists chiefly of popular dance music such as the waltz, foxtrot, Latin dances, medleys *(poporis)* and the *son,* which is 6/8 in meter with accents usually falling thus:

When European and North American music is transcribed, the deficiency in harmonic and stylistic training is apparent. A Viennese waltz, for instance, learned note for

note, would be rendered not in the Viennese style but in the Latin way, with extreme accelerations and crescendi and with exaggerated holds on notes of sentimental import. "Classical" music means to many marimberos little more than "foreign music not for dancing," and their "classical" repertoire may include Italian opera overtures, Viennese waltzes, and American marches. The Guatemalan marimbero is at his best playing the music of his own country. Usually lilting and frequently exciting, the popular music is suited to dancing and is infectious in both rhythmic and melodic appeal.

Marimbas vary considerably in their proficiency and taste as do musical ensembles anywhere. While some marimberos play sensitively and with a great deal of variety in tone production, others pound mercilessly, giving no thought to tone shading or melodic continuity but only to the maintenance of an unrelenting metrical beat. In addition to changing their dynamic level, skillful marimberos can play staccato by dampening the notes as they are played. This is accomplished by holding the mallets on the keys an instant after they are struck, preventing the keys' vibration. The mallet is ordinarily held with the index finger extending along the top of the handle, thus with little effort, damping is possible, and the mallet stays securely in hand. The players can also, within their usual 6/8 meter, produce interesting polyrhythmic effects. For example:

A rapid 6/8, stressing first and fourth beats, may effect a meter change in this way:



Sometimes, in this running 6/8, the sixteenth notes are played alternately on the two instruments, and it is common for the players to distribute segments of scales and arpeggios from player to player. The sense of timing and fluency of technic which they exhibit in doing this is amazing.

Each player of the marimba doble has an assigned register on the keyboard where he performs the melody (piccolo and tiple parts), harmony (centro) or bass (bajo). (Fig. 5.)

The bajo and centro players of the larger marimba hold three mallets (two in the right hand), theirs being the harmonic or chordal parts, while all the others play with two mallets. The piccolo and tiple parts of the larger marimba and the centro part of the tenor marimba all double the melody in single notes, while the tiple and piccolo parts of the tenor marimba also carry the melody but in double notes with the piccolo part an octave higher than the tiple. (See music illustration 2.)

Players in the treble range produce shrill tones with their hard mallets, and because the duration of vibration is short on these small keys, a fast roll is necessary, the player rapidly striking the key alternating the left-hand mallet with the right. The tiple and piccolo positions on the larger marimba are reputed to be the most difficult; they are the melodic

positions, with piccolo and tiple playing the same notes an octave apart, and to play them is technically demanding when there are elaborate variations on the melody. The leader often plays one of these positions, and frequently he is the composer-arranger for the group. With four players given melodic parts and two harmonic, the mellow bass notes are sometimes eclipsed; and the string bass was therefore added to the ensemble to fortify the bass part and the drum, to accentuate its rhythm.

The marimba ensembles hold their practice sessions in small studios—usually little more than bare rooms—which one may enter from the street just as one would a shop. In the cities of Guatemala, Antigua, Quetzaltenango, and Hue-

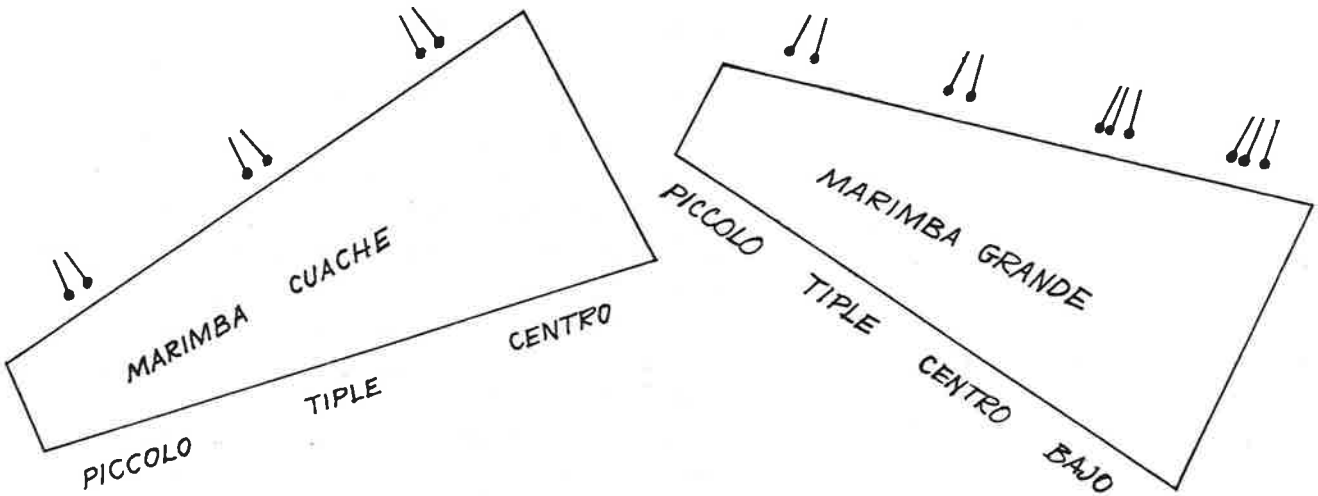


FIGURE 5. Registers of the marimba doble

huetenango are scattered many such studios, and as one walks along their streets in the evening—for most marimberos work at other jobs during the day—one may often hear the sound of a marimba and follow it to a studio where practice is being held. One such studio in Huehuetenango was small and dark, just large enough to hold the marimba doble and the players and two onlookers, and lit by a single candle stuck on a board protruding from the wall behind the larger marimba. The marimberos of this group ranged in age from 16 to 65. The eldest of them, who played the bass part, had made the instruments, which were poorly tuned though no one there seemed to mind. Other studios in Guatemala and in Antigua are perhaps equally stark but have electric light and are large enough to store all the instruments, including the string bass and the trap drums.

Socially, the marimberos occupy a low place. They have a reputation for being unkempt in appearance, so to say in Spanish that a person has the looks of a marimbero *(facha de marimbero)* is not a compliment. Yet, when performing, the men are neatly groomed; their hair is greased back and they wear their suits and white shirts. Some players dress uniformly in one of the colorful Guatemalan shirts—long-sleeved shirts with ornately embroidered cuffs and collars and with two stylized quetzals (the national bird of Guatemala) woven on the back.

The poetic feeling which the marimberos and the marimba-makers have for their marimba—a feeling that reveals their individual regard and the importance of the marimba in Guatemala—is particularly evident in the names they give to their instruments, a few of which are listed here.

Some Marimba Dobles of Guatemala

GUATEMALA CITY

"Maderas de mi Tierra" (Woods of My Land)
"Niña de Guatemala" (Little Girl of Guatemala)
"Chapinlandia" (Of the Guatemalans)
"Gloria Tecpaneca" (Glory of The Woman from Tecpan)
"Quiché Vinak" (People of Quiché)
"Maderas que Cantan" (Woods that Sing)
"Gallito" (Little Rooster)
"Sonora" (Sonorous)
"Guardia de Honor" (Guard of Honor, the army marimba)
"Estrella Azul" (Blue Star)
"Alma India" (Indian Soul)
"Monja Blanca" (White Nun)
"Alma Belenita" (Soul of Belén, a school for girls)

QUETZALTENANGO

"Voz de Occidente" (Voice of the West)
"Las Chivitas" (Little She-goats)
"Altenses" (Highlands)
"Estrella Altense" (Highland Star)

ANTIGUA

"Marimba Antigua" (Marimba of Antigua)
"Joya Antigua" (Joy of Antigua)
"Ave Lira" (Lyre Bird)

3

THE GOURD MARIMBA OR *MARIMBA CON TECOMATES*

The oldest type of Guatemalan marimba is the Indian marimba with gourd resonators, or *marimba con tecomates* (sometimes *marimba de tecomates*), of which there are two kinds. One of these, the *marimba de arco,* from its close similarity to certain African marimbas, is apparently the prototype of the instrument in Guatemala. It is identified by a bough of birch or cherry, bent into an arc and fastened to the ends of the instrument and is further identified by the fact that it has no legs. The second kind is similar to the first except that it possesses four legs instead of the arc. Both are diatonic rather than chromatic, and their use is becoming increasingly rare, the marimba de arco

27
THE GOURD MARIMBA OR *MARIMBA CON TECOMATES*

now being almost exclusively confined to the vicinity of Chichicastenango. Like all Guatemalan marimbas, the gourd ones are made entirely of wood; however, all their fastenings are hemp bindings.

In structure the gourd marimba is very much like the marimba doble, but smaller and more crudely assembled, without ornamentation or polished surfaces. To some it looks unfinished, but to others it represents native craftsmanship, appealing in its simplicity and ingenuity. The Indians who play it regard it as a complete "marimba," whether played by one or several players, and it is never found with a companion marimba as is the marimba doble.

Although the keys are tuned to a different scale, the method for tuning is the same as for the marimba doble, and various component parts such as the rails with their pegs separating the keys are present even though they are more crudely shaped. The points of distinction are the resonators, the shape of the keys, and some differences in the methods of construction and in the use of the instrument.

For the resonators, hollowed-out gourds (Cucurbitaceae) are used, the two most common kinds being the calabash, which is preferred because of its elongated shape, and the *jícara,* which is round. Actually the type of resonator makes little or no difference in sound, and the gourd resonator has a vibrating membrane of female pig intestine which is sealed over a small hole in the gourd with beeswax. The gourds are supported under the keys by small sticks which pierce them near the mouth; the ends of these sticks are held in place by a long strip of *aliso* (alder) wood tied underneath the rails of the marimba by hemp bindings. Two long

pieces of cherry wood, laid across the sticks on either side of the mouths of the gourds, serve to keep the gourds in line. (See Fig. 6.)

The most difficult part in constructing any gourd marimba is in procuring the resonators, for each gourd must be of the proper size so that it will be in tune with its particular key. The box resonators of the marimba doble can, of course, be constructed easily to the correct size, and their

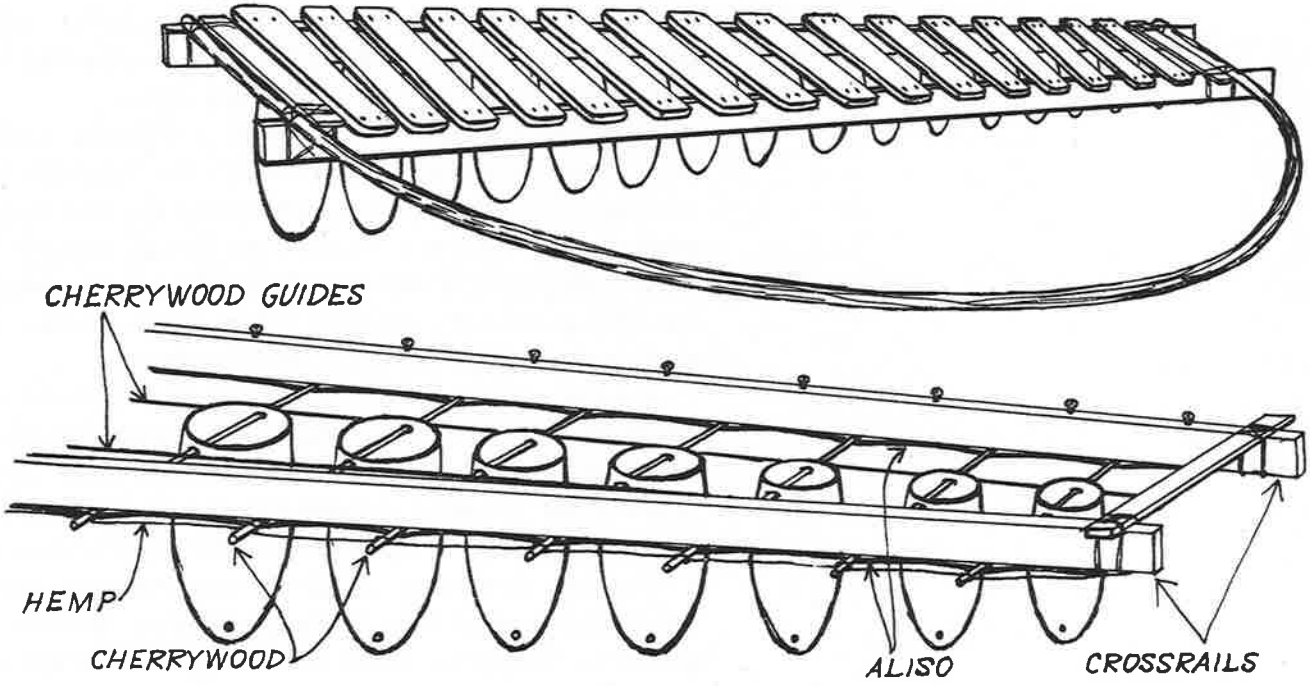


FIGURE 6. Marimba de arco, showing attachment of resonators

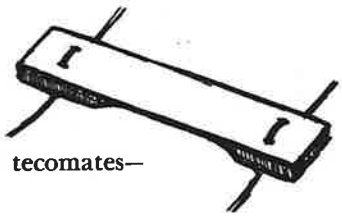
dimensions can be predetermined. For the gourd instrument the marimba-maker must examine the gourds carefully and pick those which appear to have reached the proper size, small for the treble keys, large for the bass ones. Much experiment is necessary, for there is no way to test a gourd's suitability until it has been picked and the inside scraped out carefully. After the trial and error of selection, the marimba-maker must face the disheartening possibility that the gourd may be damaged in scraping out the inside.

There is one feature which is peculiar to the making of a gourd marimba, and it was learned during a casual conversation with an Indian cabinetmaker: To increase the sonority of a newly-made marimba con tecomates, it is customarily placed in a kitchen chimney where heat and smoke can reach the gourd and wood structure. Here again is an example of a practice which the Indians make without being able to explain except that "it is better that way." A factory in Chicago, however, holds to much the same practice by slowly baking the marimba keys in order to increase their resonance.

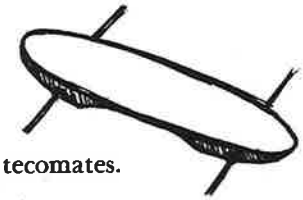
The keys of the table model marimba con tecomates are elliptical; those of the marimba de arco may be either elliptical or rectangular. Keys of the marimba doble, by contrast, are invariably rectangular. Keys with carved ends, which are usually found on the *marimba sencilla* (discussed in Chapter 4) and occasionally on the marimba doble, have not been found on any marimba with gourd resonators. (See Fig. 7.)

The keys of the marimba de arco are usually made from the lighter hormigo wood, called red hormigo or white

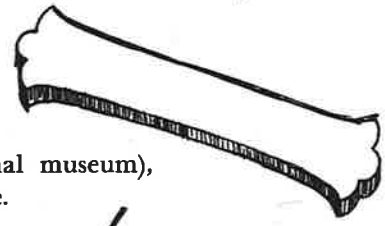
Before 1870. Not found today.



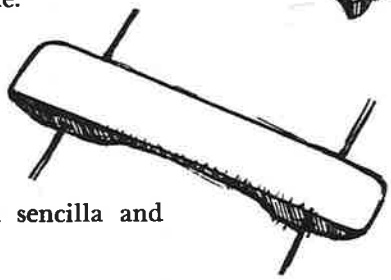
c.1870. Oldest found today. Used on marimbas de tecomates—both arc and table varieties.



c.1870-1900. Found on table model marimba de tecomates.



c.1900-1925. Found on bamboo marimba (national museum), also on marimba sencilla. Rarely on marimba doble.



c.1925- Standard. Found on both marimba sencilla and marimba doble.

FIGURE 7. Theoretical chronology of marimba key types

hormigo. As a rule there are twenty-six keys, rectangular in shape rather than oval or carved. They may be either laced together or strung through the side. The keys are tuned in the diatonic scale and range from *F* to *C*:

The scale seems to be either *C* major or *F* major, but it is difficult to be certain on this point as the tuning of those examined was inconsistent from one octave to the next.

The marimba de arco is played both from a standing and from a sitting position. When played from a standing position, it is supported by a long strip of cloth attached to the ends of the instrument and passing over the player's shoulders. The "arc," or bent piece of wood, rests against the player's waist, and sometimes he may loop his belt over it to keep it in place. When playing from a sitting position, the player sits within the arc, resting it on his bench, and props up the front of the marimba with a forked stick.

It is seldom that a stranger has the opportunity to hear the marimba de arco as the Indians of Chichicastenango keep to themselves more than do the other Indians of Guatemala. They are not unfriendly, but tend to be mysterious and apart. Once in a while one of them will bring an instrument to sell at the market and will advertise it by playing on it all day. For such an instrument the price would be about $20 which is slight compared to the $1,200 usually asked for a complete marimba doble. Both types of the gourd marimba are sometimes bought and displayed in

shops and homes as interesting examples of native craftsmanship.

One place in Chichicastenango where the marimba de arco may be seen and heard is the mask fábrica, located on a hillside a short distance above the town. The fábrica is one of four small, adobe buildings that enclose a courtyard; here men make the costumes and masks which the Indians wear in their various traditional dances. But in one of the houses on the courtyard of the fábrica is a marimba de arco, which one of the workmen will play upon request.

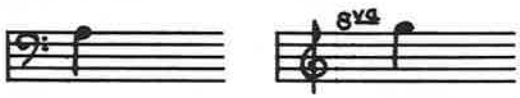
Other houses in and around Chichicastenango also contain marimbas de arco. Diego, one of the muchachos at the "caravansary," had a marimba de arco which he offered to show. A wide path of soft, dark grass shaded by a double lane of cypress trees led to his home. The family dwelling was not unlike the cluster of small buildings which comprised the mask factory. Except for Diego, the family stayed close by their home. The father was working in the nearby fields; inside the yard the mother knelt at her loom; the grandmother sat passively in the shade of the eaves, and a little brother of about two years toddled out of a doorway to follow Diego's every step. Diego was seventeen, and his room sheltered a startling conglomeration of the kind of things —parts of things, mostly—interesting to boys: bits of machinery, rusty tools, broken furniture. His marimba was extracted from the debris and brought outside for inspection by daylight. The wood was rotting, the membranes were half gone, the keys were awry because of missing pegs, and the gourds were jumbled and broken. Although he had not yet learned how to play it, his delight in the instrument was

evident, and it was a hopeful sign that the regional music of the highlands might find continuance in the younger generation.

Marimba playing in Chichicastenango is naive and unpretentious in every respect. Although it is rhythmically monotonous, the melodies often have a great deal of charm. (Music illustrations 3 and 4.) Variation is of the simplest nature, and in three or four hours of playing there may be no relief from the 6/8 meter other than a slight increase or decrease in tempo; yet, regardless of the music's limitations, the mellow timbre of the instrument pleases the ear.

Primarily, the function of the marimba de arco is to accompany the dance, and the music heard at the mask factory was accompanimental in nature. (See music illustration 5.) A crude vertical flute made of cane is often used with the marimba con tecomates to supply the melody while a drum accentuates the rhythm, but this ensemble—regarded as typical—is rarely heard.

Upon occasion a marimba con tecomates (table model) can be found as a decorative museum-piece now that the Indians are steadily forsaking its use, and the most accessible one is in the restaurant El Patio in Guatemala City. It has a range of *A* to *G*.



The dimensions of the lowest key are 22 by 2¾ inches, those of the highest, 11 by 1½ inches. Its four legs are no longer very substantial, but its well-seasoned keys are in playable condition. The keys, incidentally, are strung by a method

that would place the age of the instrument at about ninety years. Instead of the cord passing through the sides of the keys, it is laced through two holes bored vertically about an inch apart in the keys. (Fig. 8.)

In any marimba the holes are always at the nodal point

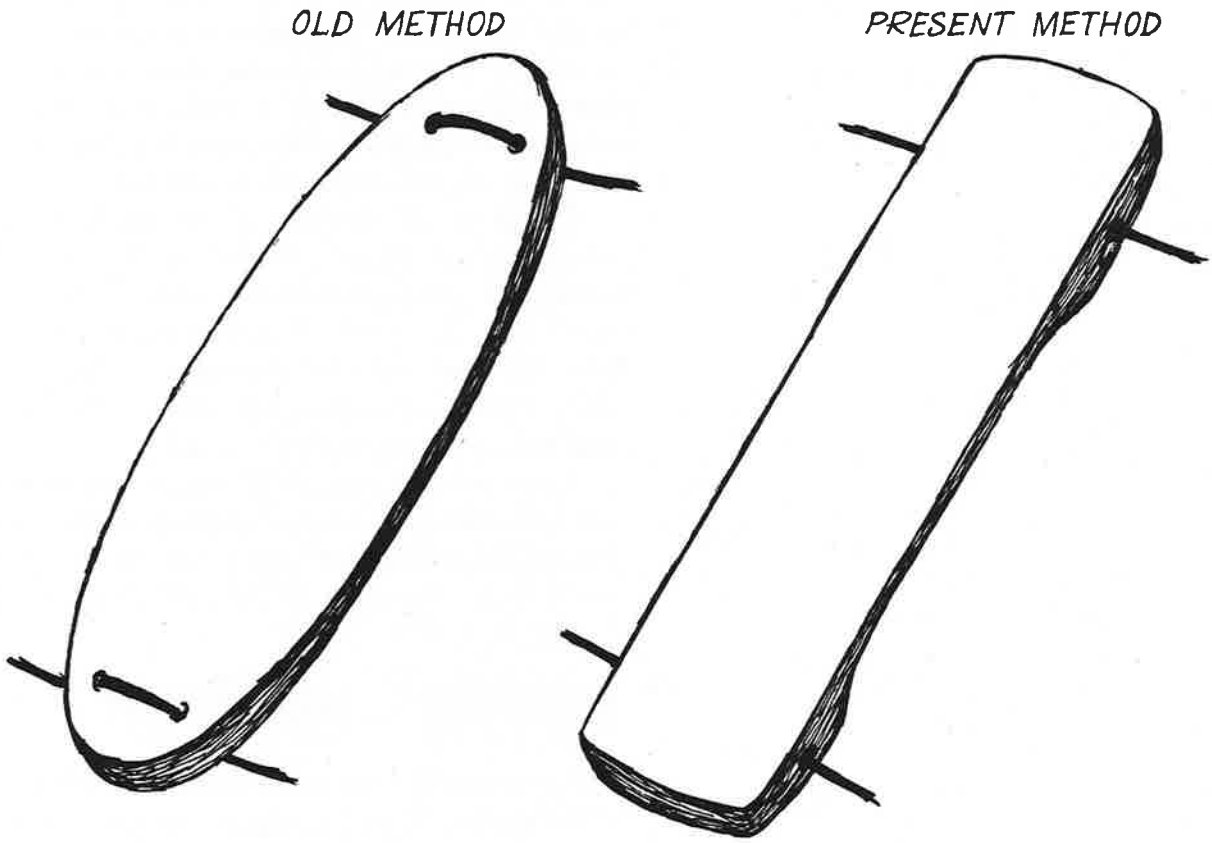


FIGURE 8. Old and present methods of stringing keys

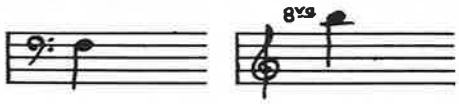
at each end of the key, since here there is no vibration. In Guatemala, to determine these points, the marimba-maker drops a handful of sand on the key and then taps it with a mallet. The sand bounces off the vibrating portions of the key, but some of it collects at the nodal points and remains there, marking an exact line-up for the holes.

A small table model of the marimba con tecomates was found in an old house in Antigua. The servants claimed that it was made in Totonicapán, and it is approximately the same age as the one at El Patio in Guatemala City. Originally this type of marimba was managed by only one player who apparently sat on a chair to play as the instrument was only some 2½ feet high. It was approximately 4 feet long. The resonators were of gourds softer than calabashes. All in all, it was in poor condition, covered with cobwebs and lacking some of the pegs and vibrating membranes. The keys, made of black hormigo, rounded on the ends and strung through the sides, covered a range from *B* flat to *D*,

a range two notes beyond three octaves tempered to the scale of *F* major. In comparison, the marimba at El Patio lacked one note of having a range of three octaves and was tuned in an *F* scale with a *B* natural.

In San Jorge, Sololá, a village of small adobe houses with whitewashed walls and red tile roofs, there is a marimba con tecomates which is still played. The keys of this marimba are strung in the old method, like those of the

instrument at El Patio, but it is unusual in that the framework has been painted—green with a red border. The range of the San Jorge marimba is *F* to *B*.



It is tuned in an *F* major scale with *G*, however, tending to be sharp in the first two octaves. Julián Buch, who leads the San Jorge marimba, keeps the instrument in his home which is a typical one of the village with its earthen floor and sparsely furnished interior. When not in use the marimba sits in a corner of the one room, carefully covered with a cloth to protect it from dampness and dust. The presence of a marimba con tecomates in San Jorge was unexpected, for at the village fiestas music is provided by a marimba with box resonators, or cajónes.

The players of the San Jorge marimba—Julián and his brother, both middle-aged men, and the eight-year-old son of Julián—form a rather typical Indian group. Enthusiastic, amiable, and polite, Julián handles all the business arrangements. He usually asks for a dollar in advance when the marimba is hired, but when it is hired by someone who dealt fairly before, he does not mention money. The marimba will keep its engagements even under the most adverse conditions. On one occasion, after a day's work in the fields, Julián and his group, without taking time to eat, walked about five miles in a downpour of rain to play at Panajachél, a neighboring village. One of the men carried the marimba on his back—the customary way the Indians transport their

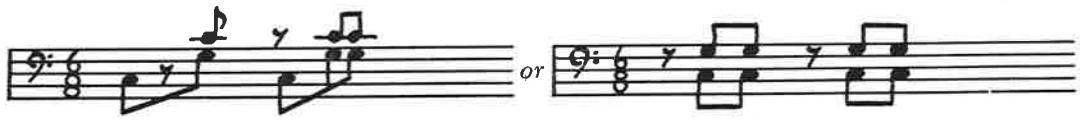
instruments—protecting it from the rain with a long strip of cloth. Since it was the rainy season the Indians accepted the downpour as a matter of course, and they played willingly all the evening, not starting for home until around midnight.

Any gathering of Guatemalan Indians is colorful as each village has its distinctive costume. The men from San Jorge, for example, wear knee-length trousers with variegated stripes of red, white, and green. Around their waists, like an apron, they wear a small black and white checked blanket. Their collarless shirts are predominantly red with multicolored stripes; the sleeves are striped in a different pattern. Over the shirt they wear a heavy woolen jacket, light grey in color with black braid on the sleeves and the back. Completing their garb are white straw hats and black and white knitted shoulder bags decorated with animal figures or geometric designs.

The performance of the San Jorge marimba in the village of Panajachél was likewise representative. Before beginning to play, the men tied the sleeves of their jackets around their waist and they piled their possessions—their shoulder bags, straw hats, extra mallets, and the marimba cover—on the floor beneath the marimba. When they are playing, the men's expressions become fixed, and, appearing as if almost hypnotized, they may continue playing for three or four hours without a pause. Each player, while performing, assumed a characteristic attitude. Julián looked down at the keyboard with his eyebrows lifted; his older brother lowered his head while the young boy from time to time heaved a deep sigh.

To commence, the leader of the group chose a melody

and announced it to the other two by playing several bars of it rapidly but faintly. Suddenly all three, with complete assurance, began the selection in its correct, slower tempo. Despite having worked all day and in contrast to their impassive appearance, they played with utmost verve throughout the evening. Raising their mallets high in the air—about a foot above the keyboard—they maintained a single dynamic level, *forte*. The leader, playing in the treble register, ornamented or varied the melodies. For the most part the music was characterized by tonic to dominant harmony, and the themes were phrases of three measures. As in a rondo, the theme or melody was periodically restated in its original form. The bass and middle players seldom varied their parts; the variations, when they occurred, were nearly imperceptible, such as a change in the accent from a strong to a weak beat. Any accent change was more likely to be in the middle rather than in the bass part, the latter keeping up a steady accompaniment like the following:



They made use of two kinds of roll to sustain a tone. In one the strokes were alternated, while in the single-stroke roll the notes were repeated simultaneously instead of alternated.

Alternating-stroke roll

played

Single-stroke roll

played

Since the purpose of the roll is simply to sustain tone, there is no set number of strokes for either kind; each player chooses his own speed.

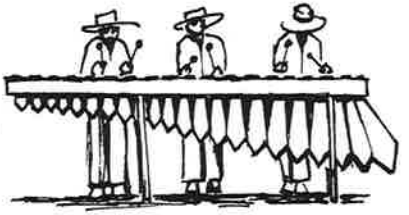
In their three and a half hours of playing in Panajachél, the San Jorge marimba strayed from the 6/8 meter of the son, the Indian folk style, only once, and this exception was one of the most interesting pieces in their repertoire. (See musical illustration 6 for typical music played on the marimba con tecomates.) The piece, called "San Lucas," was unusual in its ostinato figure, as a mixed meter such as this is rare in Guatemalan music:

To end a number, the leader would begin to distort the rhythm by slowing the tempo; he then would repeat the tonic chord several times, and the other two players would join him in the final chord or sometimes simply fade out. They usually did not employ a formal cadence.

In their technic of playing these Indians from San Jorge

exhibited one difference from ladino performers. Instead of grasping the mallet with the index finger extended along the top of the handle, they held it with the thumb along the top and consequently used an entirely different wrist action. The players held a mallet in each hand, except for the leader, who played the melody and who held two mallets in his right hand. Although they will play occasionally seated in chairs, they customarily stand; however, since each player is responsible for a limited part of the keyboard and therefore does not have to change stance, the technic is changed very little from one position to the other.

The repertoire of this marimba was exclusively the Indian son. Although to the foreigner the music and the instrument may be gay and exciting, it is interesting to note that in Guatemala the marimba is considered to be sad and mournful from its identification with the Indians, once a proud race but now a subdued one.



4

THE TRANSITIONAL MARIMBA OR *MARIMBA SENCILLA*

The marimba sencilla or "simple marimba" combines features of the gourd marimba with those of the marimba doble. Like the gourd marimba it is played as a single instrument rather than with a companion one and it uses the diatonic scale of the Indians. Like the marimba doble it has box resonators and its keyboard covers a wide range (just over five octaves). In construction it is like the marimba doble so that further details will not be given here, and because to a great extent it has supplanted the more primitive gourd marimba, what is said here about its use in Guatemala presumably would hold true for the gourd marimba when that instrument was widely used.

The marimba sencilla is now commonly found furnishing music at the Indian fairs or fiestas. In San Cristobal it was seen used as a calliope for the merry-go-round. In San Jorge, Sololá, it was used in the church and also was the musical accompaniment for the *Baile de los Mejicanos,* or Dance of the Mexicans. The marimba was played while the dancers were getting dressed in their Mexican serapes, charro trousers, painted masks, and sombreros, and as the dancers filed down a stony path into the plaza, dancing and shaking maracas, the marimba brought up the rear of the procession, carried by two young boys, walking carefully so as not to disturb the playing. Only a single performer played during the procession, and his procession music consisted of rapid thirds played with two mallets in each hand. This particular instrument had carved keys, scallop-edged in effect, like those seen on the marimba in the practice studio at Huehuetenango.

When the procession reached the plaza in front of the church, the marimba was placed on a platform with a tarpaulin awning and the number of players was increased to three. Women did not participate in the dance, nor did the dance itself have any apparent organization; rather each dancer seemed to hop and scuff about in the dirt plaza quite independently while the entire village gathered around the rope-enclosed square and watched until nightfall.

The music played by this San Jorge marimba consisted of simple melodic variations supported by chordal accompaniment. The treble player was responsible for any changes in harmony since the chordal accompaniment of the other two players depended upon whatever melodic material the leader chose. The middle and bass players had to be ready

to shift the harmony whenever their ears heard a change in the melodic part because the leader gave no visible indication of his intentions. At times there was a conflict between the melody and its accompaniment while the two players adjusted to the leader's part. This adjustment usually required a measure's duration and, interestingly enough, there was never any hesitation in the metric pulse. It seemed to them a greater offense to break the continuity of the rhythmic pulse than to tolerate a transitional measure whose harmonic accompaniment did not correspond to the melody. (See music illustration 7 for the San Jorge style.)

Some of the characteristics of the San Jorge marimba were: (1) an extraordinary sense of ensemble, so close that sight as well as sound was sometimes necessary to distinguish where the division of parts lay; (2) metrical precision; and (3) a spontaneity of performance, with improvisations made rapidly and clearly.

Counterclockwise around Lake Atitlán from San Jorge is the village of Santa Cruz La Laguna. Accessible only by boat or on foot, the village lies halfway up a mountainside, its plaza a shelf overlooking the water and the volcanoes on the opposite shore.

Fiesta days in this village, announced by exploding giant firecrackers high in the air, feature the *Baile de los Torritos,* or Dance of the Little Bulls. Again, no women took part in the dance and in this village only men and children were among the spectators. The marimba was placed in the doorway of the church where three men played for the dance accompanied by the ringing of the church bells above them. The costumes were brilliant yellows and reds with sequins

and glass bits sewn on them to catch the sunlight. A young boy wearing the bull mask jumped and charged at the teasing of the other dancers. It was more like a game than a dance as there were no formalized steps or movements, nor was there any synchronization with the music.

One of the three marimberos in the doorway played with two mallets in the treble range while the center and bass players managed three mallets, the middle player with two in his left hand and the bass player with two in his right. The music was simple melodic variations similar to the music heard in San Jorge, and the melodic part contained no harmonic intervals other than thirds. (See music illustration 8.)

San Antonio, Suchitepéquez, is a village not far from the Pacific coast and larger than the villages visited in the highlands. On the day of its patron saint (June 13) a spectacular fiesta was held with three masquerade dances in the small plaza in front of the church. Each of the dances had musical accompaniment, and all three took place simultaneously. The Dance of Conquest (dramatization of the Spanish conquest of the Indians) was accompanied by drum and *chirimía,* a crude double-reed instrument which sounded like an oboe; the Dance of the Moors was accompanied by drum and a cane whistle flute; and the Dance of the Little Bulls was accompanied by the marimba sencilla. Fiestas such as this usually lasted four or five days and resulted eventually in mass inebriation from a cheap, local liquor drunk during the festivities.

The marimba sencilla, with its forty carved keys was not of the town but had been brought from Zunilito, a village

in the state of Quetzaltenango. With the three marimberos was a trumpet player who was too drunk to play.

During the performance of this marimba, the players produced flatted tones on the diatonic keyboard by sticking a small piece of wax under the keys. The players suspend these pieces of wax on strings tied underneath the keys to the rail where they can be quickly applied to the keys. The same wax is sometimes used by the Indians for making mallet heads.

The dances in San Antonio continued without interruption from early morning until at noon; on the final day of the fiesta, the church bells rang, and the procession commenced from the church. As the procession crossed the plaza, the costumed participants joined in, and the marimba —carried on two bamboo poles—was last in the long parade around the village.

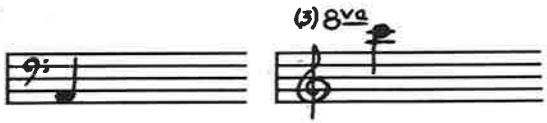
Another marimba sencilla was heard early one July morning in the old Spanish colonial town of Antigua. A dozen or so men from the village of San Felipe on the outskirts of Antigua walked through the streets with it, and as they approached they were playing two drums with a marimba, then, only the marimba. They stationed themselves under a vapory street light and began to play for an unseen audience. Not a word was spoken or sung. They played for only a few moments, then shuffled mysteriously up the cobbled street, carrying the marimba and a lantern, the haunting sound of the drums and cane flute gradually diminishing in the chilly morning air. (See music illustrations 9a and 9b.)

From time to time the marimba sencilla is also heard in Antigua at the marketplace on such occasions as a wedding

in the market chapel or the Dance of the Giants, when men dance carrying poles upon which are elevated huge puppets with costumes that come to the ground, hiding the dancers except for their feet.

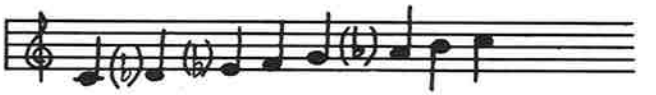
When transporting the marimba sencilla the Indians carry it, like the gourd marimba, on their backs. A heavy strip of cloth is attached to the frame and passes over the shoulders. Since the marimba sencilla is both larger and heavier than the gourd marimba, a cowhide tump line is used also, and to the lower end of the marimba's frame a chairlike contrivance is attached so the marimba may be conveniently rested on the ground.

In Antigua the marimba-maker Lencho Godoy still makes marimbas sencillas, constructing them with a range of *A* to *C*.



The marimba "Bella Antigueña," a typical instrument of his manufacture, has forty-five keys of hormigo with resonators of cypress. Godoy used cypress instead of the more attractive cedar for its greater durability. The principal note of this instrument was tuned with a tuning fork while the remainder of the keyboard was tuned relative to it.

The scale of the "Bella Antigueña" resembled that of *C* minor; however, the flatted notes were tuned a trifle higher than what North Americans know as a semitone. For example, *D* flat on this marimba would lie between *D* flat and *D* natural in the equally tempered chromatic scale. In notation the scale of the "Bella Antigueña" would be:



By comparison, the coffin-maker in San Antonio, Suchitepéquez, who also makes marimbas sencillas, tunes them in the key of *B* instead of the usual *F* or *C*.

The "Bella Antigueña" is played by five marimberos, three in the treble range and two in the bass. The melodic parts, as usual, are played in the treble range with each player using two mallets; the two bass players each hold three mallets—two in the right hand—and play staccato throughout. Its repertoire consists entirely of sones with two more or less basic rhythm patterns, one for a quick tempo and the second for a slower tempo. (See music illustration 10.)

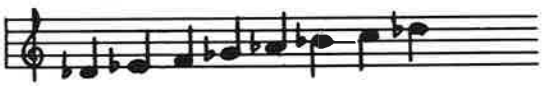
In Guatemala's national museum there is a marimba sencilla of special interest because of its resonators which are made of bamboo. This particular type, like the marimba con tecomates, is rarely found now, but is still built occasionally on special order by a few marimba-makers. Lencho Godoy made a marimba con tecomates as recently as 1956 and has also made instruments with bamboo resonators. The style of carving of the keys of the marimba in the museum is characteristic of instruments made between 1900 and 1925. The keyboard has a range of *E* to *G*,

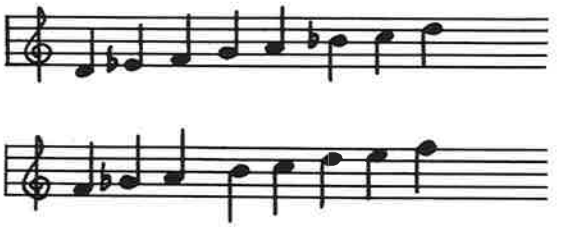
with the following scale:

At El Zapote plantation in the state of Escuintla, three small bamboo marimbas were found which had been made as recently as the summer of 1960. A worker on the plantation had made the marimbas for three fellow workers who had supplied the wood for the keys and had paid him five dollars for the labor. The charleo material was newspaper or opossum membrane, which in many instances had not stayed secure. The resonators were strung through the top with a single wire.

The instruments had been constructed to interest the sons of the workmen in learning to play, and the workmanship on all three was rather crude. The keys, for instance, had been shaped so that their outer edges would slant toward the smaller end of the marimba, but some of the keys had been reversed when strung and not only spoiled the symmetrical effect but disarranged the scale; as one proceeded diatonically up the keyboard, the pitches suddenly began to descend because of the mistake in stringing the keys.

The crudity of these instruments extended also to their musical quality, for each had a different scale and no one scale was consistently tuned, that is, the octave above or below a specific note might not be a perfect octave. Below are the approximate scales that were found on the three instruments:



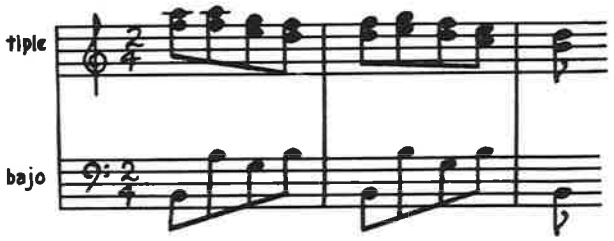


The 24-note scale from which the third example was extracted is as follows:

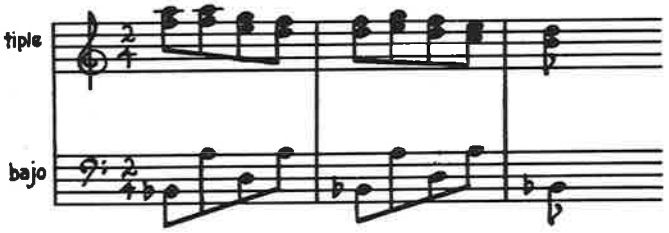
Neither scale nor range was standardized on these instruments; however, some, though not all, of the radical tuning was due to the wax placed beneath some of the keys.

Only one of the three marimbas had an hormigo keyboard (that with the first scale example); the others were of a soft, white wood called *guarumo (Brassaia actinophylla),* but all the keys were strung in the current side-through method.

The mallets were different from any others seen in Guatemala. They were made of chunks of crude rubber or pieces of rubber tires placed on the ends of brushwood *(escobo)* sticks. The handles were extremely short, and the players, whose ages ranged from eight to twelve, held a single mallet in each hand. There were two or three boys to an instrument, and two of them gave a demonstration of the types of music they play—son, *corrido* (fast 2/4), and waltz. The bass accompaniment to the corrido, intended to sound:



sounded the following because of the bad tuning:



The tiple player, as seen in the preceding example, used no harmonic intervals other than thirds. The same notes, with the rhythm changed, were the bass patterns of the son and the waltz:

The Indian marimba music has been called, without much thought, by some "monotonous repetition." Actually there is very little melodic repetition; a melodic line is sometimes repeated within a cycle of thirty or more variations, but it is hardly likely to be detected upon a first hearing. Some say it is the rhythm which is repetitious; the rhythm is metric, like the European tradition, with the added advantage of accent changes within the 6/8 meter which

allow either duple or triple rhythm to be effected without a meter change. It is probably the harmonic limitations of the Indian music that impress the foreign listener as repetitious or monotonous, though he may not be consciously aware of them. In music within the European tradition there is extensive harmonic treatment, whereas in the Indian tradition the harmonic vocabulary is confined to only three basic chords. And, too, the Indian music maintains one dynamic level and therefore does not offer the contrasts afforded by nuance.

In the field of ethnic music one is better rewarded if he approaches the unfamiliar without any predispositions in musical standards. Appreciation of the Indian music comes from a concentration upon its unique characteristics, not upon its limitations according to the standards of another culture, for characteristics that are defects in one style may expose ingenuity in another. For instance, the elasticity of tempo admired in Balinese music would not be permitted in the Indian style of San Jorge, nor would the rigid tempo of the Indians be welcome to the Balinese. One of the most intriguing facets of ethnic music is meeting the unexpected.

5

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MARIMBA

The marimba, according to the classification of Curt Sachs and E. M. von Hornbostel, belongs to the group of instruments called idiophones, those instruments of naturally sonorous materials set in motion by the action of the player.[1] In this scheme, instruments are further classified by whether they are struck, shaken, rubbed, and so forth and by the nature of the sonorous material, whether it be wood, metal, or stone. The marimba then is a struck idiophone of the xylophone group (from its wooden keys), differentiated from other xylophones by having a resonator under each key which is tuned to that key.

The earliest known instruments related to the marimba

are found in southeast Asia. In 1949 the French ethnologist Georges Condominas discovered a prehistoric lithophone with ten keys made of schistic rock near the Vietnamese village of Ndut Lieng Krak, which is considered by some to be the oldest pitched instrument in existence.[2] In historic times the Malayans have for centuries played a type of xylophone which has a single trough resonator, and fourteenth-century bas-reliefs in Java at the temple of the god Panataran witness to its tradition there.[3] In Java and Bali especially, the native orchestra or *gamelan,* contains bronze adaptations of two types of xylophones, the *saron* and the *gendér.*[4] The saron, said to have existed as early as A.D. 900, has a wooden trough resonator often in the shape of a crouching dragon. The gendér dates from about 1157 and is a more complex metallophone with tuned bamboo resonators below the keys. The gendér is extremely important in the evolution of the marimba because it seems to be the first struck xylophone known to have resonators corresponding to the vibrations of each key. Probably not all examples of the saron and gendér were metallophones, for in a conversation in New York during 1957 I Wajan Begeg, the conductor of the Tabanan Palace gamelan in Bali, said that the wood equivalents of the saron and gendér were still played in the interior of Bali.

1 Curt Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments* (New York, 1940), pp. 454-67.

2 See André Schaeffner, "Une importante découverte archéologique . . . ," *La Revue de Musicologie,* XXXIII (July 1951), 1 ff.; also Georges Condominas, "Le lithophone préhistorique de Ndut Lieng Krak," *Bull. de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient,* XLV (1952), 359 ff.

3 Sachs, p. 238.

4 Sachs, p. 239.

Although the marimba of Guatemala appears to have originated directly from Africa, it is quite possible that it had its beginning in southeast Asia. The musicologist Sachs supports the possibility. "Many implements, tools, weapons and instruments," he says, "in a well-defined area of African Bantu districts are so closely connected with the corresponding objects of southeastern Asia that an early communication across the Indian Ocean through the Zambesi Valley can be assumed. Certain accordances in the tuning of xylophones in Asia and Africa confirm this statement."[5] More specifically, such musicologists as Hornbostel, Nadel, and Kunst agree in general that the musical instruments of southeast Asia, particularly the *gambang* and the gendér of Java, exerted some influence on the development of the African marimba.

The occurrence of the word "marimba" itself in Africa offers some evidence of the relationship between the African and Guatemalan instruments. The word or its variation *malimba* is a Bantu term referring to an idiophone with gourd resonators played by the Shangana-Ndau people who live on the coast of Mozambique near the Sabi River. Two hundred miles to the south another group of Bantus, the Chopis, have the same instrument which they call a *timbila.* In a letter written on December 5, 1562, the Portuguese missionary Father André Fernandes provides the earliest account of the marimba in Africa. "These people," wrote Fernandes, "are much given to the pleasures of singing and playing. Their instruments are many gourds bound together with cords, and a piece of wood bent like a bow, some large and some small, and to the openings in which they fasten

[5] Sachs, p. 239.

trumpets with the wax of wild-honey to improve the sound, and they have their treble and bass instruments. . . ."[6] Sometime later another Portuguese missionary reported a similar instrument among the Karangas who lived between the Pungwe and the Sabi rivers in Mozambique.[7]

The principles and the technic of construction of the Chopi timbila are very similar to those of the arc marimba of Guatemala. As if he were describing the construction of a Guatemalan marimba keyboard, Hugh Tracey in *Chopi Musicians,* writes of the hard wood sought, cured, and tuned by the Chopi marimba-maker. He tells of the tuned gourd resonators beneath the keys and especially the vibration aperture in the gourds whose membrane is held in place by a ring of beeswax. He describes the arc which holds the instrument away from the player's body when he plays standing or walking. Even the mallets are like the Guatemalan. They are described as having wrapped heads made of strands of crude rubber, the larger, softer heads for the bass range and the smaller, harder ones for the treble.

The scale, too, of the Chopi instrument is similar to the Guatemalan arc marimba. In our system of twelve equal semitones, its intervals and those of the arc marimba would fall approximately as follows:

Chopi scale as given by Tracey[8]	*F*	*G—*	*G♯/A*	*A♯+*	*C*	*D—*	*D♯+*
Scale of author's timbila	*F♯*	*G♯*	*A♯*	*B*	*C♯*	*D♯*	
Scale of arc marimba	*F*	*G*	*A*	*B*	*C*	*D*	*E*

+=higher than —=lower than /=midway between

[6] Hugh Tracey, *Chopi Musicians: Their Music, Poetry, and Instruments* (London, 1948), p. 145.
[7] Tracey, p. 137.
[8] Tracey, p. 126.

The conclusion drawn from the similarities so significant in number and detail is that a basic relationship exists between the Chopi timbila and the Guatemalan arc marimba, and yet, only a glance is needed to tell that they belong to separate locales or periods. It is in reading about the Chopi and Guatemalan instruments that one is struck by their similarities, but in seeing both, one is struck mainly by the dissimilarities. The Chopi timbila differs from a Guatemalan arc marimba in the following ways:

1. The keys are strung in a way unknown in Guatemala. Only one end of the key is threaded, through a single vertical hole; the other end, nearer the player, is held in place by thongs passing over and under each key.
2. Instead of the pegs located between each key, the timbila has a single wooden piece between every two keys.
3. The resonators of the timbila are fastened with wax to a wooden plank rather than suspended freely. (Fig. 9.)
4. The timbila uses metal in fastening the key supports to the wooden plank below the keyboard and in reinforcing the corners of the "arc." The Guatemalans use no metal at all.
5. The resonators of the timbila are in two parts; around the vibration aperture is sealed with beeswax part of the neck of one gourd, making what Tracey refers to as a "trumpet."
6. Holes and decorations are burned into the Chopi instrument, including the threading hole in the keys. On the other hand, Guatemalan marimba-makers do not heat their tools for any reason, and any embellishment is hand-carved or inlaid.

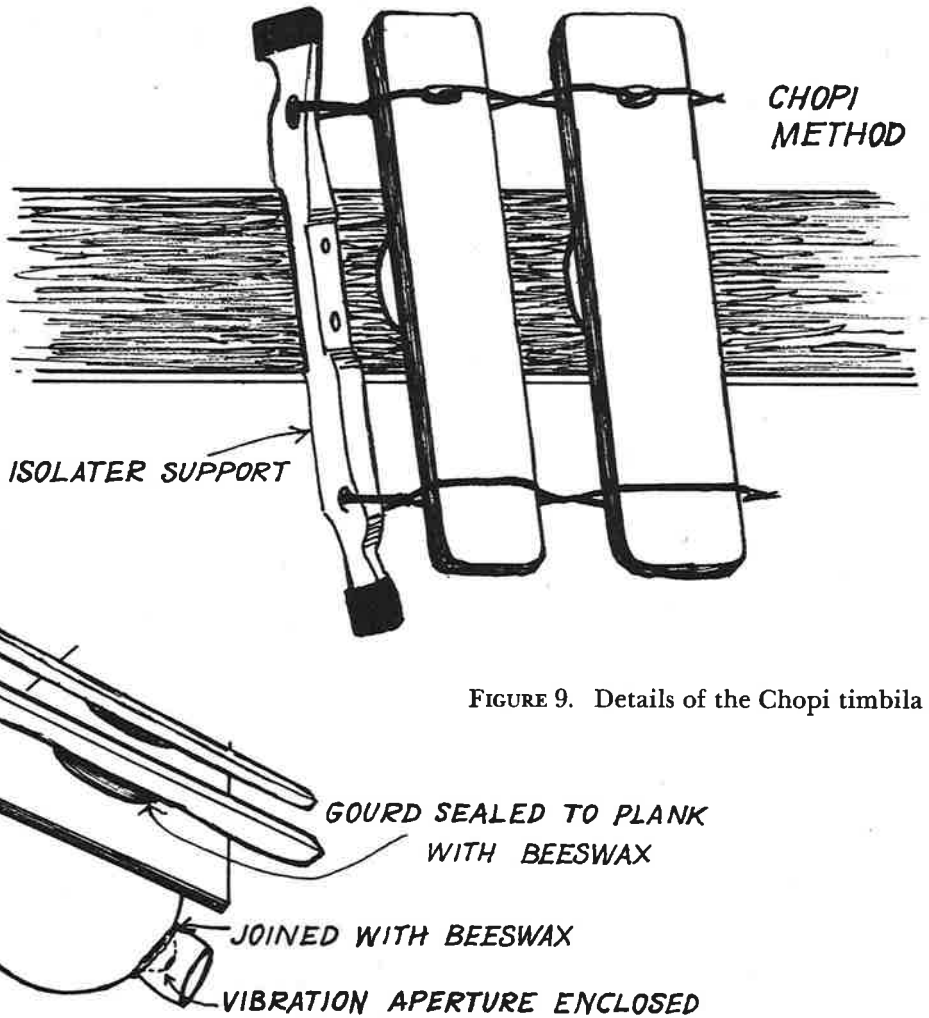


FIGURE 9. Details of the Chopi timbila

7. The arc of the Chopi timbila has square corners, but the Guatemalan arc is semicircular and in one piece.
8. The gourds of the timbila are round rather than long.
9. The Chopi instrument has a small leg (about 10 inches in length) on either end of the frame, just high enough to keep the gourds from touching the ground. The Guatemalan instrument has no legs but is sometimes propped up with a forked stick.
10. Chopi mallets have thicker, shorter handles, the end of which pierces through the mallet head and comes to a sharp point.

In the customs surrounding the use of the two instruments there are likewise similarities and differences. In both these cultures, the players are men, and among them there is always a leader. Both peoples regard musicianship as a family trait, and fathers train their sons when the boys reach the age of seven or eight. In the manner of playing, however, there are wide differences.

It is true that both the Indians and the Chopis tend to play collectively rather than as soloists, but the playing of the arc marimba of Guatemala is an exception. It is not known to be played with more than one player or in combination with another arc marimba although it is found combined with drum and/or chirimía. The fact that it is sometimes worn by the player points up its use by only one person. The Chopis do play in marimba ensembles, frequently in orchestras of twelve instruments with one man at an instrument, not unlike the fashion of the Javanese and Balinese. Like the latter also, the Chopis sit on the ground to play while the Indian never does.

Both the Chopis and Indians learn their repertoire aurally, but their music is of entirely different character. While the Chopis play in a highly complex contrapuntal style,[9] the Indians play in a simpler homophonic style. In both cultures the marimba accompanies the dance, and with the Chopis, song also. As for subject matter, the Indians' music deals with historical events (such as the Spanish Conquest), foreign peoples (the Mexicans, the Moors), or festive occasions (weddings, harvest), during which time there is dancing. The Chopi orchestra accompanies songs of celebration but also fills a unique role in that it accompanies public commentary. The songs of commentary have to do with social injustices, current events and reproof of wrongdoers, so that the orchestra and singers by their public declamation serve the purpose of a court, newspaper, and pillory.[10]

In the southern region of the Republic of Congo in the basin of the Sankuru and Kasai rivers, there is an arc marimba with calabash resonators having vibration apertures, called locally a *madimba.* It is found among many tribes in this region, and its size varies from five notes to the seventeen-note instrument of the Bapende, Bakwese, and Bambala tribes. The name varies among the tribes, but all are variations of madimba (for example, *midimba, kidimba, dimba, madjimba*).[11] In the northern part of the country, along the Congo River, there are other types of arc marimba including the *manza, karangba, kalangwa,* and *kalangba.*[12] The manza

[9] Tracey, pp. 5-7; music illustration opposite p. 164.

[10] Tracey, p. 3.

[11] Olga Boone, *Les Xylophones du Congo Belge* (Annales du Musée du Congo Belge, Ethnographie, Série III, Notes analytiques sur les Collections du Musée du Congo Belge, vol. III; Tervueren [Belgium], 1936), p. 97.

[12] Boone, p. 107.

is peculiar in that it is the only type which has a consistent number of keys (10) and is known by no alternate variations of its name.

In the Congo region along with the instruments similar to the Guatemalan arc marimba are a number of other idiophones. Some of these are quite primitive, being no more than wooden slabs laid between two logs; others are xylophones, lacking resonators. Olga Boone, who has studied these instruments of the Congo, advances the hypothesis that the madimba type of instrument could have evolved locally from a single calabash with a key suspended above it to the more complex instruments with several keys, each with its own resonator.[13]

On the other hand, it is quite possible that the arc marimba was an import from another culture. The Congolese may have had antecedents such as one or two-key instruments or a simple xylophone without resonators, or all three, which would have enabled them to adopt and imitate the multiple-key marimba immediately if it were seen in other tribes. The fact that no use of a vibrating membrane seems in evidence before the appearance of a multiple-key marimba would suggest strongly that the marimba in its entirety was an import, with the people of Mozambique the probable source of a distribution facilitated by the Zambesi and Limpopo riverways. To further substantiate the hypothesis of distribution from the east are the accounts of missionaries. While an arc marimba was reported from eastern Africa in 1562, it was not until 1680 that the Reverend Father Michel Ange is reported to have seen a marimba in Nigeria and

[13] Boone, p. 131.

seven years later the Capuchin Cavozzi de Montecuccolo recorded having discovered one in the Congo region, as did other seventeenth century explorers. (A xylophone is said to have been seen among the Karanga people on the Zambesi River as early as 1586, but the account makes no mention of resonators.)[14] An additional indication that the marimba was an importation from southeastern Africa is a duplication of scales found in South Africa[15] and in French West Africa,[16] which are Aeolian in mode: $E_b\ F\ G_b\ A_b\ B_b\ C_b\ D_b\ E_b$.

A madimba from the Bakuba tribe of the Congo, owned by Belgium's Musée de Tervueren, reveals a likely prototype of the Guatemalan marimba de arco.[17] The underside of this madimba shows clearly that it is the structural equivalent of the Guatemalan arc marimba, with gourd resonators freely suspended on sticks which pierce them near the open end of the gourds. There are only four differences which can be discovered. For one thing, the scales are radically different; Boone's frequency measurement would place the Bakuba madimba's eight-note scale in approximately the following relationship to the Guatemalan arc marimba:

Bakuban	B_b—		D_b—	$D+$		G—	—G—	A—	B_b—						G_b—
Guatemalan	A	B^*	C	D	E	F	G	A	B^*	C	D	E	F	G	

* *or* B_b ——=*lower than minus*

Second, the Bakuba instrument does not have the pegs between the keys like the Guatemalan marimba; this par-

[14] I. Shapera (ed.), *The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa* (London, 1953), pp. 275-76.

[15] Henri A. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe* (London, 1927), II, 279-80.

[16] Stephen Chauvet, *Musique Nègre* (Paris, 1929), pp. 84-90.

[17] Boone, p. 94.

ticular detail, in fact, seems to be of Guatemalan invention. Third, like the Guatemalan marimba the Bakuba instrument has an arc made of a single branch but its shape is more like a rounded-off rectangle than the semicircle characteristic of the Guatemalan arc marimba. The fourth difference is the shape of the keys, those of the Bakuba tending to broaden at their centers. To the author's knowledge the only African instance in which the general shape of the keys and the manner of threading them is similar to the Guatemalan arc marimba is the madimba of the southern Congo region. Also, just as in Guatemala, there exists in the southern Congo (among the Balunda) a marimba with bamboo resonators,[18] which also have the vibration apertures.

The semicircular arc like that found in Guatemala is used on the manza of the northern Congo region where it is played by the Azande and Yakoma people. The manza has the cucumber-shaped gourd resonators and resembles the arc marimba of Guatemala except for the absence of the vibration aperture in the manza resonators.

As regards the tuning of Guatemalan and Congolese marimbas, both the Baronga and the Guatemalan Indians make use of a heptatonic scale of equal intervals, with the Bàronga tonic in *E* flat and the Guatemalan in *F*. Marimba-makers in both countries favor tuning the instruments by interval progression rather than in octaves. Congolese scales, like those of eastern Africa, exhibit significant parallels to those of southeast Asia, particularly Java. The five-note Javanese scale system, called *sléndro,* is employed by the Ngbandi tribe of the northern Congo, and the seven-note

[18] Boone, p. 96.

Javanese scale system known as *pélog* is found among the Bakwese and Bakuba tribes of the southern Congo.[19]

Again the customs surrounding the use of the Congolese instruments exhibit parallels with Guatemalan practices. Free-key xylophones are played by men only, but some tribes permit women to play the fixed-key xylophone;[20] for example, in the Bavenda (a tribe of Bantus) musician fathers teach both their sons and daughters to play the marimba.[21] Ensemble playing ranges from two players to an instrument, such as the custom of the Bavendas on their 23 or 24-note marimba, to ensembles of a dozen or more marimbas as is the custom of the Chopis. The marimba is found often in combinations with other native instruments as in the northern Congo where wandering orchestras consisting of manzas, drums, flutes, string instruments, and tambourines supply music for social events. At least one tribe, the Bena Lulua, makes use of a pair of marimbas which are table models similar to those known in Guatemala, but the arc variety is the most common, and after a performance the Congolese store their arc marimbas in a thatch building which serves no other purpose; in some Guatemalan villages the instruments are similarly treated.

Like the Indians, the African Negroes make music at night when the day's work is finished, and most players believe that the night air enhances the sound of the marimba. Hugh Tracey calls attention to the physical truth of this belief saying that resonators are tuned in the shade at a

19 Boone, p. 133.

20 The terms free-key and fixed-key are descriptive terms originated by Boone; they refer to whether or not the keys are fixed to a framework.

21 H. A. Stayt, *The Bavendá* (London, 1931), p. 320.

moderate temperature, and at higher temperatures the air inside the resonators expands so that they are no longer precisely in tune with the keys.[22]

The Africans are proficient soloists as well as orchestral players, and in the Congo four-mallet technic is employed with the left hand accompanying the right. A curious Congolese practice not known in Guatemala is that of allowing an aide—sometimes a youngster—to rap on the lowest or highest key with a stick to add to the rhythmic effect.

The origin and first appearance of the marimba in the Western Hemisphere is the subject of much speculation, with the anthropologist David Vela, in his *Noticia sobre la Marimba,* advancing the opinion that it will never be definitely known. Some claim has been made for Mexico as the place of origin, but known reports of the gourd marimba, which is the oldest type found in this hemisphere, give precedence in time to Guatemala, and according to the anthropologist Frans Blom there is today no trace of an indigenous gourd marimba in Mexico.[23] In South America the only instrument that could be described as a marimba to be found among the Indian population is one called the *timbirimba,* which is played by the Tsátchela Indians of Ecuador. It, however, uses bamboo instead of gourds for resonators and was not reported until 1866, when it was said to have been adopted from Negroes originating in the Congo.[24] The evidence seems to favor then the theory that the marimba con tecomates, or gourd marimba, is indigenous

22 Tracey, p. 140.
23 Personal communication to author, 1958.
24 Victor and Grace Kingman, "Lo, The Scarlet Indians," *Natural History,* LXIII (Oct. 1954), 349.

to southeastern Africa, that it spread to western Africa and was later introduced into Guatemala, probably by African slaves.[25] This conclusion is based both upon the precedence in time of reports of the marimba in Guatemala and upon a careful investigation of other details of its occurrence there as well as its marked similarities to Congolese instruments.

Because the marimba con tecomates is today firmly integrated in the culture of the Mayaquiché Indians of Guatemala and has been since the middle of the seventeenth century, it has been assumed that the marimba had its source in Mayan culture. And the average Guatemalan does not question the origin of the marimba because he has always known it as a part of his culture. He has read in his schoolbooks that the marimba was of Mayan origin; he was honored on his birthday anniversaries with piñata parties and marimba music; he heard the marimba played in the public parks on weekends and on holidays of all kinds. He heard it in the city and he heard it in the country as well, on the coffee plantations, on the village plaza and in the cantinas. He danced to its music when he courted and when he married, as his parents did and as his children undoubtedly will. Not only does the marimba help the Guatemalan to recall the special occasions of his life, but it symbolizes the country's independence.[26] The music of the marimba was the sound which accompanied the celebrating of Guatemalan

[25] There seems no evidence of the marimba in Europe. A type of xylophone was popular in Europe during the nineteenth century and was described as early as 1511 (Sachs, pp. 439-40), but it did not possess the resonators which are the distinguishing mark between the marimba and the xylophone.

[26] David Vela, *Noticia sobre la Marimba* (Guatemala City, 1953), p. 46.

independence from Spain in 1821. Yet, despite the important place of the marimba in Guatemalan life—a place more important than that which it held in Africa, its country of origin—the historical evidence does not substantiate any claim for its being indigenous there.

Of primacy in an examination of the likelihood of the marimbas being native to Guatemala is discovering its ceremonial or religious uses since those are generally native to the culture. The transition marimba with its diatonic scale is found in village churches, for example in San Jorge and in Santa Cruz, but Catholicism was introduced by the Spanish, so for the oldest traditions one must examine pagan practices to see whether or not the marimba con tecomates is an important affiliate.

In some festivities which have ceremonial foundation, such as the corn offering and the blessing of the seed to be sown in April at Sololá, the gourd marimba is played,[27] and on one occasion the writer saw an arc marimba temporarily abandoned near the pagan shrine close to Chichicastenango known as *Pascuala baj*. It is not known to be played before the idol there, and its owner more than likely laid it down to free his hands for the complicated ritual at the idol, which includes lighting candles, strewing flower petals and kernels of corn, burning incense, and the like. Unfortunately, very little is known about the rituals of the Mayaquichés because they keep to their Quiché language and have a mysterious aura which discourages communication with outsiders.

[27] Felix McBride, *Sololá, A Guatemalan Town and Cakchiquel Market Center* (New Orleans, 1933).

Crop festivals and the happening upon an arc marimba at the shrine of *Pascuala baj* are instances which intimate that the marimba con tecomates has a religious role, but it is also altogether possible that the marimba was incorporated into the rites after they had become tradition, that it was a later addition, in other words. The *Popol Vuh,* the traditional book of the Quiché Indians, mentions the drum and cane whistle flute as the chief musical accompaniments of religion but not the marimba. Had it been indigenous, it would be expected that the marimba would be played during all the various types of masked dances, but this is not the case. Surprisingly, the Dance of Conquest, written in 1542 by a Spanish priest, does not include the marimba as one of the accompanying instruments but only the drum and chirimía. Several questions arise as to why the marimba was not included in the Dance of Conquest: (1) Were the marimba in use at the time, did the Spanish missionary favor those instruments familiar to him such as the drum and the oboe-like chirimía? Other instruments such as those made from turtle shell and gourds were also omitted, a further indication that the instrumentation may have hinged on the priest's own preference. (2) Again, if the marimba's existence be assumed, could it have been so precious to the Indians—for religious or other reasons—that it was kept secret from Spanish missionaries in order to protect and preserve it? It is entirely in accord with their practice to withdraw to a remote place and to retain certain pagan customs. (3) Was the marimba in existence in Guatemala as early as 1542? A circumspective reply to these questions is that the Mayan instruments which were singular to that

culture—like the gourd trumpet and various scraped instruments such as the turtle shell—gradually fell into disuse, whether due entirely to European influence being debatable; and as for keeping a secret for 150 years, which was the period of time between the writing of the Dance of Conquest and the first historic account of the marimba in Guatemala, the Indian has up until today maintained secrecy relating to many of his ways.

What does not seem credible is that the marimba should appear in Central America as a replica, even to the name, of an African instrument, a facsimile even to the unique membrane aperture and the details of construction. From what Mayan instrument could an instrument as complete as the marimba have evolved? It is known that the Mayas played upon rows of gourds tied around the waist and struck with sticks and that they had a gourd trumpet with a perforation similar to the membrane aperture of the marimba,[28] yet the fact remains that there is no evidence of a xylophone which could have been combined with the gourds to form a marimba. Some believe that the slit-drum (a hollow log, closed at both ends and played by beating on the two tongues formed by the H-shaped cut made in its side) may have served as a forerunner of the marimba, but this is doubtful from several standpoints. If the gourd marimba were considered to be a further development of the idea which produced the slit-drum, the superseding instrument would likely render the first one obsolete, but again this is not the case. Among the Chorti Indians of Guatemala the

28 Vela, p. 37.

marimba and slit-drum were played together,[29] and in other cultures too the slit-drum exists with the xylophone and has an entirely different function, usually that of sending signals.[30]

Archaeologists who are specialists in Mayan culture agree that there is no reason to suppose that the marimba belonged to the ancient Mayas or that the instrument existed in America in pre-Columbian times. The Mayas themselves provide much information on this point in codices, stelae, temple bas-reliefs, figurines, and murals (especially the Bonampak murals, dating from the eighth century) which contain graphic evidence of their tambourines, trumpets, drums, turtle shells, and other instruments. Nowhere among these artifacts is there the semblance of a marimba or xylophone.

Nor is there any mention of the marimba found in the many chronicles written by Spanish explorers and missionaries at the time of the Conquest. An instrument so advanced acoustically and so unusual in appearance would surely have been noted had it been known. Even in early colonial times there is no trace of it to be found in plantation records or explorations. Not even the meticulous records of John Lloyd Stephens' two-volume work *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán* (New York, 1841) mention the marimba. From the conspicuous lack of evidence of the marimba's early existence in Guatemala and from the correlation of its oldest type with an African counterpart, it appears most likely that it was an African import which was later

[29] Charles Wisdom, *The Chorti Indians of Guatemala* (Chicago, 1940).
[30] Personal communication from Hugh Tracey, April 17, 1957.

brought to a higher stage of development in Guatemala. Upon this hypothesis the history of the Negro in Central America may shed some light.

A search through the national archives of Guatemala disclosed these several facts regarding the Negro's introduction into the New World by the Spaniards: In 1517 the Spanish were allowed to import twelve Negroes each; there were Negroes in the expeditions of Cortés, and Las Casas, and there were even thirty Negroes with Balboa in 1513; but it is doubtful that the marimba was introduced so early, and since these Negroes did not proceed directly from Africa and their tribal customs but sailed from Europe as second-generation captives or were transported from islands in the Caribbean they are not likely to have been the ones who introduced it. However, the New Laws of Spain in the mid-sixteenth century prohibiting the use of the Indians as slaves resulted in wide-scale Negro slave trade which was made legal by Charles V of Spain when in 1561 he signed an authorization permitting the importation of Negro slaves to Guatemala "to alleviate the burden of the Indians."[31] Additional records show that in 1574 Negroes were taxed by the Spanish government.

Conceding the marimba's introduction to have been coincidental with slave trade, one must ask himself why, with the vast slavery population in the Western Hemisphere, the marimba was not known in Brazil, Cuba, the United States, and throughout the New World. There are numerous possible answers to this question. For one thing, not all African

31 *Prontuario de Reales Cédulas 1529-1599,* Index Al. 23-1512-292 (National Archives, Guatemala City), p. 103.

Negroes are acquainted with the marimba, and so it does not follow that wherever there were slaves the marimba would have been known. A more romantic possibility would be that, if the marimba came to the New World from the Congo as seems most likely, its construction might have required a Congolese chief or notable, since there the marimba was reserved for the use generally of aristocrats. If this be granted, it would be the rare slave who would be familiar enough with the marimba's construction to create one in the New World. It should be pointed out also that some of those brought as slaves were a generation removed from Africa, being brought from Spain or Portugal or from islands along the way and would not have been associated with the marimba. Vegetation also plays an important role in the marimba's construction as the African would have need of the tropical materials such as rubber, gourds, and resonant hardwood corresponding to those of his native land. It is possible, of course, that the marimba may have been introduced into other parts of the Americas and fallen into disuse, unrecorded. Fernando Ortiz, for example, quotes Oneida Alvarenga who stated that the marimba was once played in the state of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and also in the West Indies.[32] The Brazilian account was written in the nineteenth century and lacks historical proof. The West Indian report may refer to an instrument completely different from the Guatemalan marimba. In Cuba, for example, a "marimba" can be an instrument which consists of a wooden box in one side of which is a hole 3-4 inches in diameter; the sound is produced

32 Fernando Ortiz, "La afroamericana 'marimba,'" *Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía y Historia* (Guatemala), XXVII (1953-54), 310 ff.

by plucking thin metal pieces which extend over the hole. This instrument is also called a *marímbula* or "marimba drum." Ortiz also cites a statement that the marimba was once found in Peru, but this statement perhaps referred to the canoe xylophone of the Tucundyapa Indians, which consisted of several wooden slabs that were suspended vertically at one end of a canoe and played with a mallet.[33] A final factor which may help to explain why the marimba is not found in all countries where there were slaves is that all cultures do not have the same degree of response to an instrument when or if exposed to it; but with the Maya-quichés there were already in use instruments which may have been recognized as component parts of the marimba. Adoption of the marimba may have been natural for these people who, through familiarity with its parts, could grasp the whole. It is also plausible that the sight of familiar objects worked both ways, that the gourds and mallets which the Negro saw in Guatemala reminded him of his homeland and inspired him to make one of his native instruments.

That "marimba" is an African word is generally acknowledged on the basis that it is not found in the old Spanish, Quiché, Mam, or Incan languages. Some Indians of Guatemala have a word from their own language to designate marimba. In the Quiché language the marimba is referred to by a number of words, *h'ajom, gohon, kojom, koj,* or *gog,* which Flavio Rodas N. translates as "thing which cries," (hence, "musical instrument").[34] The equivalent in the

[33] Julian H. Steward, ed., *Handbook of South American Indians* (Washington, D.C., 1948), III, 679.

[34] Flavio Rodas N., "Música Regional," *La Revista Musical* (Chile), II (May 1929), 5.

Comalapa language is *oh'on,* meaning "musical instrument," and in the language of the Cakchiquel Indians it is interesting to see that *k'ojom* means "small drum," *tepunawa* is "slit-drum," and the compound word *nimá k'ojom tepunawa* means "marimba."[35] These Indian words are presented as vernacular terms for the marimba used by those who retain their Indian tongue, and it is not meant to imply that the instrument is indigenous because it has indigenous names.

The word "marimba" does occur in countries of the Western Hemisphere where it is not played, and wherever it appears it seems to connote in some way the musical instrument. In Colombia, for instance, "marimba" is a term for goiter, because of the goiter's physical likeness to the shape of a gourd. In Salvador and in Argentina "marimba" sometimes denotes flogging (or a strap which might be used for that purpose), probably from the treatment the marimba receives in the hands of inexpert players.

These applications of the word "marimba" were once thought to have resulted from an earlier knowledge of the instrument in Spanish colonies other than Guatemala, but that idea has been replaced by the supposition that, as used in these colonies, the word stems from familiarity with the Guatemalan instrument. The other colonies had no knowledge of the African marimba upon which to base their use of the word, and it was realized that the word was a recent addition to these vocabularies where its meaning was figurative. In addition, Tracey has reported that he knows of no comparable meanings of the word in Africa.[36]

[35] See Jakob Schoembs, *Material zur Sprache von Comalapa in Guatemala* (Dortmund: F. W. Ruhfus, 1905).

[36] Personal communication from Hugh Tracey, April 17, 1957.

It has been proposed that the name may have come from the Spaniards having discovered the Indians of Guatemala with an instrument like one they had seen in Africa, but the probability of this explanation is slight since only a few traders would have had opportunity to become acquainted with the African marimba and even fewer would likely have learned and transmitted the name of the instrument. There is more likelihood in the chance that the Negroes themselves might have assigned the name "marimba" on relating it to their own, had they found the instrument among the Indians. This would have been a reasonable answer provided there had been in existence in America such a musical instrument before the arrival of slaves from Africa, but no such instrument appears on record.

The first veritable account of the marimba in the Western Hemisphere is dated over 100 years from the time slaves were first imported into the New World. Its source is a highly descriptive chronicle written by the historian Juarros in which he gives a detailed account of the dedication and opening of the new Cathedral of Santiago de los Caballeros in what is now known as Antigua on November 5, 1680. As part of the dedication ceremonies was music furnished by "military drums, kettledrums, bugles, trumpets, marimbas, and other instruments which the Indians use."[37]

In his study of the marimba David Vela cites an obscure pamphlet written by a balladeer named Núñez which contains the following observation dated 1673: "I condescend to note as a curious thing, that in those times the marimba,

[37] Domingo Juarros, *Compendio de la Historia de la Ciudad de Guatemala* (3rd ed.; Guatemala City, 1936), II, 241.

forming part of the orchestra, was always played in the cathedral festivities."

According to Victor Miguel Díaz, the marimba was widely diffused among the Guatemalan Indians by 1737: ". . . by that time some marimbas were seen in various Indian populations as well as in the regions of San Gaspar and Jocotenango (of the city of Santiago de los Caballeros). Each instrument is played by one individual." He mentions the marimba again in a description of the parade of Santa Cecilia in the same year: ". . . and here is added the noise made by players of chirimías, reed whistles, drums in confusion, marimbas of tecomates and many other instruments which the natives played simultaneously, producing noise enough to be heard from a great distance."[38]

In more recent times the development of the marimba in Guatemala has been more rapid. David Vela says that about 1840 the keyboard was enlarged to accommodate three or four players. Some years later, in William T. Brigham's *Guatemala, The Land of The Quetzal,* published in 1887, the marimba sencilla is first recorded. Possibly the substitution of wooden for gourd resonators was due to the influence of European musical instruments made of wood; undoubtedly the wooden resonators were stronger and easier to make to the correct proportions.

It does not appear certain whether the chromatic marimba or marimba doble, a Guatemalan invention, preceded the marimba sencilla or not. According to Miguel Díaz the

[38] Victor Miguel Díaz, "Vida Artística de Guatemala" (notation for the history of music, 1928), published in serial form in *Diario de Centro-América,* (Guatemala, 1928).

first chromatic instrument was made in the capital city by José Chaequin and Manuél López, both from Jocotenango; this instrument was presented publicly at an aerialist exhibition given by Donaciano Escarreola shortly before 1874. No record, however, of this exhibition appears to exist. More generally the origin of the chromatic marimba has been attributed to two members of the Hurtado family, Toribio and Sebastián, of Almolonga, Quetzaltenango, with Julián Paniagua Martínez helping tune the keys. On November 21, 1899, the Hurtado marimba performed in the capital to honor the birthday of President Cabrera, who was from Quetzaltenango. Another chromatic marimba was presented by Federico Guzmán at the industrial exposition in 1905.

In the early twentieth century touring performers began to spread knowledge of the marimba to other countries. Most active in these tours were various members of the Hurtado family. One group of them brought a marimba sencilla to an exposition in Buffalo, New York, in 1901, but the performance was cancelled at the death of President McKinley. In 1908 another group, with their teacher Mariano Valverde, made a three-year tour in the United States with a chromatic marimba and afterwards went to Europe. In 1915 the Hurtados recorded for the Victor Talking Machine Company, and a year later the marimba of Jacinto and Carlos Estrada also recorded for Victor. Other marimbas active during this period were that headed by José Ovalle and a group called the Marimba Ideal.

Guatemala has been the country to develop the marimba from the primitive stage, and both the marimba sencilla and the marimba doble are native to the country although the

marimba con tecomates is believed to be of African origin. At some point within the century between the beginning of the slave trade in Guatemala and the dedication of the Cathedral in the capital city of Santiago (Antigua), the marimba was presumably transferred from the Congo to the Guatemalan highlands. Which Negro may have introduced the marimba and which Indian first adopted it remains a mystery, but the fact that it was embraced by the Indian culture demonstrated that it fulfilled an inner need. Without the rich store of folksongs sometimes had by secluded peoples and with a seven-note cane flute[39] their only melodic instrument, it is quite understandable that they would be drawn to the marimba which could give them greater expression. With the marimba they disclosed an intimacy with nature in melodies about the coffee trees or in imitation of birdsongs, and with it they worshipped, petitioning aid for the growing of their crops or paying homage to saints. To its music they danced their joy and cried in disguise. One senses their feeling today as they begin to lose themselves to the voice of the marimba. The players seem to become a part of the instrument, both visually and audibly, but the look of their faces—paradoxically quiet—intimates that inner world which the marimba opens to them and to the sensitive listener.

[39] *F# G# A# C C# D# F#*

APPENDIX

The Indian Son as Played by the Marimba of San Jorge, Sololá

In texture the son style is homophonic and consists of three parts: the soprano, supplying the melody and variations on it; the middle, furnishing harmonic support and a rhythm either like the bass or in counter-rhythm to it; and the bass, giving the harmonic and rhythmic basis. Throughout, the dynamic level of the son remains *forte*.

The harmony is triadic, and the following progressions are typical of the San Jorge marimba as well as the Indian marimba in general:

Introduction	*Theme and variations*
$V_6 - IV - II - V_6 - I$	$- IV - I$
	$- IV - I_6 - I$
	$- IV - I_6 - IV - I - V - I$
	$- V_6 - I$
	$- V_6 - IV - I$
	$- V_6 - IV - I_6 - I$
	$- V_6 - IV - I_6 - IV - I - V - I$

The scale used is hypolydian, the equivalent of *C* major only with *F* tonic instead of *C*. One external melodic characteristic is a phrase length which is more or less standard, that of two measures (12 beats); the melodic compass of a son may be generalized also as having a compass of one octave plus four notes. Another external feature of the melody is its contour which may be one of these three: a falling contour (ex. Theme A), a rising and falling (ex. Episode D), or a falling and rising contour (ex. Episode C).

Kinds of melodic intervals are limited to major and minor seconds, thirds, and sixths as well as perfect fourths; these

intervals may ascend or descend freely, but perfect fifths ascending and descending are found in the bass part only. Repeated notes are common in the melodic line of any of the three parts, and occasionally there is an augmented fourth; otherwise the melodic movement is consonant with disjunct motion in arpeggios preferred in the construction of a melody.

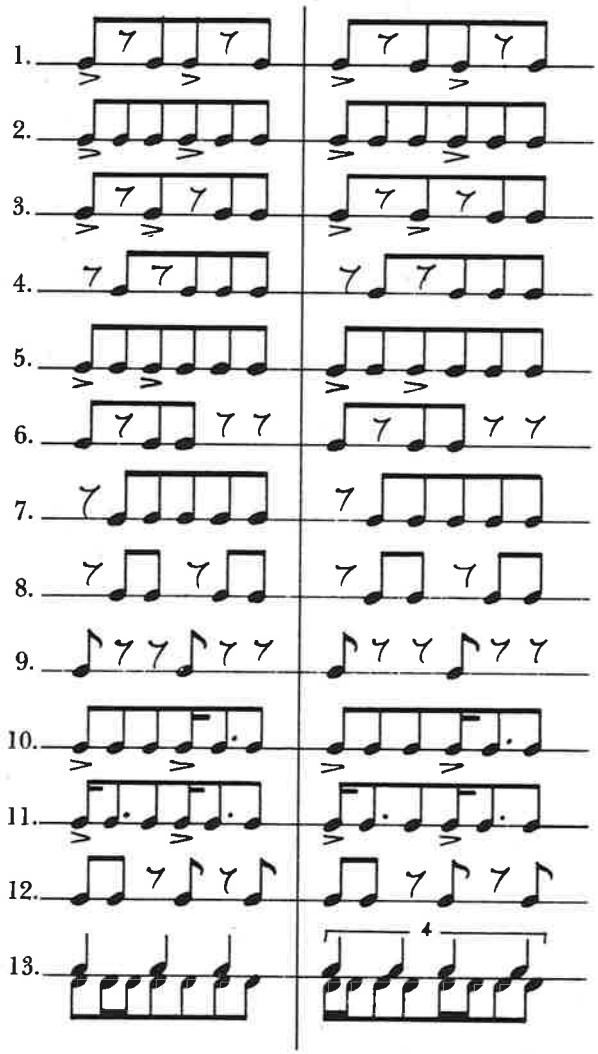
In regard to harmonic intervals, major and minor seconds, thirds, sixths, and ninths are found, with the seconds occurring in the cluster *GAB* or *ABC*. Perfect fourths, fifths, and octaves are also frequent with parallel fifths within triads found in block harmony. The harmonic motion in relation to the soprano and bass lines is contrary or similar motion. To the author's knowledge no triple sequences are employed although two-measure phrases are treated sequentially in a harmonic pattern of subdominant to tonic or dominant to tonic.

Since it is the leader who determines when the son should end there is no formal cadence, and the final chord comes before the listener can anticipate it; the leader abruptly initiates an arpeggio on the tonic chord which cues the end to the other players, and immediately they all join in the playing of the tonic chord in single-stroke rolls.

The meter of the son is 6/8, and the tempo may vary from ♩. = c.88 to between 100 and 132, and the note values may range from a 32nd note (excluding the grace-note) to a dotted half. Even within these rhythmic confines it is surprising to find that the son may assume one of many qualities depending upon the rhythmic patterning of the 6/8 and its tempo. For instance, in the following examples the flavor of

APPENDIX

Some Varieties of 6/8 Patterns Employed in the Accompaniment



1 and 8 suggest a lively dance while 3 and 4 provide for a more serious, dignified rendition of the son. Especially in a slow tempo, 10 and 11 portray a solemnity in marked contrast to the exciting and more complex pattern listed finally (13).

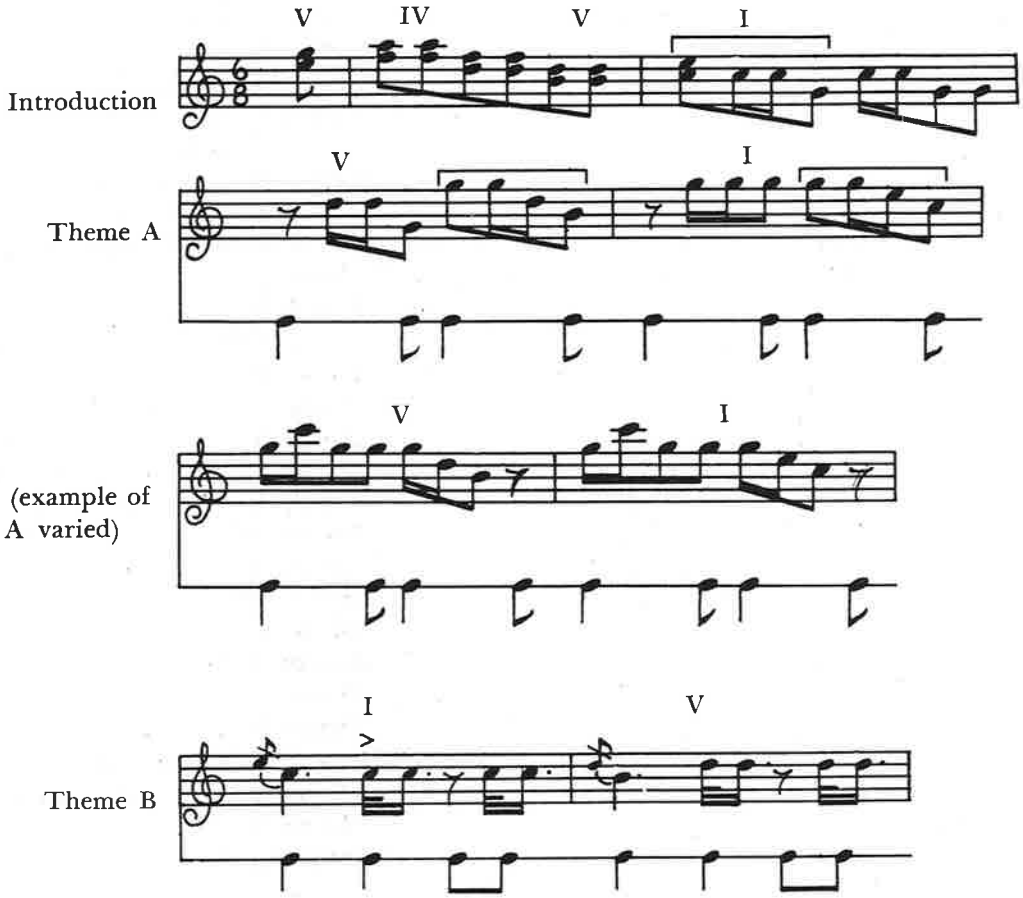
As for its form, a son is best described by the brief analysis of one son chosen at random from the San Jorge repertoire. Here is a summary of such a form with illustrations of the thematic material and some examples of its variance.

After the introduction, two two-measure themes (A and B) alternate and are varied or repeated as the leader wills. Thus form and duration are flexible. Subordinate two-measure themes serving as episodes are treated in the same manner as the two principal themes and occur in a specific order. In order to show that the form is not so symmetrical as it would seem to be, the number of measures devoted to the particular divisions will also be listed. It should also be observed that the themes never recur exactly as originally stated.

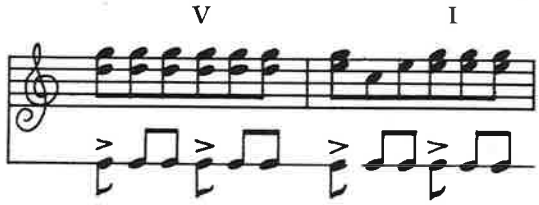
APPENDIX

Order and Duration of Themes and Episodes

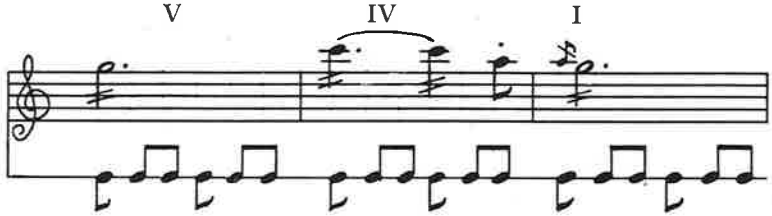
	number of measures
Introduction	2
Theme A	2
A varied	7
Theme B	2
B varied	9
Episode C	2
C varied	6
Episode D	2
D varied	4
C and D mixed and varied	8
Theme A^1	2
Episode E	2
E varied	4
Theme A^2	8
Theme B^1	18
Theme A^3	9
Theme B^2	36
Theme A^4	12
Theme B^3	7
Episode C^1	9
Episode D^1	13
Theme A^5	10
Episode E^1	6
Theme A^6	8
Theme B^4	25
Episode C (1st measure)	1
Theme A^7	18
Theme B^5	6
Cadence	


V
IV
V
I
Introduction
V
I
Theme A
V
I
(example of
A varied)
I
V
Theme B

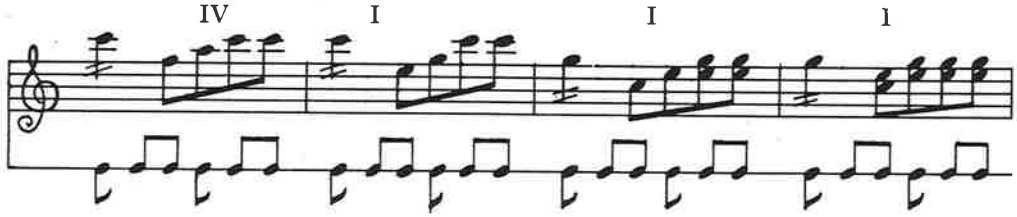
Episode C



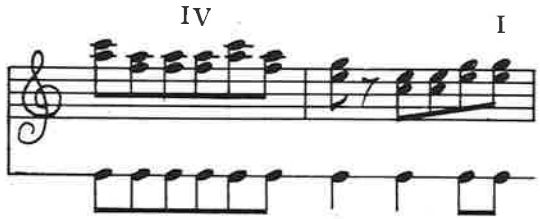
Episode D



(examples of C and D mixed and varied)

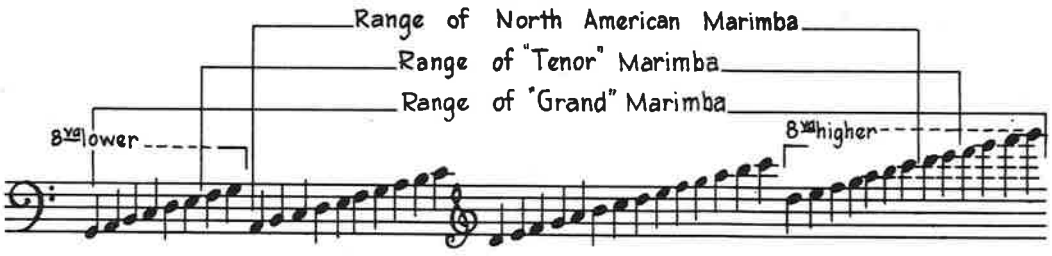


Episode E

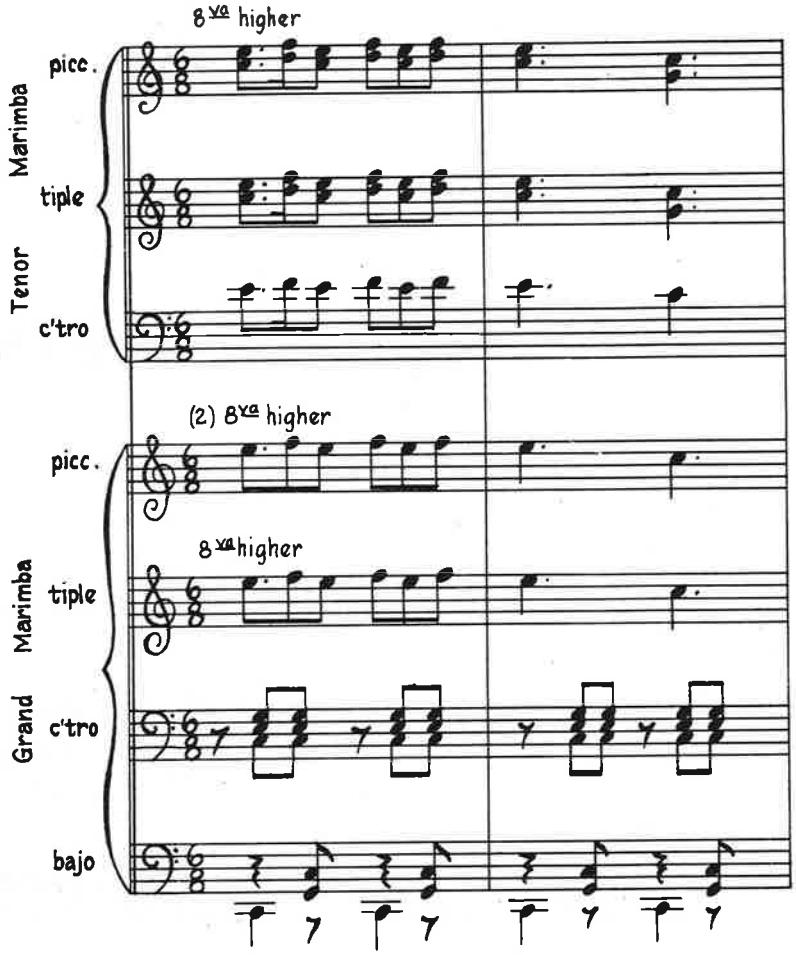


MUSICAL ILLUSTRATIONS

1. RANGE OF MARIMBA DOBLE AND OF NORTH AMERICAN MARIMBA

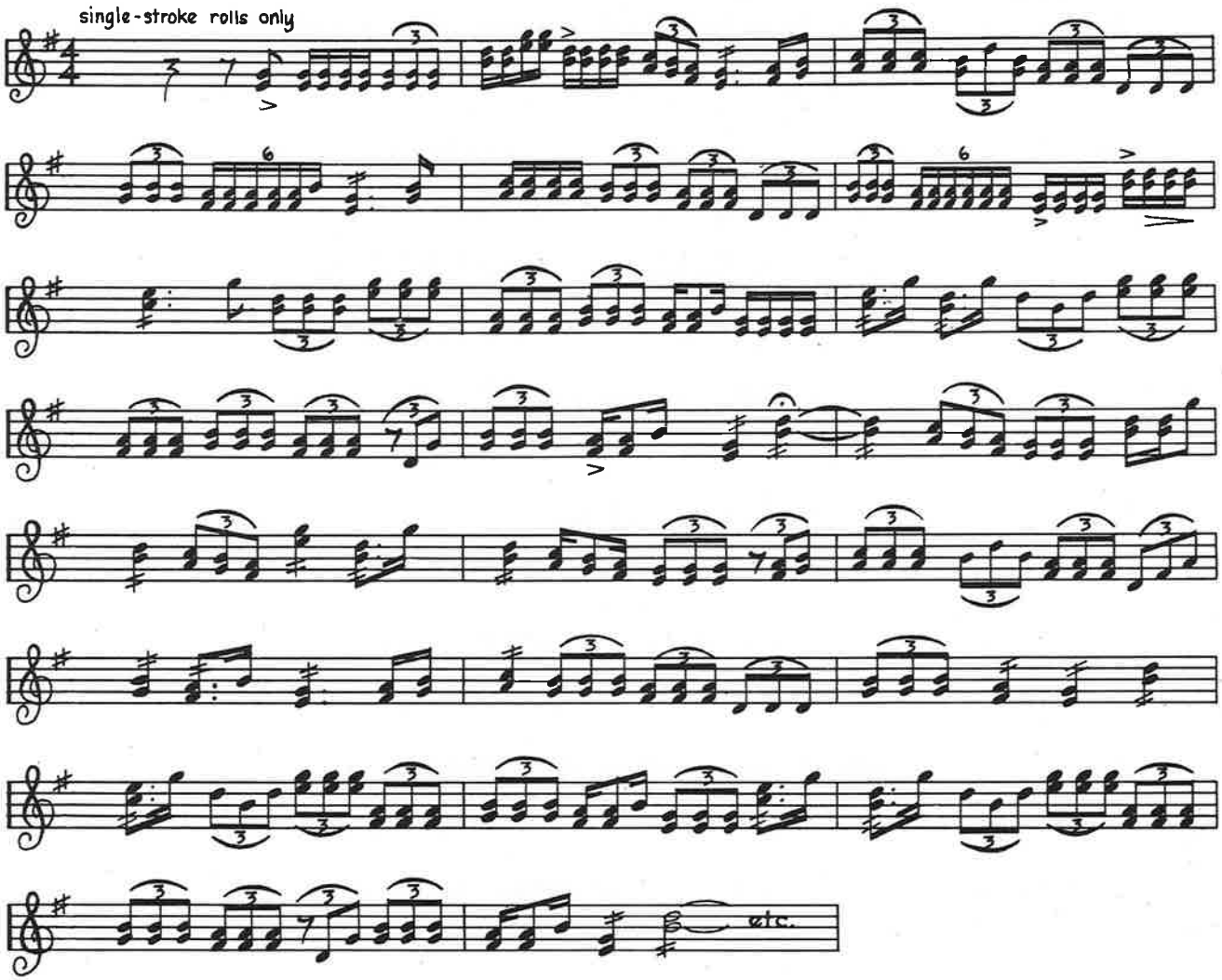


2. "TIKAL-ACHÍ" Manuel José Hernandez de León, 1957

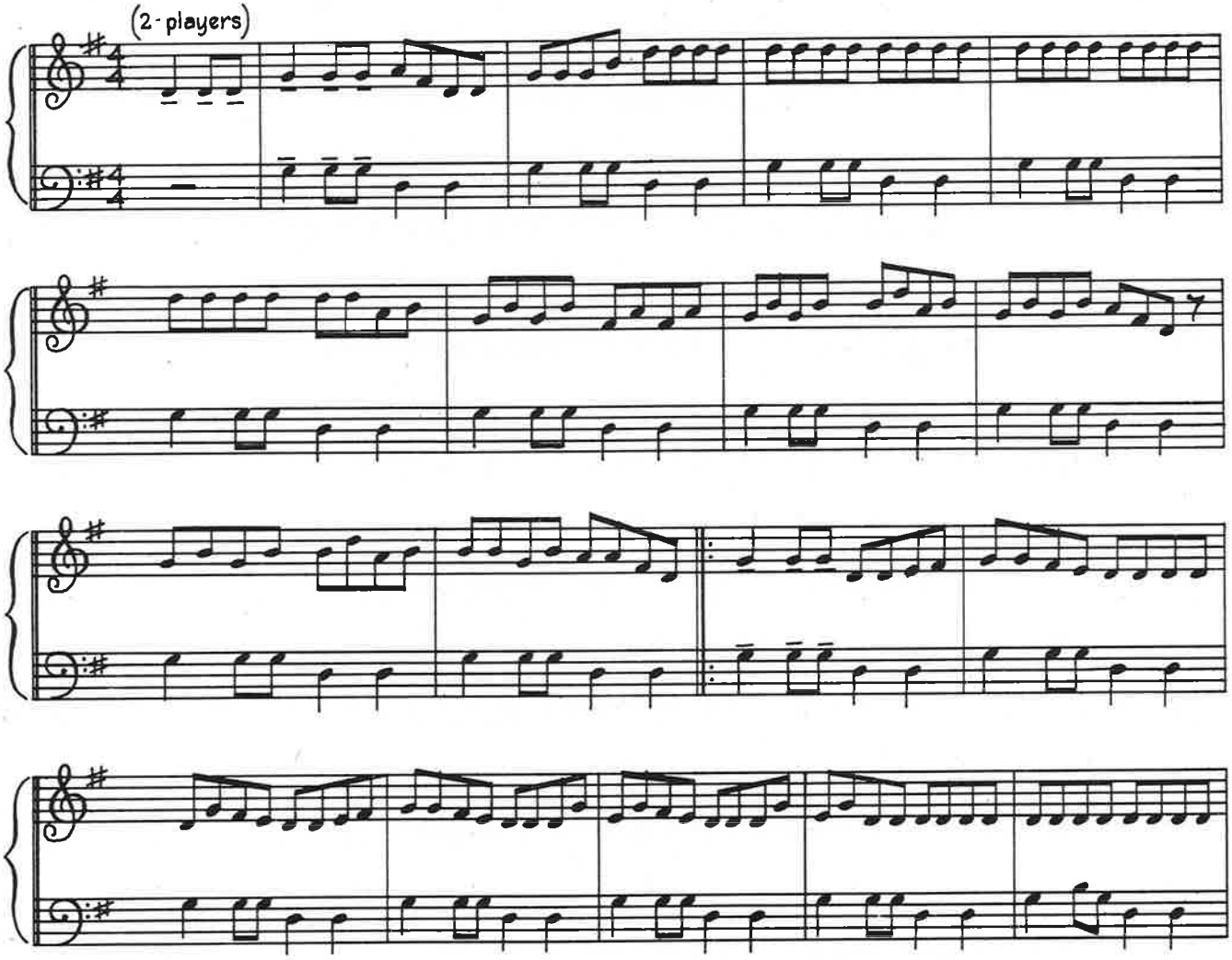


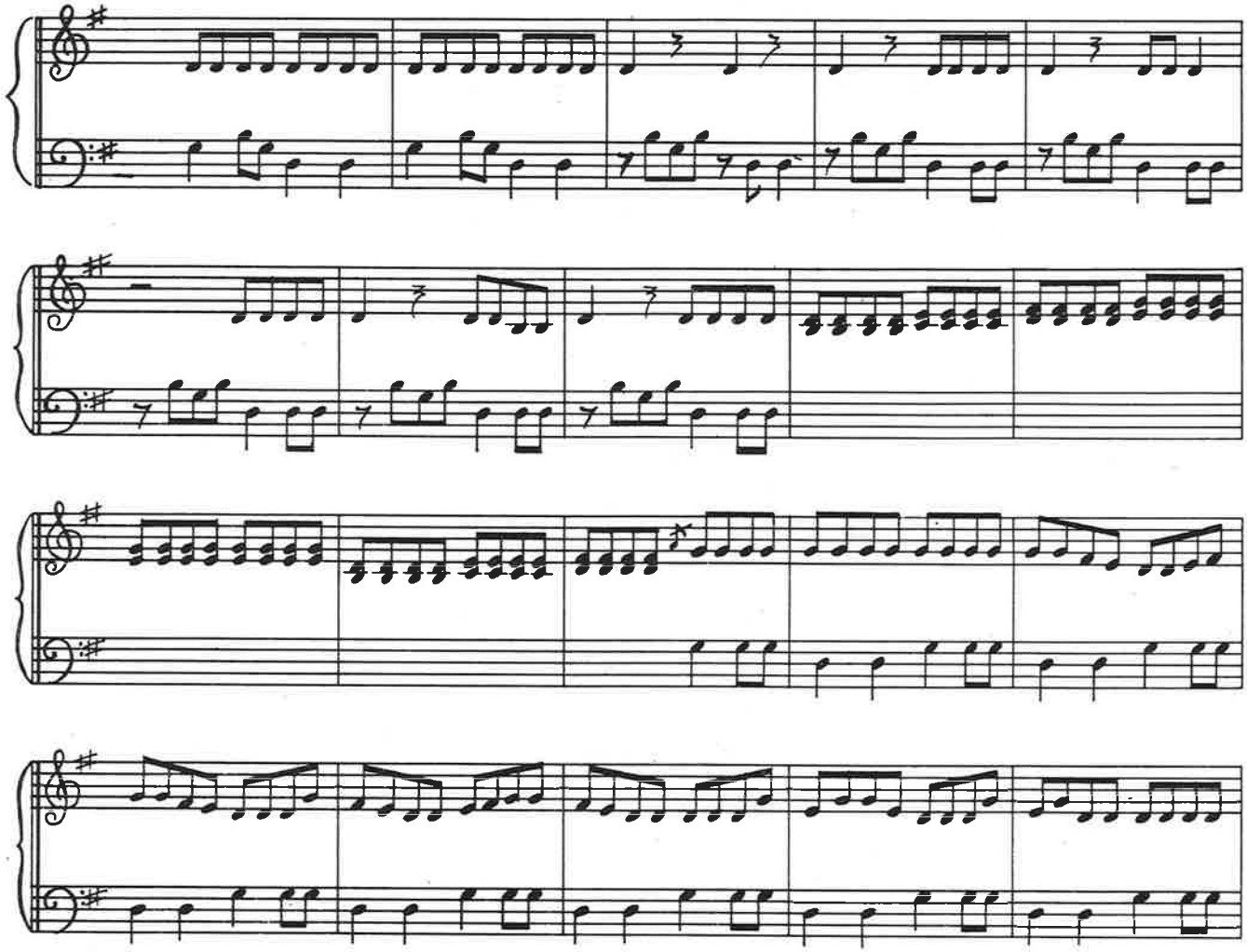
3. Baile de San Miguel—Chichicastenango

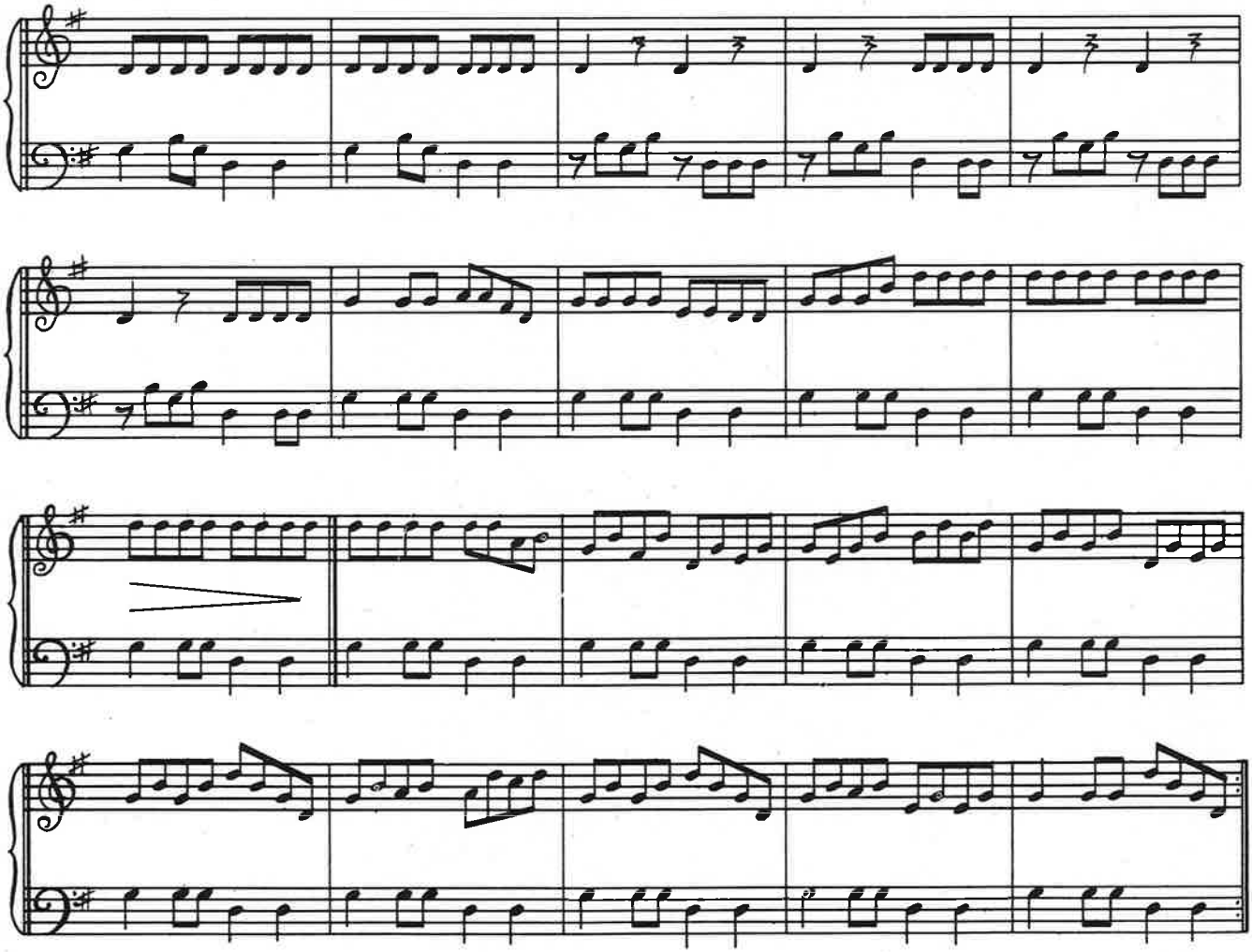
Yurchenco Collection, Library of Congress
Recording copied as heard, 1957



4. Son de Despedida—Chichicastenango





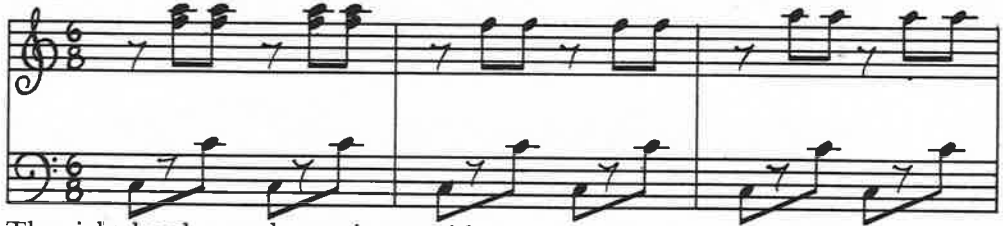


5. At the mask-fábrica in Chichicastenango

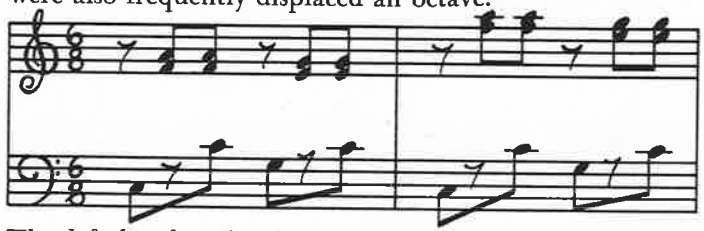
As played  etc.

at the mask-fábrica, the left hand accompaniment was tonic to dominant with the first and fourth counts of the 6/8 meter stressed.

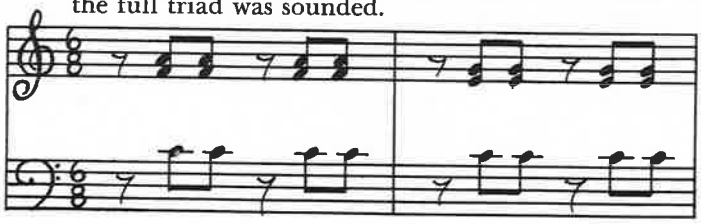
The third and sixth counts were always tonic. Two mallets were held in the right hand, and the melody was played in thirds; at times the thirds were separated into single notes as a simple melodic variation.



The right hand moved stepwise or with repeated notes, but the double notes of the right hand were also frequently displaced an octave.

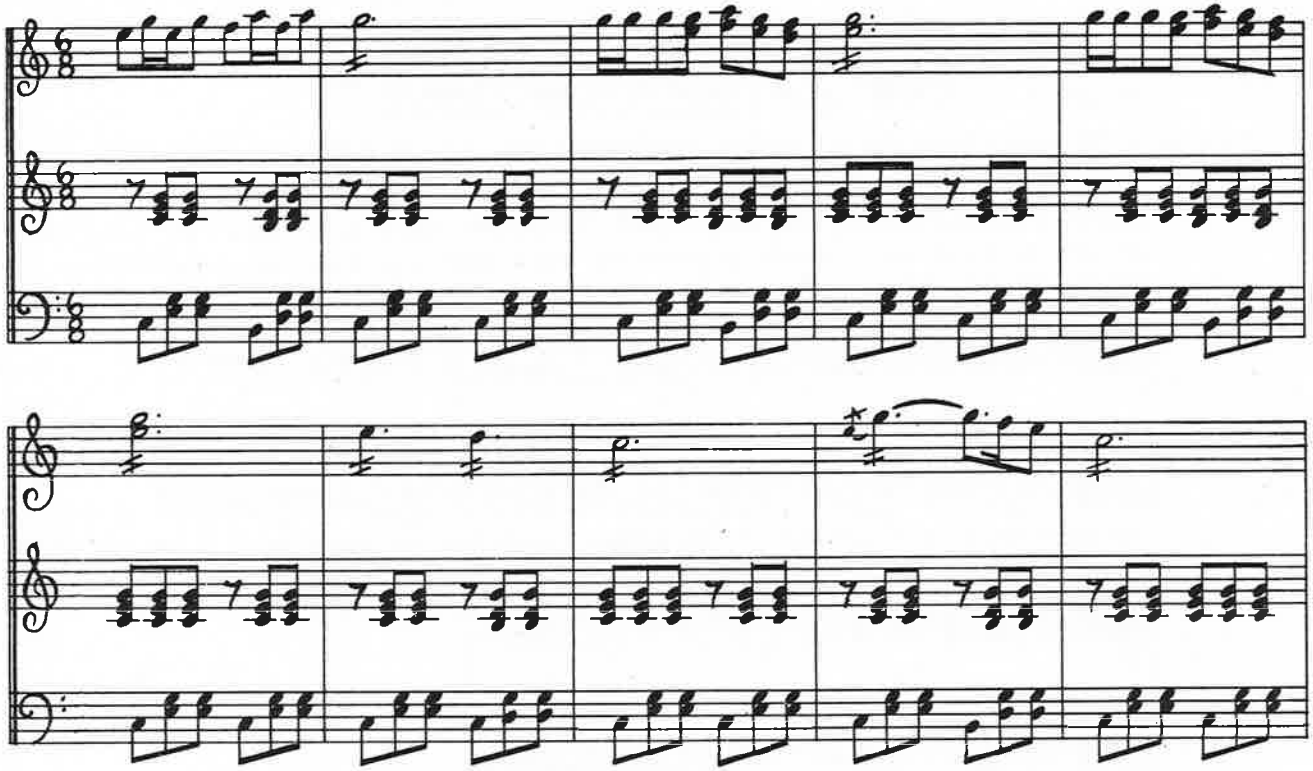


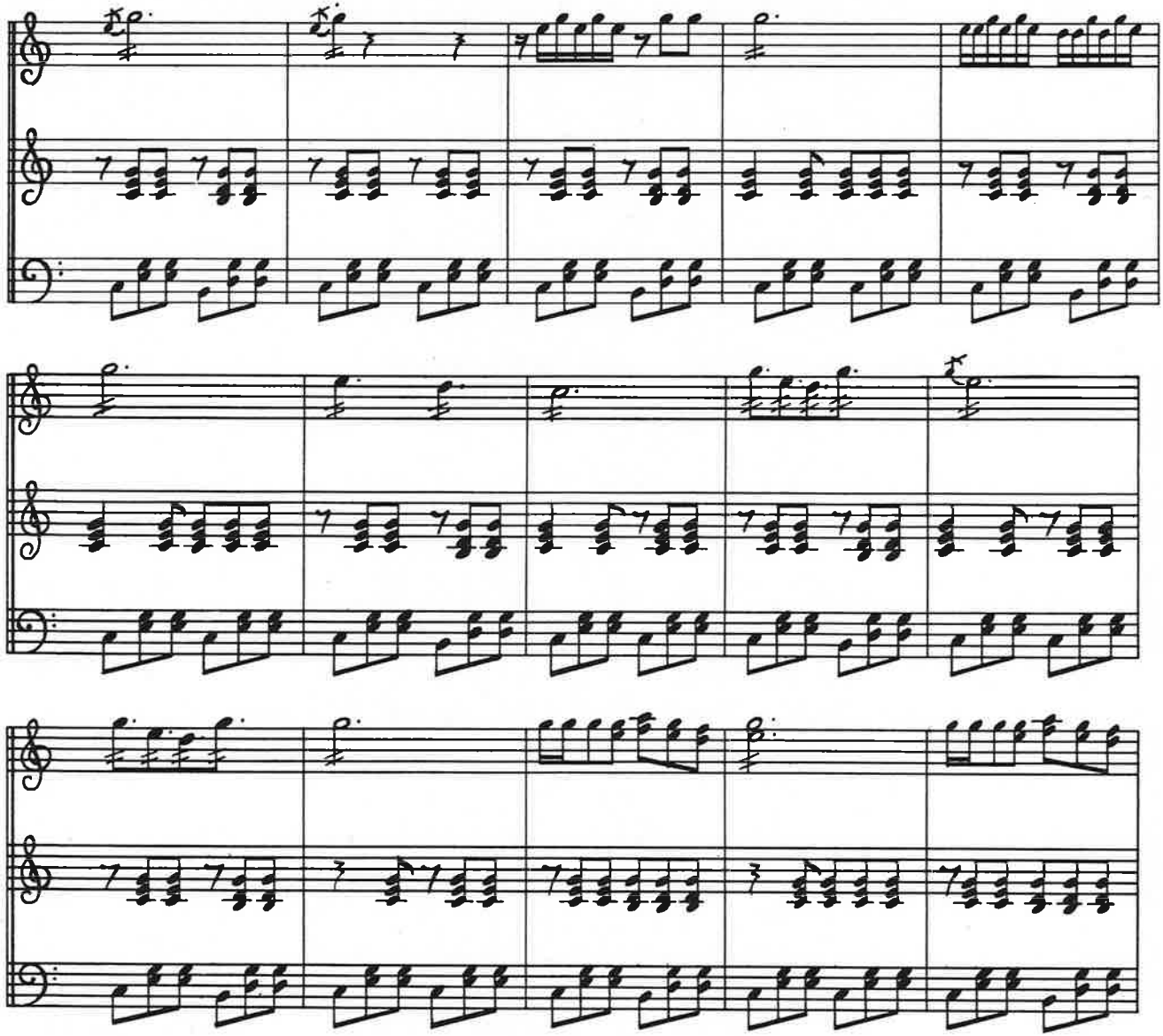
The left hand maintained a consistent pattern. The first and fourth beats were omitted when the full triad was sounded.

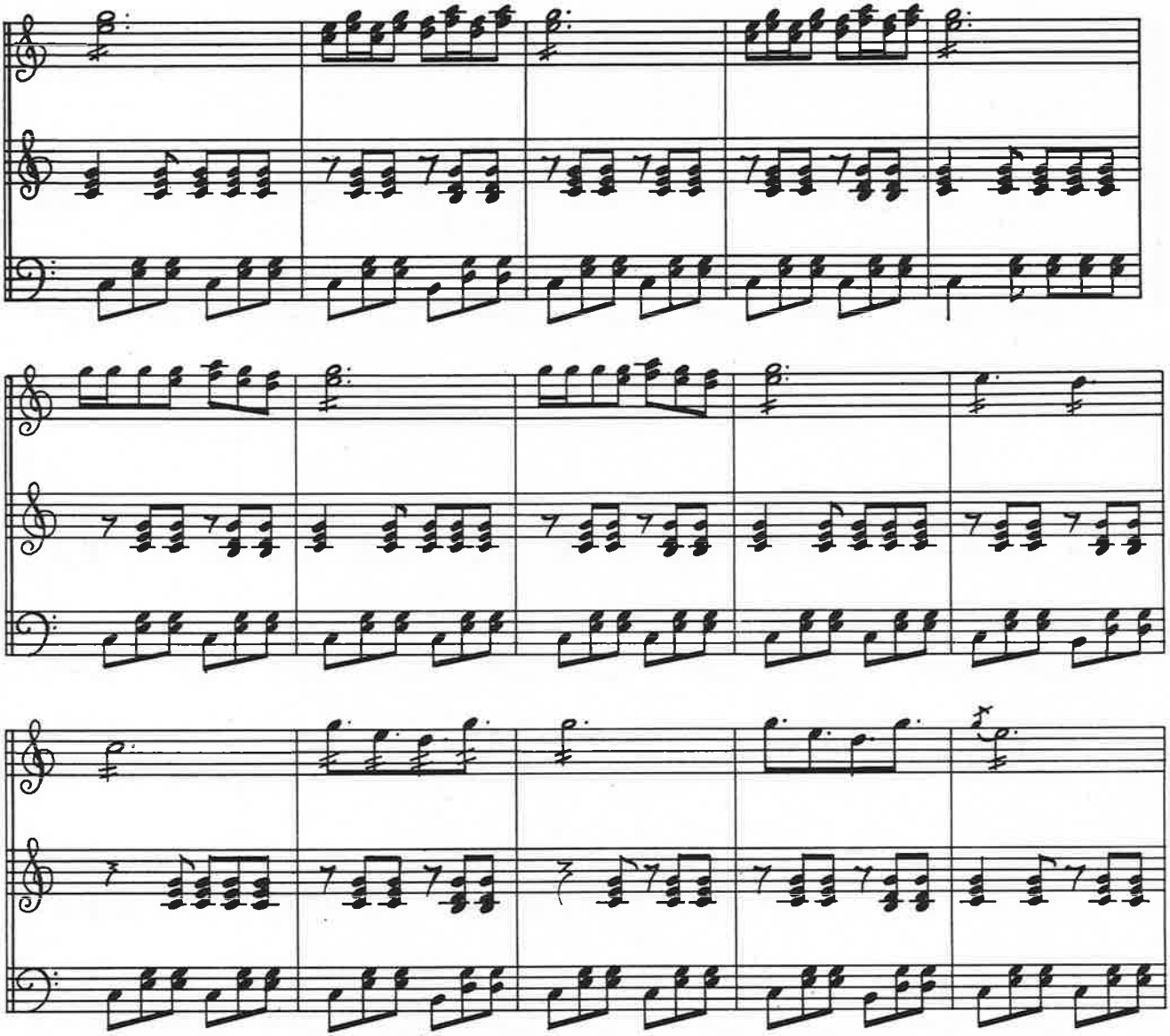


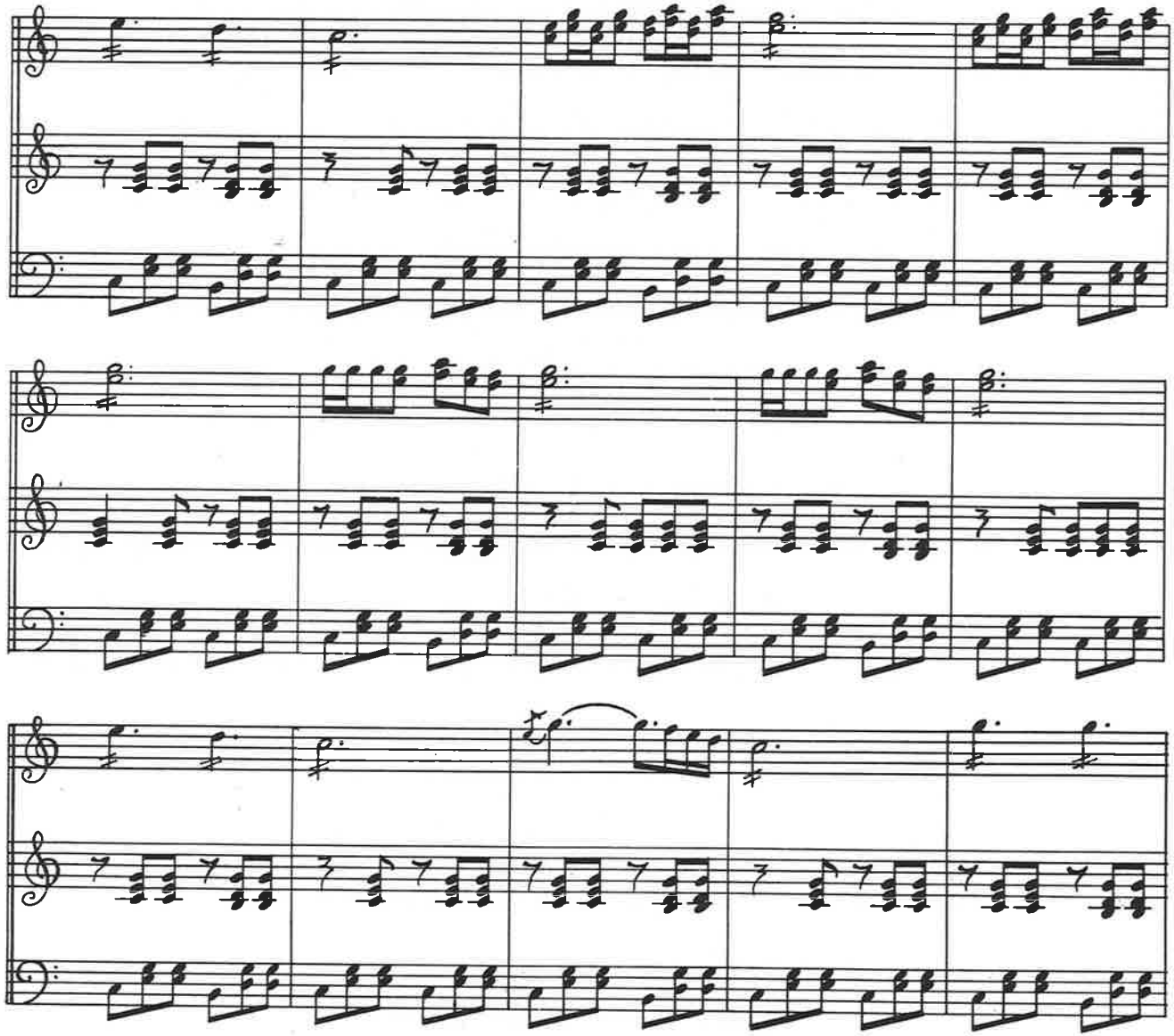
6. Son de San Pablo, Sololá

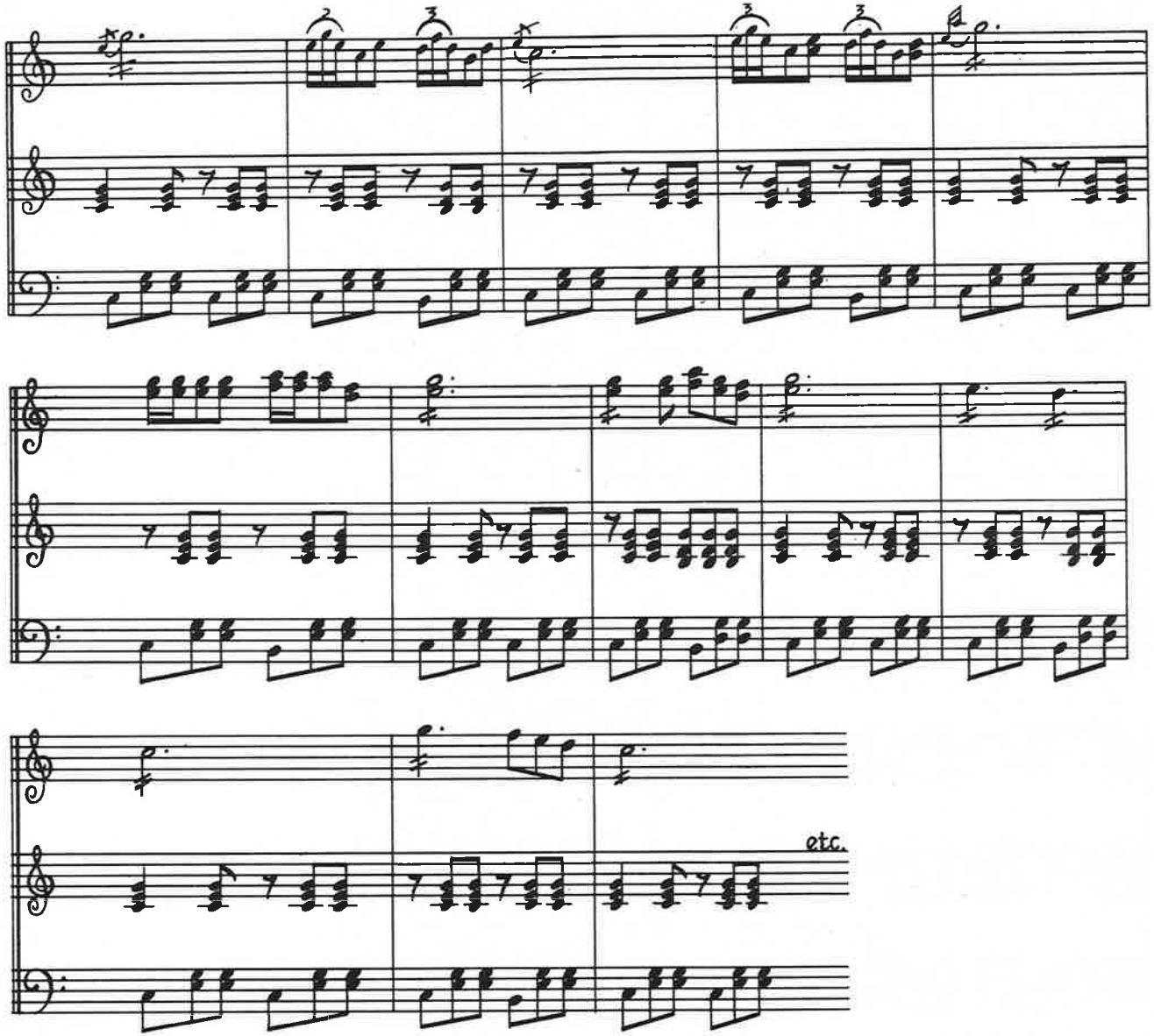
Copied as heard, 1959

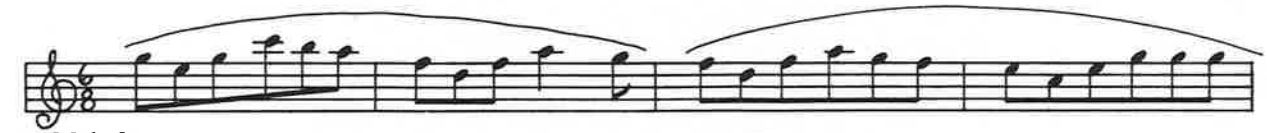









etc.

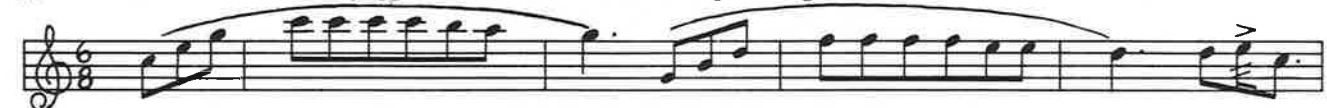


(1) Melody A

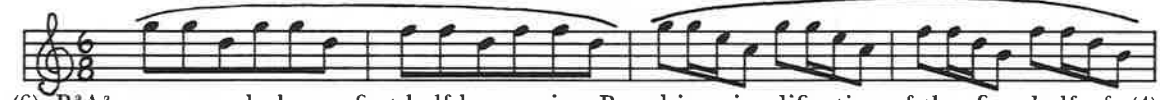
(2) Melody B

(3) A^1—melodic variation with arpeggio, repeated notes and a new cadence

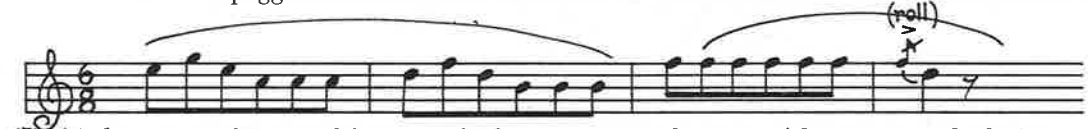
(4) B^1—single notes given arpeggio treatment; last half of phrase gives melodic contour of original B



(5) A^2—same as (3) only with an upbeat and ornamental closing



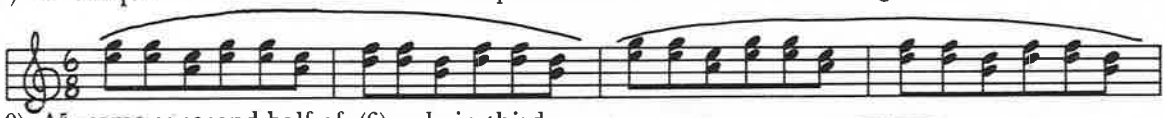
(6) B^2A^3—compound phrase; first half harmonizes B and is a simplification of the first half of (4); second half is an arpeggio harmonization of A and a variation on the first two measures of this phrase, B^2



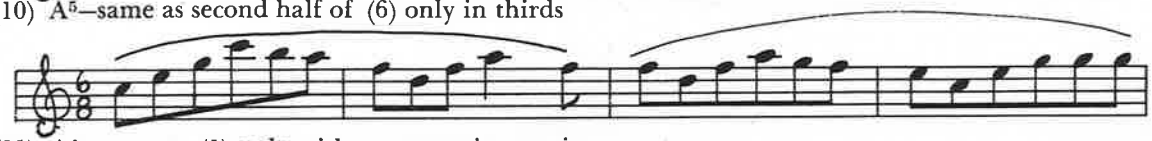
(7) A^4—harmony of A stated in arpeggio figures, repeated notes, with ornamental closing

(8) A^2—same as (5)

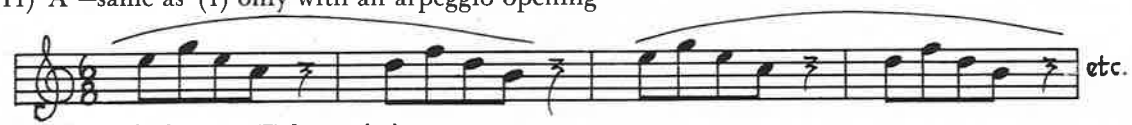
(9) B^3—simplification of B with octave displacement and addition of the grace note



(10) A^5—same as second half of (6) only in thirds



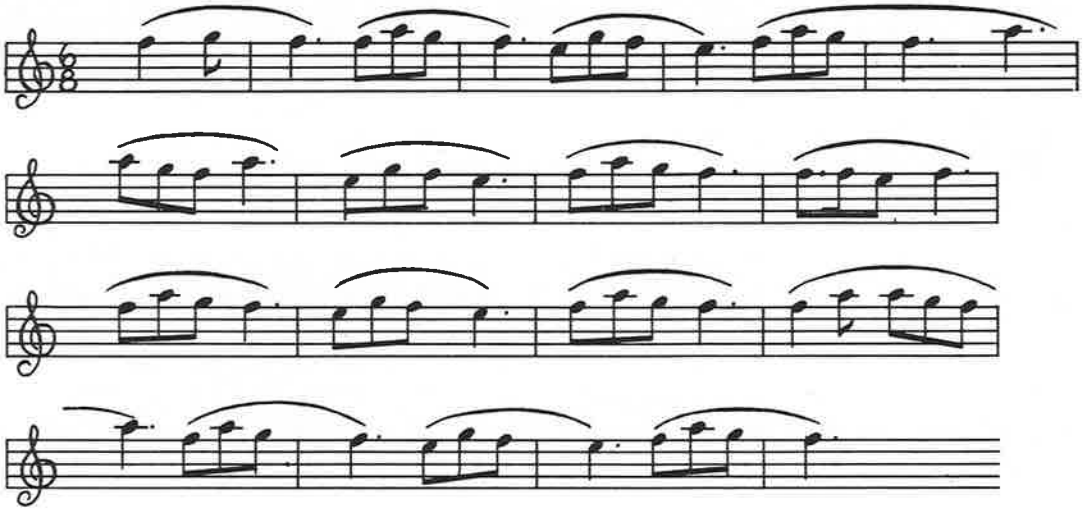
(11) A^6—same as (1) only with an arpeggio opening



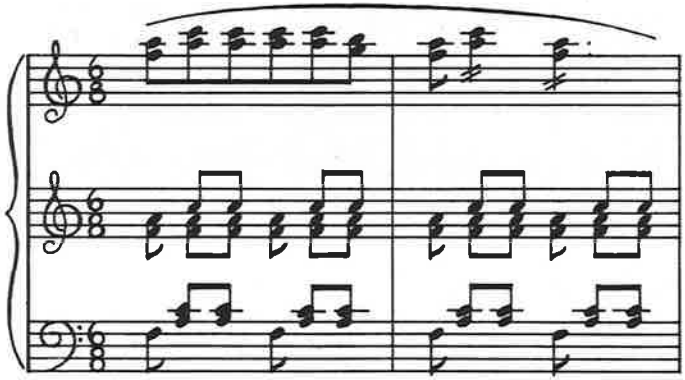
(12) A^7—variation on (7) by omitting two notes

8. MARIMBA DE SANTA CRUZ LA LAGUNA — Copied as heard, 1957

Example 1

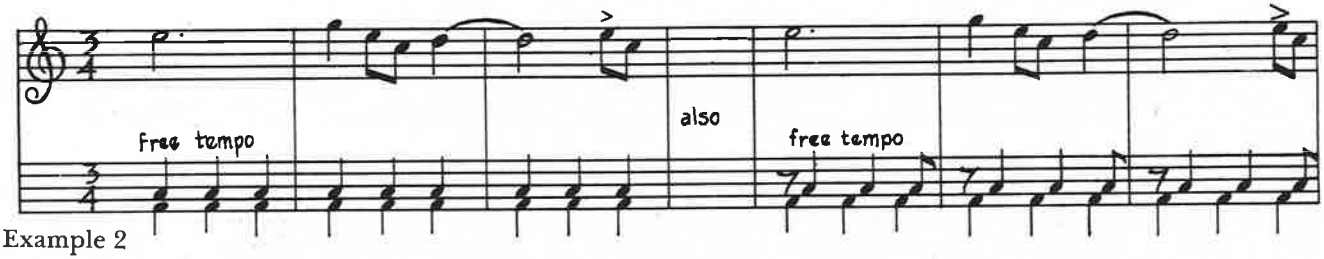


Example 2



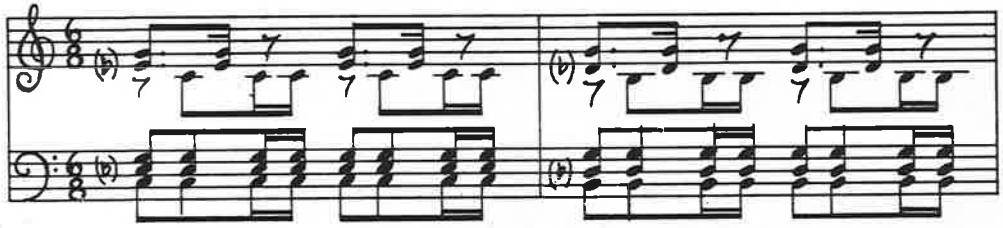
9. Marimba de San Felipe — Copied as heard, 1957

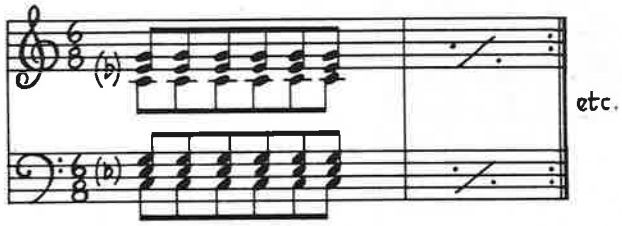
Example 1



Example 2

10. Bella Antigueña marimba of Antigua — Copied as heard, 1957





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