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# Three Hand Drum Duets

By Robert J. Damm and Ricky Burkhead

Hand drumming provides an opportunity to learn about and connect with the rich traditional musical practices of Africa and the African diaspora. It is in these traditions that we find a sophisticated range of techniques and a wide palette of sounds related to the tonal languages of Africa: muffles, bass tones, open tones, and slaps. There is also a special intimacy to playing hand drums because of the direct skin-to-skin contact. Babatundé Olatunji described in his autobiography, *The Beat of My Drum*, the power of hand drums to celebrate life, bring peace, help in healing, and foster unity (p. 41–42).

There are various ways to learn about the traditional music of Africa and the African diaspora. The best way is to experience this music in the traditional setting of cultural celebrations in Africa or Cuba. This is not an option for everyone. Another choice is to watch videos and to learn from transcriptions and method books; these are valuable resources. One might ultimately want to experience some degree of social interaction while playing drums that were intended for use in communal settings.

One option is to find a musical partner with whom to play duets. A duet provides the synergy of an ensemble experience and the intimate dialogue of conversing with a friend. Given that scheduling large ensembles can seem impossible, the duet is a viable solution. In the context of a duet, both musicians may alternate in the role of accompanying or leading and strive for various levels of balance as called for by the music.

There are, however, relatively few duets through which percussionists present congas and jembes in a recital setting and, at the same time, connect to the traditional music for which these instruments are traditionally played. The authors of this paper have played as a world drumming duo since 2009 and would like to share our performance notes for three of our favorite hand drum duets. All three of these pieces were notated with rhythms and textures that are representative of African and/or Afro-Cuban styles. Two of the three compositions also call for improvisation, an essential performance practice in traditional jembe and conga styles. The three hand drum duets analyzed in this article are “Rumba Clave” by Roberto Vizcaino, “You’re Makin’ Me Dizzy” by Rich Holly, and “Desert Celebration” by Matt Savage.

## “RUMBA CLAVE”

“Rumba Clave” was written by Cuban percussionist Roberto Vizcaino and was premiered in Havana by his students. The authors made every effort to contact Roberto Vizcaino about his music over several years, but had to rely on published performance notes for direction. Vizcaino described “Rumba Clave” in the published performance notes as being close to his African roots and influenced by Cuban popular music. The work requires four congas pitched from high to low, two drums per player.

In Cuba the word “rumba” originally designated a party, but eventually came to refer to a family of specific Afro-Cuban rhythms and associated dances. *Clave* is a Spanish word meaning “key” and is the name of the pattern played on the claves in Latin American music. The two-measure clave rhythm is made up of five notes split into 3 + 2 or 2 + 3 units. The most common clave patterns are son clave and rumba clave. The rumba clave is used in yambú and guaguancó rumba traditions and some popular music styles.

“Rumba Clave” is notated in 4/4. The composition seems to be constructed in 2:3 rumba clave. The piece was written to be played using claves as drumsticks, but because of the conga instrumentation, the authors suggest a reinterpretation of the piece applying traditional hand drum techniques.

Figure 1. Vizcaino: Key for hand drum interpretation

High drum (HD)  
Low drum (LD)

LD muffle   LD open tone   HD muffle   HD open tone   HD slap

The piece is published on nine 8½ x 14 pages. The score can easily be reduced to fit on three pages to eliminate the distraction of excessive music stands or page turns. There are no improvised or ad lib solos in this composition. The piece does, however, feature two notated solos, one for each player. Bars 12–29 are a written-out lead solo for player 1 over a notated accompaniment figure for player 2. This accompaniment figure is similar to the cascara rhythm found in rumba and also similar to a syncopated mambo bell pattern. The rhythm is called cascara because it is traditionally played on the shell of the drum, and *cascara* is the Spanish word for shell. Note that player 2’s low drum accompaniment in mm. 12–29 is easily aligned with the 2:3 rumba clave pattern.

Figure 2. Vizcaino: Low drum accompaniment in mm. 12–29 with added 2:3 rumba clave

Low drum  
Clave

Measures 46–59 are a written-out lead solo for player 2 over an accompaniment provided by player 1.

Figure 3. Vizcaino: High drum accompaniment in mm. 46–59

*mf*

There are two unison break sections (see Figure 4) in this work, which provide thematic unity to the composition.

Figure 4. Vizcaino: Unison breaks in mm. 9–11 and mm. 43–45

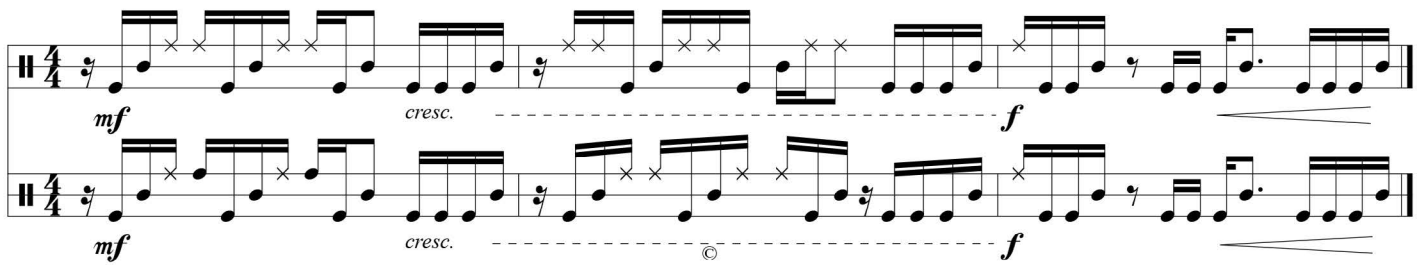
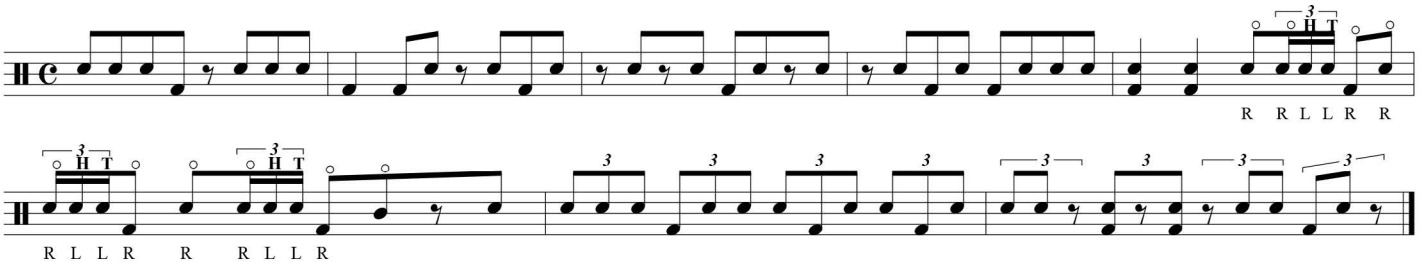


Figure 5. Holly: Unison break in mm. 1–8



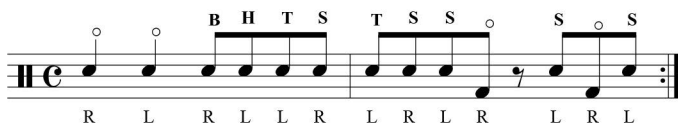
### “YOU’RE MAKIN’ ME DIZZY”

“You’re Makin’ Me Dizzy” was composed by Rich Holly in honor of Dizzy Gillespie. Gillespie’s collaboration with Cuban conga drummer and composer Chano Pozo in the 1940s resulted in significant developments in the Afro-Cuban jazz genre. The composition requires four congas, two for each player. The piece is comprised of four distinct sections; each player is featured with an improvised solo.

Holly generously provided information about this piece to the authors via e-mail. He acknowledged the influence of Frank Malabe, with whom he studied congas, in the composition of this work. Part I of this piece (measures 1–30) is actually a sequence of fills or syncopated breaks inspired by Malabe. The first eight measures serve as a sample of this break section (see Figure 5).

Part II (beginning with a pickup in measure 31) is written in a style called mozambique. Mozambique was derived from the music of Cuban *comparsas* or street carnivals. A basic mozambique conga pattern is played as an accompaniment by player 1, over which player two improvises a solo.

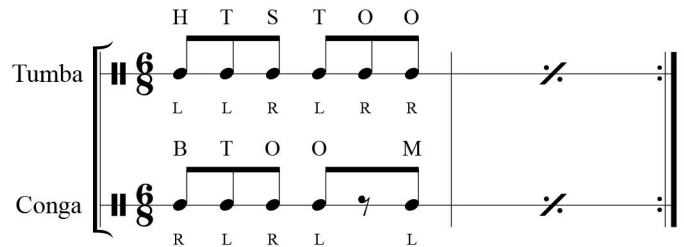
Figure 6. Holly: Mozambique accompaniment in mm. 32–33



Eddie Palmieri popularized the mozambique in New York City during the 1960s. The New York mozambique bell pattern was later adopted by drumset players in jazz and popular music. Steve Gadd is known for playing his version of mozambique on drumset for Paul Simon’s “Late in the Evening.”

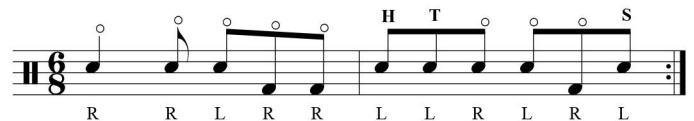
Part III, notated in 6/8, is in a style known as rumba Columbia. In the traditional setting, this style is played by three drummers—two accompaniment patterns and one improvised lead. The two basic supporting drum parts, as learned by Damm in Cuba, may be notated as seen in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Holly: Rumba Columbia accompaniment for two players (H = heel, T = tip, S = slap, O = open, B = bass)



Holly combined these two parts into a pattern to be played by one drummer using two drums. This pattern serves as an accompaniment, over which player one improvises an open solo.

Figure 8. Holly: Rumba Columbia accompaniment for one player in mm. 42–43



Part IV, the final section, is a *songo*, a style of Cuban music popularized by the group Los Van Van in the early 1970s. It was Los Van Van’s drummer José Luis Quintana, known as “Changuito,” who developed the *songo*. *Songo* integrated rhythmic elements from the folkloric rumba and popular dance music such as funk from the United States. In this duet, player 1 uses a stick to imitate the timbale or drumset pattern of *songo* while player 2 plays a typical two-drum conga pattern.

Figure 9. Holly Songo timbale/drumset and conga pattern in mm. 70–71

During the finale, performers exchange four-bar ad lib solos. The last eight measures (see Figure 10) consist of four bars in unison (recapping the opening syncopated break but now in double time), two bars of triplets in crescendo, and finally, the 2:3 clave pattern with an accent on the final hit. The last two measures are written in son clave, and perhaps should be played in rumba clave, putting the final hit on the “and of 4” rather than on “4.”

### “DESERT CELEBRATION”

“Desert Celebration” is a duet for two jembes. Information about this piece was provided during a face-to-face interview with composer Matt Savage at a recent PASIC. Savage composed the piece for a student who was taking jembe lessons with him: “We played it for his jury,” Savage told us. “The piece is a duet for jembe using my compositional experience including a lot of writing for marching drum line. It’s pretty ‘choppy.’ It’s kind of through-composed and gives lots of time for soloing, which is a huge part of jembe playing. I think of it as super energized and very aggressive, although it has moments where it ebbs and flows.” The suggested tempos are very fast. Savage remarked, “This is not a beginner piece.” When played well, it’s virtuosic.

There are certain African elements in the piece, such as the drum call, polyrhythmic grooves, improvisation, use of drum cues to signal transition, syncopated rhythms, call-and-response dialogue, drums imitating the rhythm of speech, and one traditional West African dance rhythm. The work opens with a drum call (see Figure 11).

Figure 11. Savage: Drum call in mm. 1–3

The first section of the piece is a polyrhythmic 4/4 groove (see Figure 12). This gives way to an eight-bar improvised solo by each player. Section (D) is a highly syncopated unison passage (Figure 13). Savage commented, “I wanted the rhythm to be as syncopated as possible so that the listener doesn’t really know where the time is and it just sounds wacky.”

Figure 12. Savage: 4/4 groove at five measures after A

Figure 10. Holly: Finale in mm. 76–83

Figure 13. Savage: Syncopated unison at letter D

Figure 14. Savage: Call-and-response at E; 8-bar excerpt

Beginning at rehearsal letter (E) is a 14-bar call-and-response dialogue (see Figure 14). “This is a duet in which the performers trade rhythms, as in ‘hocketing.’ It’s split and extremely syncopated, but comes back together at the end.” The middle section of the piece at (F) features a free solo by each player over a drum roll accompaniment. Savage explained, “I want the performers to ‘say’ something here. The solos are to be very declarative and speech-like. I imagine Charlie Brown’s teacher as portrayed by the muted trumpet or trombone.”

Four bars before (G), the piece changes to a fast 12/8 meter for the closing section of the piece. (G) is a polyrhythmic 12/8 groove (see Figure 15). The pattern for player 1 at the top of the last page is similar to a traditional supporting drum pattern used in *maraka* from Mali (see Figure 16).

Figure 15. Savage: 12/8 groove at G

Figure 16. Savage: Maraka-like groove

Near the end, there is a long, extended crescendo and accelerando over 20 measures leading to the finale. The piece closes with a five-bar call-and-response exchange. In Savage’s words, “The ending rocks! It’s trading four beats, trading two beats, slaps, and unison. It’s an energetic climax (see Figure 17).”

A duet provides the synergy of an ensemble experience and the intimate dialogue of conversing with a friend.

Figure 17. Savage: Finale in concluding five measures

The musical score consists of two staves in common time (C). The top staff begins with a dynamic marking of *ff* and contains four measures of triplets of eighth notes, each marked with an 'R' above it. The bottom staff also begins with a dynamic marking of *ff* and contains four measures of triplets of eighth notes, each marked with an 'L' above it. The fifth measure of both staves contains a complex rhythmic pattern with 'R' and 'L' markings. The score concludes with a final measure in the fifth measure of both staves.

Stylistic analysis of published music, paired with talking to composers, helps performers better understand and audiences better appreciate a work. The three compositions reviewed here represent, to varying degrees, African and Afro-Cuban hand drumming traditions. These works also provide ample opportunity for creative expression as well as the synergy and esprit de corps unique to the duet chamber ensemble.

### REFERENCES

“Desert Celebration” by Matt Savage  
Copyright © 2004 Alfred Music  
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“Rumba Clave” by Roberto Vizcaino  
Copyright © 1997 Media Press, Inc.  
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“You’re Makin’ Me Dizzy” by Rich Holly  
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Babatunde Olatunji with Robert Atkinson, *The Beat of My Drum: An Autobiography* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005).

**Robert Damm** is Director of Music Education Partnerships at Mississippi State University, where he has been on faculty since 1995. His current teaching responsibilities include African American Music, Recreational Drum Circles, and World Music. He has studied music and dance in Cuba, Ghana, and Mali. His original compositions are published by HoneyRock and HaMar. He has served as president of the Mississippi PAS chapter.

**Ricky Burkhead** is the director of percussion studies at the University of Mississippi. His teaching responsibilities include applied percussion, percussion ensemble, steel band, and salsa band. He is an active performer, clinician, and adjudicator throughout the U.S. He has also performed in Argentina, Uruguay, and Jamaica. He is past president of the Mississippi PAS chapter and was the first to form steel drum bands in the Mid-South region. His compositions and arrangements are available at JW Pepper and DevMusic.

**Damm and Burkhead** have performed throughout Mississippi as a world drumming duo since 2009. They were featured clinicians for the 2012 PAS Mississippi Day of Percussion\*. **PN**

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