

Messing With The Danzón

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Oswaldo Ramírez/Cuartoscuro

Arms circled at the elbows, heads lifted high, couples slide in squares across the Plaza de la Ciudadela in Mexico City, swaying to a live orchestra. Men in two-toned shoes, baggy suits and hats dropped down over one eye swagger and talk, eyeing the women sitting on the side, some waving colorful fans, others adjusting short skirts or long coats.

The music is lively but sedate at the same time, a mixture of tropical swing and ballroom perfection. Couples move their feet in slow squares, then curl out from each other to do twists, turns and weaves. This is *danzón*, a nineteenth-century ballroom dance still alive on the Mexico City streets after a long trip from England and France, by way of the Caribbean.

Everyone here has style, from the woman in a flashy sparkling coat to the man without teeth who dances spinning from side to side, showing off his pinstripes, from the saxophone players to the sedate fan-toting *señoras*.

“My *danzón* professor was very strict, but she had a tremendous personality, which is what we show off when we dance. That is the elegance of *danzón*,” remarks *danzón* instructor Jorge García Rojas.

The 16 beat *descansos*, or breaks, in the music, are a mystery to anyone unfamiliar with *danzón* music. At a given time during the song, all the couples stop dancing, separate, applaud the orchestra or fan themselves.

As it turns out, these *descansos*, are the riffs of music which serve as introductions before each melody. A *danzón* consists of an introduction, a first melody, a *descanso*, a second melody, another *descanso* and a *montuno*, the third melody, faster and livelier than the first two.

García Rojas says the *descansos* are similar to musical breaks in romantic songs. “When Juan Gabriel sings, first there is a musical introduction, then he sings, then he stops singing while there is a musical break and then he sings again. It’s the same with *danzón*. You just don’t dance the *descansos*.”

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The sound system's master of ceremonies, Eduardo Cisneros, however, has another idea.

"The *descansos* exist because, one, live *danzones* are very long, and two, in olden days, women were much more repressed, and couples took advantage of the *descansos* to talk and get to know each other: 'What's your name? When do you go out to buy bread?'¹ Are you in school or working?" he explains.

Certainly *danzón* is a romantic dance. Its more than 300 different steps speak of style, elegance, refinement. But they also have a sort of mysterious flirtation to them.

Francisco Javier Vértiz, 84, and his wife of more than 50 years, Emelia López Morón, move quietly through each song, speeding up their steps with the music and then stopping to rest as do all the couples at each *descanso*.

Vértiz, little and spry, reaches out to grasp his tall willowy partner and they sway knowingly to the music, their smiles sweet. This particular couple comes here to the Ciudadela every Saturday, rain or shine.

"We like *danzón* a lot now that we are older," says Vértiz. "We can dance salsa and cumbia, too, but they tire us out."

Vértiz began to dance at 14 in the *salones*, or ballrooms. After he got married and had a family, however, he had to work and never had time to practice those steps. Now that he and Emelia's youngest son is 30, they have time to enjoy themselves.

Eight years ago the Ciudadela, along with at least five other locations all over the capital, became *plazas de danzón*, where middle-aged and elderly couples come to dance every Saturday. Although live orchestras paid by the city used to accompany the dancers in the Ciudadela every week, now they only come once or twice a month. Most Saturdays, music is piped from a sound system through speakers set up in the trees.

Some deadbeat dancers, such as Prudencio Aguilar, not only come every Saturday to the downtown Ciudadela but travel all over the city to find the best dancing partners and the best music. After Saturday mornings at the Ciudadela, Aguilar takes the subway to La Villa, in the north of the city, where the Cocodrilo Orchestra plays every week, and then shimmies down to the south side in Coyoacán to dance the evening away.

Most of the dancers are senior citizens, but in the midst of the elderly are a few youngsters

and adolescents. Rodrigo Jaramillo learned to dance when he was 10 years old. His parents came to the Ciudadela to watch the dancing, and he wandered off. His father Raymundo told him to sit down next to him, and he said, "No, I'm going to be bored. Teach me to dance." And so, he learned his first steps from his father. At 11, Rodrigo won a championship in *danzón* at the Salón La Maraca, one of many ballrooms still vibrant in Mexico City.

"*Danzón* is my life," Rodrigo, now 17, announces. Today he dances with his mother Alejandra, while his father dances with Sherlyn, his two year-old niece.



Germán Romero/Cuartoscuro

According to the instructors here in the Ciudadela, *danzón* began in England and France as the *contradanza* and was brought to Haiti by French slaveholders. Tropical rhythms were added to the dance in the Caribbean, and in 1879 in Cuba, the first *danzón*, called “Las Alturas de Simpson”, was written by Miguel Faílde.

“He thought to himself, ‘Well, here in Cuba we play *son* music and these guys dance *contradanza*. So if you do *danza* to a *son*, that’s *danzón*,” explains García Rojas.

In the early twentieth century, *danzón* arrived in the Yucatán peninsula, the closest part of Mexico to Cuba, and ended up in Veracruz, the Gulf coast port known for its lively night life. The first *danzón* ballroom in Mexico City was the Salón Colonia, set up in 1927 and known as the “*templo de danzón*,” or the “*Danzón Temple*.”

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there are women who lift up their legs and you can see their underwear. *Danzón* was made to show off a man and woman joined at the arms, not letting go. That is how *danzón* should be danced, decently,” says García Rojas.

Today, some couples go all out to dance what is denominated “*danzón floreado*” or “flowery *danzón*”. According to García Rojas, this is a completely Mexico City style, unheard of in any other part of the country or the world, for that matter. In the flowery *danzón*, couples let go of each other and dance circles around each other to show off their steps.

“In Mexico City, we mess with everything and make it better,” says Luis Sánchez, another dance teacher, before going back to his stylish moves, arms outspread, feet in tiptoe, followed by close to 40 students.

And his words come true. All around the Ciudadela, different personalities infuse the air. A short man in a gray suit flings his arms wide and spins in circles as his partner dances calmly and properly, her gaze fixed into space. A young woman in jeans and a tight blouse sways her hips as she dances with an elderly man in suede. A flash of skin under a red dress. Tiptoeing patent leather, just so. Making the *danzón* their very own. **NMM**



German Romero/Cuartoscuro

NOTES

¹ In the old days, when parents were not so lenient, young men found that a sure time for seeing their sweethearts was when she went out to the bakery to get bread for the family dinner.