

Latin for drummies - Candombe

Candombe is the heritage of African slave's in Rio de la Plata's area. Originally forbidden and confined to a small room, nowadays is proudly played in the streets and continue reflecting the deeply identity feeling that make it born and raise.

Candombe was originally forbidden and confined to closed ceremonies due to his obvious relation with the unknown social and religious practices originally from Africa. Cause the really deep feeling of identity and brotherhood that this rhythm specially provides. The original small room kept so small that first on weekends, holidays and patriotic dates, everybody went to the meeting point to dance and play a drum in this marvellous reunion. Fortunately, on these days, every single occasion is the best excuse to tune the drums and play a little bit.

Candombe is played with three different drums, the biggest and low-pitched one is called "Tambor Piano" (Piano drum), the middle one is called "Tambor Repique" (Repique drum) and finally, the high-pitched is called "Tambor Chico" (Chico drum).

To play one of this drum you'll need your hand and one single stick on the other hand (like drum sticks). If you play the bigger - lowest drum you'll need a bigger stick!!!

First of all, in the tradition, when you play Candombe, you play standing on your feet, walking with the drum hanged on your shoulder during several blocks on the street (maybe ten...) Nowadays in different modern contexts, is usual to see Candombe drummers playing sited.

What to play:

1. - Madera:

"Madera" is a figure played with the stick in the shell of the drum, cause the drum is wooden made, that's the meaning of the name ("Madera" means wood in spanish).

The director, usually the most experienced and valious drummer of the group, starts playing this figure in the shell of his drum. When everybody hears the speed and intention, they start copying it in their own drums. This is the way for getting "in tune" about what and how to play.

The "Madera" figure and it's relation with the pulse.



(Yes! It's similar to the Cuban - Son Clave!...and that's not a coincidence...We are talking about the same roots!) They have also the same function, that's getting everybody "aligned" in time and pulse.

2. - The Chico drum.

This one, the highest pitched drum, is the most important drum in Candombe. Cause what it plays gives identity to this language. It's easy to understand what it plays... but really hard to!

Here you can check it with it's relation with the "Madera" and pulse.



Symbol	Means
✕	Written in the third space is what the hand plays. With this symbol we're gonna represent the playing of a slapped-high pitched-tone stroke, without choking the head!
∅	This is written in the first space. It represents the notes played by the stick. Remember...Do not leave the stick ON the head. Let it fly back!

Note the accent played with the hand on the second sixteenth note in every beat...This is the identity of this drum and one of the mainly aspects of Candombe!

3. - The Piano drum.

The lowest pitched drum has the solid-base function. The drummer is allowed to make some variations but always staying "on tune" and without attempting to the groove.

Check the base rhythm by the Piano drum and it's relation with the "Madera" and pulse.



Symbol	Means
●	Written in the third space. It represents the palm of the hand on the head (standing ON the head), like the bass-tone stroke on tumbadoras.
✕	Written in the first space is what the stick plays. With this symbol we're gonna represent the stick staying ON the head, without bouncing!
∅	This is written in the first space too (cause is played by the stick). It represents the open tone of the drum played by the stick without staying ON the head!

Note that the first open-tone happens at the same time with the second note of the “Madera” figure. The second open-tone is placed between the fourth and fifth note of the “Madera” figure. This is the identity of this drum and one of the mainly aspects of Candombe.

4. - The Repique drum.

Last, but no less important. This drum has the improvisation role. It works basically on two different “states” first of all playing the “Madera” figure with all the different variations. And the “improvisation” part, where the drum has a “base” and starting in that figure... free your mind to an infinite amount of combinations and beautiful rhythm phrases!

Check the base figure with it’s relation to the “Madera” figure and pulse.



Symbol	Means
x	Written in the third space is what the hand plays. With this symbol we’re gonna represent the playing of a slapped-high pitched-tone stroke, without choking the head!
o	This is written in the first space. It represents the notes played by the stick. Remember...Do not leave the stick ON the head. Let it fly back!

Note where the hand-played notes are placed, some of them happen at the very same time with the Chico drum, emphasizing it...some of them no...Pay special attention to the one placed similar with the last note of the “Madera” figure and in pulse number 4.

Now we all know what to play...but...How to do it!?

(This is an explanation of a very “hybrid” typical way of start playing. Every group has its own ways depending on his culture, companions, etc.)

Really easy...5 steps!

Step n°1 – Everybody on tune

As we read in the first page, the “Madera” figure is used for calling the other drummers, asking them to join this reunion at a certain time and intention. When that happens everybody is “on tune” and ready to start.

Step nº2 – Calling the Chico Drum.

This is made by the Piano drum. It usually makes this figure to start:

Musical notation for Step nº2. It consists of four staves: REPIQUE, PIANO, CHICO, and PULSE. The REPIQUE staff shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The PIANO staff shows a similar pattern with accents on the first two notes of each bar. The CHICO staff shows a pattern of eighth notes with accents. The PULSE staff shows a simple four-beat pulse labeled 1, 2, 3, 4. The notation is divided into three measures.

Note where is placed and where it ends. After a couple of times everybody playing the Chico drum understands which is the first pulse of the bar and can start playing without doubts.

Step nº3 – Starting with the Piano Drum.

After the Chico drums started playing; now it's the turn of the Piano drum. Check this:

Musical notation for Step nº3. It consists of four staves: REPIQUE, PIANO, CHICO, and PULSE. The REPIQUE staff shows a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The PIANO staff shows a similar pattern with accents on the first two notes of each bar. The CHICO staff shows a pattern of eighth notes with accents. The PULSE staff shows a simple four-beat pulse labeled 1, 2, 3, 4. The notation is divided into three measures.

In Candombe, and in every African-based music. It's all about dialogue. See how the Repique drum "calls" the Piano drum by playing his one-bar base rhythm. This is enough for the Piano drummer to understand that he has to start playing and where to do it.

Step nº4 – Now...the Repique Drum.

At this point the Chico drummer is playing, the Piano drummer too and the Repique drummer is playing the "Madera" pattern. Now is time to play on the head!

For this he can wait for the Piano drummer to make some variation (like the one it used for starting) or start playing his base rhythm.

Usually the Repique drum makes short interventions, for example, from 8 to 12 bars. Of course, not playing the very same rhythm in every bar. You can make different variations by repeating, continuing, resting or adding figures, some examples:



Playing this “base” continuously...



An 8 bar intervention. First of all playing the “Madera” figure. Making a little improvisation and ending with the “Madera” figure.



Step number 5 – Ending.

There's a particular and concrete way to end Candombe. Check it:

REPIQUE

PIANO

CHICO

PULSE

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4

The explanation:

The Repique drum, in this case, will be responsible of the ending. First of all, he starts playing the “Madera” figure. Then he makes a one-bar phrase that ends in the first pulse of the next bar. Usually this phrase is preceded by a sign or a spoken phrase such as “it ends!” (Clearly, uh?)

It's really important to end at the very first pulse of the bar. This is another mainly aspect of Candombe.