

Latin for drummies - Candombe

Candombe is the heritage of enslaved Africans in the Rio de la Plata area. Originally forbidden and confined to a small room, it is proudly played in the streets nowadays and continues to reflect the deep identity feeling that makes it born and raised.

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

Candombe is played with three different drums. The biggest and lowest-pitched one is called the “Tambor Piano” (Piano drum), the middle one is called the “Tambor Repique” (Repique drum), and finally, the highest-pitched one is called the “Tambor Chico” (Chico drum).

To play one of these drums, you will need one hand and a single stick on the other hand (like drumsticks). Of course, if you play the bigger - lowest drum, you will need a bigger stick!!!

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

What to Play

1. - Madera:

“Madera” is a figure played with the stick on the drum’s shell, and because the drum is made of wood, that is where the meaning of the name comes from (“Madera” means wood in Spanish).

The director, usually the most experienced and vibrant drummer of the group, starts playing this figure on the shell of their drum. Then, when everybody hears the speed and intention, they start copying it with their own drums, which is the way of getting “in tune” with what is being played and how to play.

The “Madera” figure and it’s relation to the pulse.

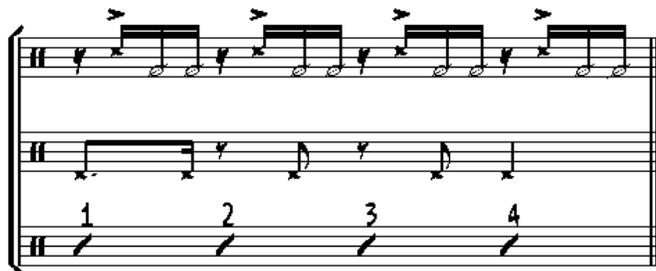


(Yes! It is similar to the Cuban - Son Clave, which is not a coincidence (we are talking about the same roots!). They also have the same function: getting everybody “aligned” in time and pulse.

2. - The Chico drum.

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

Here you can check its relation with the “Madera” and pulse:



Symbol	Means
×	Written in the third space is what the hand plays. So, with this symbol we are going to 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 main aspects of Candombe!

3. - The Piano drum.

This is the lowest pitched drum, and it has a solid-base function. The drummer can make some variations but always stays “on tune” without attempting the groove.

Check the base rhythm of the Piano drum and its 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 simultaneously 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 main aspects of Candombe.

4. - The Repique drum.

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

Check the base figure related 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!
☐	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 happen simultaneously with the Chico drum, emphasising it... some of them no... So, pay special attention to the one placed similarly to the last note of the “Madera” figure and pulse number 4.

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

(This explains a very “hybrid” typical way to start playing. Every group has its own ways, depending on its culture, companions, etc.)

It is really easy... It is just five steps!

Step 1 – Everybody On Tune

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

Step 2 – Calling the Chico Drum.

The Piano drum does this, and it usually makes this figure to start:

The musical notation for Step 2 consists of four staves. The top staff is labeled 'REPIQUE' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The second staff is labeled 'PIANO' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The third staff is labeled 'CHICO' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The bottom staff is labeled 'PULSE' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The notation is organized into three measures, with a pulse count of 1, 2, 3, 4 for each measure.

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

Step 3 – Starting with the Piano Drum.

After the Chico drums start playing, it is now the turn of the Piano drum. Check below:

The musical notation for Step 3 consists of four staves. The top staff is labeled 'REPIQUE' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The second staff is labeled 'PIANO' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The third staff is labeled 'CHICO' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The bottom staff is labeled 'PULSE' and contains a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents. The notation is organized into three measures, with a pulse count of 1, 2, 3, 4 for each measure.

In Candombe and every African-based music, it is all about dialogue. For example, see how the Repique drum “calls” the Piano drum by playing its one-bar base rhythm. This is enough for the Piano drummer to understand that they must start playing and where to do it.

Step 4 – Now...the Repique Drum.

At this point, the Chico and Piano drummers are playing, and the Repique drummer is playing the “Madera” pattern. So, now it is time to play on the head!

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

