



ArtSmarts

2005-2006 Wells Fargo School Matinee Series

Plena Libre

October 17, 2005 1:00pm
Jackson Hall, Mondavi Center

Dear Teacher,

We hope you find this CueSheet helpful in preparing your students for the school matinee presentation of Plena Libre. This guide, which is intended to be used in conjunction with the Multicultural Music curriculum guide, provides information about Plena Libre, Puerto Rican music, and a brief overview of Puerto Rico. Also included in the guide is a review of audience etiquette.

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PLENA LIBRE

Three-time Grammy nominees, the 13-member **Plena Libre** is Puerto Rico's foremost exponent of *plena*: a traditional Puerto Rican rhythm and musical genre which emerged from the island's African heritage. Plena Libre has invigorated this folkdance with innovative arrangements that combine salsa, samba, merengue, cumbia, and bomba into a veritable sonic fusion. The ensemble has performed at numerous international music festivals, where their multi-layered percussion, funky horn work, impassioned vocals, and wild choreography take the audiences into uncharted territory!

Plena Libre was formed in 1994 by bassist and bandleader **Gary Nuñez**, whose mission was to reinvent and update the plena genre, taking it from its folkloric status—which relegated its performance to holidays and folk festivals—and turning it into a popular and evolving form. He recruited an impressive instrumental lineup, to include bass, key boards, timbales, congas, four trombones, miscellaneous percussion as well as some of the best plena singers (*soneros*) to be found in Puerto Rico. With a style that draws on both the traditional and the modern, and arrangements that mix other Caribbean rhythms and sizzling dance-floor charts with plena, Plena Libre topped the charts with one hit after another on commercial radio stations in Puerto Rico, becoming a major force on the Puerto Rican musical scene.

In 1996, Plena Libre made their way into the mainstream theaters when they began to play large venues, such as Puerto Rico's University Theater. The group was the first of its kind to have their own show at the Roberto Clemente Coliseum, where they were joined by other prominent Puerto Rican artists including Andy Montañez, Melina León, Domingo Quiñones and Son by Four in the production "Puerto Rico sabe a Plena." At this point they also began to perform at various music festivals in the United States, Latin America, Europe and Asia.

Plena Libre's list of accomplishments includes an award by the House of Representatives of Puerto Rico's Legislature (1999), "Fundación Rafael Cepeda" (1997), and an award given by Loiza, the town known as the birth place of the *bomba y plena*, (1995). Other awards include: The "Tu Música Award" (1999, 1997, 1996 and 1995), "Farándula" (1999) for "Best Plena Group," the "People's Choice Awards" for "Best Independent Production" for 3 consecutive years (1995, 1996 and 1997), and the "King Momo Award" for "Best New Orchestra" (1995). Plena Libre was nominated for a Latin Grammy in 2001 (*Más Libre*, RykoLatino) and a Grammy Award in 2003. Their latest release, *¡Estamos Gozando!*, marks their 10 year anniversary and their 10th commercial offering. The recording is a tribute to the greatest Puerto Rican plena composers of the century: Manuel Jiménez "El Canario," Angel Torruellas, César Concepción, Efraín "Mon" Rivera, Rafael Cepeda, Rafael Cortijo and Ismael Rivera, updated in Plena Libre's style.

Discography:

Juntos y Revueltos I (1994)

Cógelos que Ahí Te Va (1995)

Plena Pa'Ti (1996)

De Parranda en Natividad (Plena, 1997)

Plena Libre (Ryko Latino, 1998)

Plena Libre Mix (1999)

Juntos Y Libre (Ryko Latino, 1999)

Juntos Y Revueltos II

Más Libre (RykoLatino, 2000)

Mi Ritmo (Latin World, 2003)

¡Estamos Gozando! (Times Square Records, 2004)

Evolucion (Times Square Records, forthcoming 2005)



ARTIST BIOGRAPHY: GARY NUÑEZ

Gary Nuñez is Plena Libre’s founder and director. He graduated *magna cum laude* from the Conservatory of Music of Puerto Rico and, before that, from the University of Puerto Rico (with a major in psychology). Bass player, prolific composer, musical arranger, and record producer, Nuñez’s career spans more than 20 years as a professional musician and group leader in a wide variety of musical forms, that include Puerto Rican folkore, Afro-Caribbean music, rock and jazz, among other styles.

Since his beginnings, Nuñez has had his own independent voice and musical vision. In 1975, while the Latin music world was tuned to “salsa,” he decided to study the history and styles of Puerto Rican music. He learned to play the “cuatro puertorriqueño” (Puerto Rico’s national string instrument) and established a group, Moliendo Vidrio, that would contribute to the “New Song” movement in Puerto Rico. During the 1980s, Nuñez experimented with a fusion of salsa and jazz, what he called “Caribe Jazz.” Plena Libre was born out of the hybrid of Gary Nuñez’s investigations.

Nuñez’s contributions to the development and promotion of Puerto Rican music have been recognized by different institutions, including the Commission for the 500th Anniversary of the Discovery of Puerto Rico and America and the Puerto Rican Institute of Culture.

“The Paradox of Puerto Rican Pride: Plena Libre Frees the Rhythm and Salutes the Masters”

Puerto Rican identity is complex. It is not a coincidence that in 1952 this United States commonwealth’s constitution was instated on July 25, the same date the United States invaded Puerto Rico in 1898. But any perceived political ambivalence is no reflection on cultural pride, as seen by the many Puerto Rican pride parades held each summer. This type of pride is at the heart of Plena Libre, “Even after five centuries of colonial rule, the Puerto Rican personality is clearly defined regardless of our relationship to the US,” says Plena Libre bassist-bandleader Gary Nuñez; “It is impossible to dilute the character of Puerto Rican people, because we have strong roots. And *plena* is an important part of it.”

Plena emerged in the late 19th century when the repertoire of Barbados immigrants mixed with local genres, and along with the *bomba*, has been the mainstay of Afro-rooted music of Puerto Rico. But paradoxically, today many Puerto Rican artists are known for *salsa* and *merengue* that originated in Cuba and the Dominican Republic. “By the early ’70s, the Puerto Rican music industry came down,” explains Nuñez; “Our rhythms took a back seat to other nations’.” Playing *plena* takes on a complex form of pride, affirming Puerto Rican identity within the dominance of genres that originate elsewhere.

Nuñez asserted Puerto Rican identity in the 1970s with his band Moliendo Vidrio, in line with the *Nuevo Canción* (New Song) movements of Latin America, which rallied folk music against colonialism. After 18 years of putting the *cuatro* (Puerto Rican guitar) on the map, he was ready for a new challenge. “Three things kept the *plena* alive from the ’60s to the ’90s,” says Nuñez; “First, when people gather for parties, the *plena* rhythm is always there. Second, *plena* took center stage during labor strikes. And third, folklore groups kept the roots of *plena* alive.” When Nuñez picked up the torch by forming Plena Libre in 1994, he sought to reinvent the genre, taking it from folkloric status. . .and turning it into a living and breathing, popular, evolving form.

Traditionally, *plena* uses three different-sized hand drums called *panderos* that are pitched low-to-high and play interlocking rhythms. The *güiro* (a Taíno gourd scraper) and the vocalists—with leader and chorus in call-and-response style—complete the basic ensemble. Over time, the *plena* took on different forms—from the addition of the accordion or *cuatro* to full orchestral variations. For migrant workers who followed the harvest of different crops, the *plena* was their

orally transmitted newspaper, informing people of the latest news, and accompanying every celebration.

Excerpted from the article available at the archive of Rock Paper Scissors world music website:

<http://www.rockpaperscissors.biz/>

VOCABULARY

Plena: A type of folk music in Puerto Rico. Plena music is sometimes called “el periodico cantado” in Spanish, which means “a living newspaper” because it often tells stories about local events or politicians.

Libre: “Libre” means free in Spanish.

Panderos: A musical instrument that looks like a tambourine without the cymbals. These hand held drums are covered with stretched animal skin and come in several different sizes and pitches.

Taíno: The Taíno Indians were the native people in Puerto Rico before the arrival of Europeans in the early 18th century. The Taíno created some of the instruments used in plena.

Güiro: This hollowed out gourd instrument is believed to have originated with the Taíno people as early as the 17th century. The instrument’s surface has parallel notches cut in one side and is played with a small metal comb called a pua to produce a rhythmic, rasping sound.

Salsa: A generic term used to describe contemporary Afro-Cuban and Puerto Rican dance music.

ABOUT PUERTO RICO



---map taken from www.lonelyplanet.com

Full country name: Commonwealth of Puerto Rico

Area: 3,515 square miles (9,104 square kilometers).

Population: 3,916,632 (July 2005 estimate)

Capital City: San Juan

People: white (mostly Spanish origin) 80.5%, black 8%, Amerindian 0.4%, Asian 0.2%, mixed and other 10.9%

Language: Spanish, English (both official)

Religion: Roman Catholic 85%, Protestant and other 15%

Government: commonwealth associated with the US

Head of State: President George W. Bush of the United States (since January 20, 2001)

Head of Government: Governor Anibal Acevedo-Vila (since January 2, 2005)

Major Industries: pharmaceuticals, electronics, apparel, food products, tourism

Agricultural products: sugarcane, coffee, pineapples, plantains, bananas, livestock products, chickens

Exports: chemicals, electronics, apparel, canned tuna, rum, beverage concentrates, medical equipment

Major Trading Partners: US 90.3%, UK 1.6%, Netherlands 1.4%, Dominican Republic 1.4% (2002 est.)

Land and Climate

Puerto Rico lies at the eastern end of the major island chain of the Caribbean, the Greater Antilles. The other islands in the chain—Cuba, Jamaica, and Hispaniola (Haiti and the Dominican Republic)—are larger and geographically more diverse. The relatively smooth coastline is fringed

by many small islands and cays, especially in the south and east. The island is roughly rectangular in shape and stretches for 110 miles (180 kilometers) from east to west, with a width from north to south averaging 35 miles (56 kilometers).

Puerto Rico is **topographically** rugged; its surface consists largely of hills, slopes, and mountains. The topographical structure affects Puerto Rico's climate and soils. The soil lacks depth and plant nutrients, with less than a third—that of the coastal plain—having average to good qualities for agriculture. Overuse of low-quality and inadequate soil, especially in the hilly regions and mountainous interior, has contributed to damaging erosion of hillsides and gullies.

Puerto Rico has a tropical **climate** with little seasonal variation, although local conditions vary according to elevation and exposure to rain-bearing winds. Northeast trade winds bring heavy rainfall to the north coast, while the south coast is in a rain shadow. Rain falls each month of the year, but the heaviest precipitation occurs between May and December.

Plant life is abundant and varied. Tropical rainforests cover parts of the north side of the island, and thorn and scrub vegetation predominates on the drier south side. Most of the island's original vegetation was removed through centuries of agricultural exploitation, particularly during the first two decades of the 20th century, when farm settlers and plantation workers destroyed large tracts of coastal forest and used the lumber for railroad ties and fuel. The Caribbean National Forest preserves rare species of orchids and the small green Puerto Rican parrot, an endangered species. Puerto Rico has more than 200 species of birds, but land animals are mostly confined to nonpoisonous snakes, lizards, mongooses, and the coquí, a frog whose name is onomatopoeic with its call (“co-kee!”) and which has become a kind of national mascot. Numerous varieties of fish abound in the surrounding waters, but edible and inedible species mingle together, limiting commercial fishing there.

By the last third of the 20th century, government efforts to **conserve** the remaining natural forest and to create and increase forest reserves began to have an effect on the serious rates of deforestation that had reduced the tree cover to about a quarter of the island. Trees were planted on lands whose agricultural productivity declined as a result of erosion, while small groves were established in regions of agriculture and pasture. New forests were planted with such fast-growing trees as eucalyptus, teak, and Honduran pine.

History

Puerto Rico was known as Borinquén to the indigenous Arawak Indians who had settled the Greater Antilles as traditional hoe-and-garden cultivators, fishermen, and gatherers. When

Europeans first settled the island, the prosperity of the Arawaks prompted the notion that here indeed was a “rich port.” Imported diseases soon decimated the Arawak population. From a population of more than 30,000 before the arrival of the Europeans, missionary reports of 1515 recorded only 4,000.

Christopher Columbus claimed Puerto Rico for Spain in 1493, but the arrival of the first governor—Juan Ponce de León—and the first Spanish settlers did not occur until 1508. The island remained Spanish despite harassment and conquest attempts by buccaneers and pirates and English and Dutch expeditions. To defend the island against these threats, two forts—El Morro and San Cristóbal—were built to guard the approaches to San Juan harbor. Defense of these forts foiled attempts by Sir Francis Drake in 1595, by another English fleet in 1598, and by the Dutch in 1625 to capture Puerto Rico for their respective empires. The defeat of the British in 1797 finally thwarted that country's designs on the island, and the Spanish realm was kept intact.

Puerto Rico was characterized primarily by peasant agriculture until the early 19th century, when Spanish law was changed to allow unrestricted trade. Concentration of land into the hands of a small elite followed, and export-oriented agriculture became prominent.

Puerto Ricans revolted against Spanish domination in 1868, and in 1897 home rule was established. Puerto Rico was given the status of a Spanish dominion. This autonomy was short lived, however, as the United States defeated Spain in the Spanish-American War and was ceded Puerto Rico in 1898.

By the Jones Act of 1917, Puerto Ricans became American citizens, and Puerto Rico became an unincorporated territory of the United States. Partial self-government was granted in 1947, enabling citizens to elect their own governor. Further autonomy was granted in 1951, when Puerto Ricans wrote their own constitution and elected a nonvoting commissioner to represent them in Washington, D.C.

Puerto Ricans, or *puertorriqueños*, have an intermingled Spanish, U.S., and Afro-Caribbean culture. The island's social and economic conditions are generally advanced by Latin American standards, partly because of its ties with the United States (including the presence of U.S.-owned manufacturing plants and military bases in the commonwealth). Puerto Ricans now have most of the benefits of American citizenship. However, domination of Puerto Rico by the United States is a major political issue. Some Puerto Ricans object to being ineligible to vote in presidential elections despite being subject to service in the armed forces. The *independistas* call for total independence as a nation-state, others support the present commonwealth status, and a third group hopes to see Puerto Rico become the 51st state.

Cultural Life and the Performing Arts

The idealized folk hero of Puerto Rico is the *jíbaro*, a rustic, independent hill-farmer whose status in local song and story is similar to that of the gaucho of Argentina. However, modern Puerto Rican cultural life is a blend of North American and Latin, African, and Caribbean forms, as is evident in much of the island's dance, music, art, literature, and sports. African influences are found in food, music, and art. Music festivals, museums in Ponce and San Juan, and theatrical performances encourage hispanidad, or Spanish customs. Puerto Ricans have worked to preserve a Latin heritage while welcoming U.S. economic and social novelties, engendering a cultural dilemma that has often catalyzed political debate.

Puerto Rican musicians, composers, and actors have made marks far beyond their island's narrow shores, and some have been counted among the world's most famous pop-culture figures. Notable Puerto Rican stage and screen performers include the Academy Award winners José Ferrer, Rita Moreno, and Benicio Del Toro, as well as Raúl Juliá; also of Puerto Rican descent are Chita Rivera and Jennifer Lopez.

Among 19th-century composers are Manuel Tavárez and Juan Morel Campos, both known for their dance melodies. The popular 20th-century songwriter Rafael Hernández is still revered throughout Latin America. The Spanish-born cellist Pablo Casals, whose mother was Puerto Rican, moved to the island in 1956 and founded the world-famous classical music festival there that bears his name. Puerto Rican musicians have included the classical pianist Jesus María Sanromá, opera singers Antonio Paoli and Justino Díaz, and popular musicians Tito Puente, José Feliciano, and Ricky Martin.

Latin jazz and salsa are enjoyed throughout the island; also popular are merengue, rock, rap, the Afro-Caribbean *bomba*, and the tambourine-marked *plena*. Many musical groups preserve *jíbaro* (folk) music by playing such instruments as the *cuatro* (a small guitar carved from a single piece of wood), the *marímbula* (a wooden box on which are mounted tuned metal tongues), the *güiro* (a percussive gourd that is also a popular decoration), drums, and maracas.

Excerpted from "Puerto Rico." *Britannica Student Encyclopedia* from Encyclopædia Britannica Online. <<http://search.eb.com/ebi/article-207001>> [Accessed August 28, 2005].

QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

Talking with your teacher, friends and family about a performance after attending the theater is part of the experience. When you share what you saw and felt, you learn more about the performance. You can now compare ideas and ask questions and find out how to learn even more. Here are some questions to think about:

1. How would you describe Plena Libre's music to a friend?
2. What feelings did you have while you listened to the music and songs?
3. What did you like best and why? Was the program different from what you expected?
How?
4. Did you have a favorite selection? A least favorite? Explain.
5. Do your parents or grandparents celebrate holidays and special events with music and dance traditions? What are they?
6. Can you think of other examples of music that are associated with specific countries or regions?
How can music be used to connect people to the ideas and values of their country and/or culture of origin?

This Teacher's Guide was written by Anett Jessop, Graduate Researcher, Davis Humanities Institute

ATTENDING THE THEATER

What is expected of student audiences at the matinee:

- * Enter the auditorium quietly and take seats immediately;
- * Show courtesy to the artist and other guests at all times;
- * Demonstrate appreciation for the artist's work by applauding at the appropriate times;
- * Refrain from making unnecessary noise or movements;
- * Please eat lunch before or after the performance to avoid disruption;
- * Please turn off cell phones and pagers;
- * Flash photography is strictly prohibited;
- * Relate any information acquired from the pre-matinee discussion to the new information gained from the matinee.

What you can expect of your experience in a performing arts theater:

A theater is a charged space, full of energy and anticipation. When the house lights (the lights that illuminate the audience seating) go down, the excitement level goes up! Theaters are designed so that the voices of the singers and actors and the music of the musicians can be heard. But this also means that any sound in the audience: whispering, rustling of papers, speaking and moving about, can be heard by other audience members and by the performers. Distractions like these upset everyone's concentration and can spoil a performance.

The performers on stage show respect for their art form and for the audience by doing their very best possible work. The audience shows respect for the performers by watching attentively. Applause is the best way for audience members to share their enthusiasm and to show their appreciation for the performers. Applaud at the end of a performance! Sometimes the audience will clap during a performance, such as after a featured solo. Audience members may feel like laughing if the action on stage is funny, crying if the action is sad, or sighing if something is seen or heard that is beautiful. Appreciation can be shown in many different ways, depending upon the art form and the culture(s) of the people in the audience. While the audience at a dance performance will sit quietly, other types of performance invite audience participation.