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Improvising sabor: Cuban dance music in New York by Sue Miller

McGuinness, Sara ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1888-2235> (2021) Improvising sabor: Cuban dance music in New York by Sue Miller. *Ethnomusicology Forum*. ISSN 1741-1912

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2021.1989174>

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**Improvising Sabor: Cuban Dance Music in New York** by Sue Miller, Mississippi, University Press of Mississippi, 2021 334pp., \$30 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-496-83216-0

*Improvising Sabor* is Sue Miller's second book about charanga flute style. It follows on from *Cuban Flute Style* her comprehensive study of charanga flute in Cuba, moving the focus to the New York Latin scene. To my knowledge, Sue Miller is the first academic to publish in-depth musicological work on the charanga tradition and the two volumes provide a fascinating insight into the two worlds of music making and their links and divergence.

As a musician on the UK salsa scene, I was first made aware of the use of flute in salsa music through listening to the wonderful outputs from Fania and the wider New York/Puerto Rican scene. However, I did not pay much attention to the charanga format until my visit to Cuba in 1998 when I was lucky enough to spend time with Charanga Rubalcaba and the wonderful flautist Joaquín Oliveros, who featured in Sue Miller's first volume, *Cuban Flute Style*. The experience of being immersed in the glorious sound of a live charanga orquesta changed my perspective of the style, which I had previously enjoyed but thought of as rather genteel music for the older generation. A striking feature of the format was the up-front, expressive flute lines which Joaquín delivered with such panache and tremendous swing. I was hooked. While I was aware of the differences in performance aesthetic between Cuba and New York, I had not delved into this in any depth. I therefore approached this book with great enthusiasm and an appetite for knowledge.

From the early generation of Cuban flautists in the 1950s through to the New York based and non-Cuban players, *Improvising Sabor* delves into charanga flute playing and performance aesthetics in the charanga orquestas of New York. Miller is herself an accomplished charanga flute player, her personal connection with the music and musicians coupled with her academic viewpoint has allowed her to produce an in-depth and erudite study of the topic. Throughout the book we are informed by the musicians themselves, revealing much about the world they inhabit and performance practices therein.

While there has been much written about salsa music in New York, the focus has been on the salsa orquestas and big band mambo. Miller's consideration of the New York charanga orquestas and their input into musical development broadens the perspective, providing a refreshing contribution to academic study of the topic. The concepts of *sabor* and *cubanía* are central to the aesthetic of charanga performance and Miller discusses these nuanced terms in depth with her informants. She artfully unpicks the meaning and through careful use of musical transcription and clarity of explanation makes the discussion accessible to the reader with or without knowledge of Cuban musical styles.

This book contains history and ethnographic study interwoven with personal stories and discussion of aesthetics and performance practice. Miller manages to successfully combine all of this with in-depth analysis of musical arrangements and discussion of approaches to charanga flute playing. She points out the multi-cultural nature of Latin music-making in New York, with integration of Latin musicians from Cuba, Puerto Rico, other parts of Latin America and the US and the resultant developments in performance tradition.

The disconnect within diasporic communities between music performance within the home community and that presented in public facing venues is a familiar topic for ethnomusicologists. Miller's detailed consideration of this in the context of the Latin communities of New York provides a valuable insight into performance practice within these communities and how the flow of musical ideas and musicians between the two scenes feeds musical development. Musicians typically would play in a variety of formats to a range of audiences: big band at the Palladium, conjuntos and charangas at grassroots venues, adapting their performances accordingly.

From the outset Miller's writing is energetic and her obvious passion for charanga music shines through. The introduction launches straight in to a discussion of what the word *sabor* means in the context of charanga flute playing and broadens out from there to lay the foundations for what is to follow. Miller carefully explains the terminology used in the book, highlighting where meanings vary from those used in Cuba, a useful foundation for subsequent chapters. Throughout, this is illustrated with quotes from informants, allowing the musicians to express what these terms mean to them. The table of stylistic features of charanga flute provides the reader with an insight into the topic.

In Chapter One, tapping into the memories of musicians, Miller provides historical information on venues for music performance. The comprehensive list includes the often overlooked grassroots community venues alongside more mainstream clubs. She includes an outline of the bands that would play in the clubs and musicians' reflections about performance practice and the ambience of the varied performance spaces. She reminds the reader that while performance practice might differ to accommodate the different audiences, there was a constant flow of ideas between the grassroots and formal spaces, with musicians playing in various bands across both the formal and local scene.

In Chapter Two Miller turns her attention to mambo. She provides an overview of the mobility of several key players in Cuban music, discussing musical transformation in the context of environment. Prior to the Cuban Revolution, bands would move between Cuba, the USA, and elsewhere, being exposed to different performance contexts, absorbing and adapting ideas. Miller uses musical example to demonstrate how cross-fertilisation of genres impacted development of Cuban dance music, creating a New York voice.

Chapter Three considers the rise in popularity of charanga orquestas in 1960s New York by focusing on the work on three renowned Cuban flute players: Jose Fajardo, Belisario Lopez, and Rolando Lozano. Through detailed use of transcription and analysis Miller discusses the salient features of each player's approach to charanga soloing. She details how the performance style of these three flautists, bringing their *cubanía* into the music, was the inspiration for a flourishing of charangas.

In Chapter Four Miller provides a detailed contextual study of flautist Eddie Zervignon. The chapter combines comment from the musician, consideration of socio-cultural factors and detailed analysis and transcription. She demonstrates how, in New York, Zervignon's playing exhibited a strong sense of *cubanía* which combined with a brash, nervous energy which could be interpreted as a New York *sabor*. Included are Zervignon's diagrams of fingering on the five key flute, an absolute gift for flautists wishing to explore the style.

Chapters Five to Eight investigate musical transformation and stylistic factors, documenting change and performance aesthetics in a New York setting. In Chapter Five Miller reflects on cultural appropriation and terminologies. Chapter Six moves on to look at a Nuyorican performance aesthetic with a faster, louder, more 'urban' approach to playing. The brash, 'in your face' approach to flute playing was termed *embalao* and Nuyorican Johnny Pacheco was a leading proponent of this style. I particularly liked Miller's discussion of Pacheco's playing. She considers criticisms of his style and then, through careful study of transcriptions, provides a thoughtful, well-evidenced defence of his adherence to the charanga aesthetic. Further development is considered in Chapter Seven, with a focus on the innovations of bandleader Eddie Palmieri. The chapter includes detailed comparison of different flute players' approach to soloing. The discussion and critique brings up issues of expectation and development versus tradition, providing an insight into the conflicts between modernisation, transformation and tradition. Chapter Eight delves into another dance craze which emerged in the mid-sixties: Latin Bugalú: blending African-American Soul with Cuban dance music. Although popular among the younger Nuyorican musicians, older

musicians were more motivated by the commercial success and resultant better pay they could get for Bugalú gigs.

In Chapter Nine Miller moves forward to later developments. She focuses on another innovative Nuyorican musician, Ray Barretto and the flute players who worked with him. Here she notes the emergence of female musicians and includes their voices in her research. Miller concludes by arguing that in New York while *cubanía* thrived, a new, unique and urban performance aesthetic emerged driven by the Cuban and non-Cuban flautists. The city embraced the broader range of approaches to charanga performance with New York bands developing their own signature sounds.

There are many ways in which the reader can approach this book. Musicians and Cuban music scholars can learn a great deal from the detailed transcriptions and analysis of which there are many. I thoroughly enjoyed studying these, stopping to play bits and flicking back and forth from one to the next making various comparisons. Miller's careful, measured explanations directed the reader to notable features of the different players' approaches to playing. There is a lot of knowledge here that warrants study and re-examination, not just by flute players hoping to embrace the style but all instrumentalists and vocalists who wish to expand their Cuban music vocabulary. It is interesting to see how Miller approaches the task of analysing the music in a way which will provide pertinent information to all readers. She provides a wealth of musical detail with insights into performance practice and techniques.

I imagine some of it would be fairly heavy going for non-musicians but throughout there is clarity of thought and careful explanation. Miller weaves together a vast amount of information and detail, keeping the musicians' voices in the foreground throughout. There is a lot to take in but the book is carefully crafted with reminders of salient points so that the reader does not lose their way.

*Improvising Sabor* is a great example of how to approach a study of musical transformation and identity in a manner which engages both academics and practitioners. Miller has put aside commonly held opinions about performance aesthetic in New York and, from the perspective of the flute within the charanga tradition she has considered the wider world of Cuban music and transformation in New York.

Dr Sara McGuinness,  
London College of Music,  
University of West London,  
[Sara.mcguinness@uwl.ac.uk](mailto:Sara.mcguinness@uwl.ac.uk)  
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