



Sones de México Ensemble Chicago • Fiesta Mexicana

SUMMARY [50 words]: This GRAMMY® nominated group of accomplished musicians and educators specializes in *son*, a rich and lively Mexican music tradition. Over twenty-five folk instruments are featured along with lush vocal arrangements and dance demonstrations. The Chicago Tribune says "[They] move seamlessly between styles and instruments playing with rock 'n' roll energy without sacrificing cultural authenticity."

Sones de México Ensemble was founded in Chicago in 1994 by a group of accomplished Mexican musicians and educators. The group specializes in *son*, a rich and lively Mexican music tradition and its many regional styles. Bob Tarte of The Beat magazine (Los Angeles) says "After 13 years in the U.S., these overachievers bring so much authenticity to the regional folk styles, so much virtuosity to the orchestral excursions (on which they play over 50 all-acoustic instruments), and so much fun to everything they touch, that you can't help but surrender to their creativity." Today, Sones de México travels around the country presenting concerts, accompanying professional dance companies, playing clubs, and offering lectures and workshops.

From its inception Sones de México has taught and performed for thousands of children in cities around the U.S. The group embarks on a journey through Mexican music and the magic world that surrounds it. Children begin by learning about the four sacred elements of nature for the Aztecs: Water, Earth, Fire, and Wind. Then they learn songs about different animals that inhabit the Mexican ecosystem, like the *acamaya*, the crocodile, the legendary mermaid, a mouse, a buzzard, a duck, and even a cat! They also clap Mexican rhythms and learn the difference between a slow and a fast tempo. First and foremost, they learn how fun it is to play and dance Mexican music.

The ensemble has recorded three commercially available CDs. Their most recent release, entitled Esta Tierra Es Tuya (This Land Is Your Land), was nominated for both a Latin GRAMMY® for Best Folk Album of 2007 and a GRAMMY® for Best Mexican/Mexican-American Album of 2007. The group has been featured on NPR's "Morning Edition," PRI's "The World," and "A Prairie Home Companion" with Garrison Keillor. The other titles, ¡Que Florezca! (Let It Bloom) and Fandango on 18th Street, are available from the group's website, iTunes and other outlets.

THE ENSEMBLE:

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PROGRAM

Xipe

The program begins with this Aztec ritual piece that serves to awaken the senses, inviting all to make tribute to Mexico's native cultural roots and the sacred elements of Aztec cosmology: Water, Earth, Fire, and Wind (learn the Spanish words for the 4 elements: Agua, Tierra, Fuego, Viento). Dancer, Lorena Iñiguez calls upon the energy of these elements in a ritual dance where he faces the four sacred directions: North, South, East, and West. On his head, he wears a feathered headpiece called *copilli*. Incense—called *copal*—is burned, the conch shell—called *caracol*—is blown, and the *huéhuetl* and *teponaztli* beaten, accompanied with the strumming of the *concha*—a guitar made on an armadillo shell—, and the ankle shakes of the *ayoyotes*—made with dried seeds from a plant sown on a leather strip.

La Acamaya

Buried in the banks of a Mexican river in the *huasteca* region lives a small, ugly-looking, relative of the shrimp known locally as “La Acamaya.” When children don't behave, they are told about “La Acamaya” similar to the way American children are told about the bogey-man. The song tells about dangerous magical creatures that inhabit the waters: a crocodile, a mermaid, and *la acamaya*, warning children to be careful when they bathe by the river or at the beach. In the chorus the children in the audience can respond with a fretful “uy, uy, uy” “ay, ay, ay”.

The *huasteca* is a mountainous region in central Mexico that includes the states of San Luis Potosi, Tamaulipas, Querétaro, Hidalgo, Guanajuato, and Veracruz.

El Ratón Vaquero (The Cowboy Mouse)

This song was written by Mexico's premier children's music composer Francisco Gabilondo Soler (also known as *Cri-Cri*), a well-known radio host on the XEW station in Mexico City during the 1950's. He wrote all the songs for his show, from which came this fun, bilingual song about a Texan cowboy mouse who did not speak Spanish and who at one point found himself put in a Mexican jail. The song is set to a lively polka beat in a 2/4 meter, popular in folk songs along the Tex-Mex border. In the song, frustrated by his new home, the cowboy mouse sings the following chorus in English which can be taught to the children beforehand so that they may sing along during the performance. Try also the Spanish response:

“What the heck is this house
For a manly cowboy mouse,
Why don't you let me out
And don't catch me like a trout?”

“Conque si, ya se vé,
que no estás agusto aqui
y aunque me hables inglés
no te dejaré salir.”

Danza de Los Viejitos (Dance of the Old Men)

In the Mexican state of Michoacán, the Purépecha Indians celebrate a festival where a series of comical or satirical dances known as “old men dances” are performed. The selection chosen for this program is a circle dance called “El Trenecito” (The Little Train), and it is used to teach the meaning of *tempo* in music (i. e. “fast” *tempo* vs. “slow” *tempo*). The audience is asked to summon “Doña Sabina” (who is actually one of the musicians in costume). She emerges wearing a hat with multicolor ribbons, a cane, a straw wig, a mask carved from white wood representing a smiling, rosy-cheeked old man, and lively, forceful foot-tapping. About 8-10 volunteers from the audience are asked to form a train-like chain by holding hands together. The music begins in a slow 2/4 meter and the audience is asked to follow the beat with hand-claps. As the train speeds up around the room the tempo increases too and the clapping must get faster to keep up with the train.

WANT TO KNOW MORE? There are 3 theories attempting to explain the origins and/or meaning of this piece: (1) that it begun in the 16th century to make fun of Spaniards’ rosy-cheeked complexion; (2) that it portrays a pre-Hispanic, humorous attitude that the Purépecha people have towards their elderly, and (3) that it dates back to an Olmec worship of *Huehuetéotl*, the “Ancient” or “Elderly God” who was the purveyor of fertility —the colored ribbons in the hat representing the rays of the sun, the cane stands for the sowing stick, and the forceful tapping is the rain.

El Zopilote/ El Patito/ El Gato (The Buzzard/The Little Duck/ The Cat)

This medley from the Mexican state of Guerrero introduces some dances from the Tixtla region. These dances are often referred to as “mimetic” because dancers imitate the movements of different animals. Children in the audience can participate from their seats by moving their arms and heads like a buzzard, a duck, or a cat, as led by dancer Lorena Iñiguez. Children can learn to clap along the rhythm of *chilena*: 1-(pause)-3-4-5-6, 1-(pause)-3-4-5-6, 1-..., etc.; and they can sing along with the bilingual words to ‘El Patito’ from an arrangement recorded by Los Lobos in the album *Papa’s Dream*.

A mi me llaman El Pato (patito)
porque vivo en la laguna (patito)
luego que me ven venir (patito)
ahí viene el pato sin plumas (patitos)

Ay, ay, ay, ay, ay patito (patito)

A mi me llaman El Pato (patito)
porque vivo entre las flores (patito)
luego que me ven venir (patito)
ahí viene el pato de amores (patitos)

Everybody calls me duckie (patito)
‘Cause I live in *la laguna* (patito)
Later when they see me coming (patito)
They say here comes the duck *sin plumas* (patito)

Ay, ay, ay, ay, ay patito (patito)

Everybody calls me duckie (patito)
‘Cause I live among the flowers (patito)
Later when they see me coming (patito)
They say here comes the duck of ours (patito)

WANT TO KNOW MORE? The rhythm used, is often called *chilena* for its relationship to the Chilean *cueca*. It can be traced to an African origin, brought to Mexico, not through the Caribbean or the Atlantic as one would expect, but through the Pacific Ocean. African mining slaves based in Perú were brought North during the California Gold Rush. Along the way, they stopped in Mexico, leaving behind the *chilena*. Particular to this style is the beating on an empty overturned wooden box called *cajón*, and waving a handkerchief, *paliacate*, by the dancer.

La Bamba

The show culminates with two versions of this festive Mexican standard, one American rock'n'roll arrangement popularized by California-based 1950s teen idol, Ritchie Valens, the other in the original Veracruz folk style. The audience is invited to clap along to the beat: 1-2-3-(pause), 1-2-3-(pause), ..., etc. and everyone may get up and dance to this song stomping the beat with their feet on the floor. The song has as many verses as the performers can improvise. When they can sing no more, they all sing together "Ay, te pido de compasión que se acabe La Bamba y venga otro son." [I beg you please to finish this song and play something else!]. With this the show ends.

WANT TO KNOW MORE? The style of the music reflects yet another example of Mexico's African heritage brought via the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. Although most of Mexico was cultivated on a *hacienda* system (Spanish patronage over the indigenous population), a number of African slaves were brought to the coastal plains of Tabasco, Campeche, and Veracruz to plant sugar cane and coffee from plantations which were transplants from the Caribbean and they knew how to grow. These slaves eventually escaped to form their own inland communities and leave their mark on the people and the music. Recognition of widespread African roots in Mexico have only been acknowledged in recent years. Africanism in Mexico is still a young science.



Sones de México Ensemble

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What country are the songs that you saw in the performance from? What is the name of the performing group?

answer: All the music you heard is from Mexico (find it in a map). The name of the group is Sones de México Ensemble. They are Mexican, and they live and work in Chicago.

2. What are four sacred elements of nature for the Aztecs?

answer: Water (Agua), Earth (Tierra), Fire (Fuego), and Wind (Viento).

3. Which of the following musical instruments were used in the Aztec ritual dance you saw? (circle all that apply)

Huehuetl	Concha	Harp	Piano
Teponaztli	Caracol	Violin	Accordion
Ayoyotes	Bass	Marimba	Cello

answer: Huéhuetl (a large, old drum that can be heard for miles, and that represents the heartbeat of the dance), Teponaztli (a slit drum with a high tone and a low tone), Ayoyotes (a set of shakers worn around the ankles), Concha (a guitar or a mandolin built on an armadillo shell), Caracol (a conch-shell that is blown like a trumpet).

4. What is an Acamaya?

answer: an "acamaya" is a small shrimp-like animal that lives in some rivers in Mexico. It is similar to the American cray fish or the crawdad.

5. Where is the mouse in "El Ratón Vaquero" (the Cowboy Mouse) from? Why was he in trouble?

answer: he is from Texas. He is in trouble because he was put in jail, the jail is in Mexico, and he doesn't speak any Spanish. He can only sing "What the heck, is this house, for a manly cowboy mouse?, Why don't you, let me out, and don't catch me like a trout."

6. Where is Doña Sabina from? What does her dance represent? Did she dance fast or slow?

answer: Doña Sabina is an old woman from the Mexican state of Michoacán, where they celebrate an annual festival for old people, where everyone dances and wears masks representing old people. This dance was called "El Trenecito" (The Little Train). Doña Sabina used it to teach us the difference between "fast" and "slow" tempo in music. As an old woman, she begins dancing on a "slow tempo," but after seeing so many children and getting excited she speeds up the train to a "fast tempo."

7. What is a "mimetic dance"? What "mimetic dances" did you see? What is the ethnic origin of the dances that you saw?

answer: A dance where dancers immitate the movements of other things is called "mimetic," in this case the dancer mimed the movements of different Mexican animals: "El Zopilote" (the buzzard); "El Patito" (the duck); "El Gatito" (the cat); "La Iguana" (the iguana). These traditional dances from the Mexican state of Guerrero are rooted in an Afro-Mexican music tradition.

8. What is the name of the song that ended the program?

answer: La Bamba. This song, an early rock and roll hit recorded by Ritchie Valens in the 1950s, was based on a Mexican folk song from the Mexican state of Veracruz which was also called "La Bamba" which is danced with forceful foot tapping and a beat of "one-two-three-(rest), one-two -three-(rest), etc."

9. How many places in Mexico can you name? Do you have any friends from those places?

answer: look at a map of Mexico and see how many places you can recognize (eg. Mexico City, Monterrey, Guadalajara, Acapulco, Chiapas, Michoacán, Chihuahua, Sierra Madre, Yucatán, Cancun, Veracruz, Baja California, Michoacán, etc.). Is there anyone in the classroom from these places? What can they tell us about them?

10. Can you draw a picture of yourself on the stage playing your favorite instrument along with Sones de México Ensemble?

answer: the members of Sones de México play the following instruments: Juan plays the "guitarrón" (a large bass guitar), Lorena dances on the "tarima" (wooden stage) and "donkeyjaw," Rudy plays the "vihuela" (a small guitar), Victor plays the guitar and "jarana" (a small guitar). Renato plays the harp and the accordion, Joel plays the drums... and Doña Sabina dances with her cane. What instrument would you like to play? harp, drum set, electric guitar, synthesizer, saxophone, etc.?

We hope you enjoyed today's program.