Lesson 2: Learning “La Piragua”

Aim: How is the cumbia rhythm expressed in dance?
Summary: Students learn the cumbia dance and create their own dance rhythms.
Materials: Musical Explorers digital resources, Musical Explorers Student Guide
Standards: National 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, 11; NYC 1, 2, 3, 4
Vocabulary: refrain, rhythmic layers

José Benito Barros is perhaps the most well-known and prolific of Colombian composers, having written more than 800 songs! “La Piragua” is one of his most famous and often sung. It is based on a true story about a businessman named Guillermo Cubillo who moved to a rural area where the roads were impassable and the main mode of transport was small canoes on the river. Cubillo built a giant canoe called a “piragua.” Its launch was a great event, and his business prospered. Fun fact: Barros changed the name of Cubillo’s canoe to Pedro Albundia so it would rhyme with cumbia.

Sing “La Piragua”

- Listen to “La Piragua,” Track 15.
- Learn the words to “La Piragua” using Track 16.
- Learn the chorus and the refrain that links to the verses using Track 17. Note that the chorus is in call-and-response form. Your students can take turns singing in call and response, or they can sing both phrases together.

Chorus

Call

Response
"La Piragua"

Me contaron los abuelos que hace tiempo, 
Navegaba en el Cesar una piragua, 
Que partía del Banco viejo puerto 
A las playas de amor en Chimichagua.

Capoteando el vendaval se estremecía 
Impasible desafiaba la tormenta, 
Y un ejército de estrellas la seguía 
Tachonándola de luz y de leyenda.

Chorus:
Era la piragua de Guillermo Cubillos, 
Era la piragua, era la piragua 
(x2)

Refrain:
La piragua, la piragua 
(x2)

Doce bogas con la piel color majagua 
Y con ellos el temible Pedro Albundia, 
Por las noches a los remos arrancaban 
Un melódico rugir de hermosa cumbia.

Doce sombras, ahora viejas ya no reman, 
Ya no cruje el maderamen en el agua, 
Solo quedan los recuerdos en la arena 
Donde yace dormitando la piragua.

(Chorus)

(Refrain)

"The Piragua"*

My grandparents told me that long ago, 
In the Cesar, a piragua would sail, 
It would leave the old port of El Banco 
For the beaches of love in Chimichagua.

Fighting the gale, it would shake 
Impassively it defied the storm, 
And an army of stars would follow 
Decorating it with light and legend.

Chorus:
It was Guillermo Cubillo's piragua, 
It was the piragua, it was the piragua 
(x2)

Refrain:
The piragua, the piragua 
(x2)

Twelve rowers with majagua-colored** skin 
And with them the fearsome Pedro Albundia, 
At night with their rows, they would tear out 
A melodic roar of beautiful cumbia.

Twelve shadows, now old, no longer row, 
The wood no longer creaks in the water, 
Only memories are left in the sand 
Where the piragua lies asleep.

(Chorus)

(Refrain)

*Piragua is a type of giant canoe.
**Majagua is a type of tree.
Dance the Cumbia to “La Piragua” and “El Pescador”

- In cumbia, there are traditionally two roles for men and women.
- The cumbia is traditionally danced with props, including a lit candle, a hat for the man, and skirt for the woman. Encourage your students to try out both roles.
  - Pretend that you have these props as you act out the dance.
- The basic step is a kind of shuffle walk, stepping on each beat and swinging your hips. The male dancer drags his left foot a bit behind the right as he steps. The female dancer steps evenly.
- The upper body stays still and elegant.
- Smiling throughout the dance is key!

- After you’ve danced to “La Piragua,” you can try dancing to “El Pescador.”
  - Step 1: The man holds a hat in his right hand and candle in his left. He dances towards the woman and gives her the candle, who holds it up high with one hand while holding her skirt with the other.
  - Step 2: Both dance in small circles. Each time the man gets closer to the woman, she puts the candle between them and he dodges it.
  - Step 3: Face in opposite directions with your right shoulders together and dance in a circle; switch directions and repeat.
  - Step 4: Stand side by side and dance to the front and back together while looking at each other.
- View a video of these movements at carnegiehall.org/MusicalExplorers.
Creative Extension: Compose Your Own Dance Rhythm

As explored in Lesson 1, the basic cumbia rhythm layers three different rhythms together. As a class, create your own eight-beat dance rhythm by making three rhythms and layering them together. You’ll find a digital worksheet for this activity at carnegiehall.org/MusicalExplorers.

- Review the three rhythms that comprise the cumbia rhythm.
- Explain that you will be composing your own class dance rhythm, using the cumbia rhythm as your model. Your class’s dance rhythm will have three layers. Create one layer at a time using the following instructions.
- Explain that the new dance rhythm will be eight beats long, just like the cumbia rhythm. For an additional challenge, add an option to subdivide a beat or beats.
- Which beats do you want to play? Which beats do you want to keep silent?
- Note that, in the cumbia rhythm, different beats are played with different parts of the instruments to produce a variety of sounds. Guide the class in choosing what sounds they want to use. They can play classroom instruments, found objects, and body percussion.
- Note that, in the cumbia rhythms, some of the beats are strong and loud, while others are weaker and soft. Guide the class in assigning dynamics to their rhythms.
- Devise a word or phrase that can be used as a mnemonic device to speak the rhythm, just like Gregorio did for the cumbia rhythms. It can be anything that helps you remember the rhythm. For example, you can use students’ names, instrument names, kinds of food, or a description of how to play the rhythm (similar to “stop, shake, stop, shake,” which Gregorio used for the maraca rhythm).
- Divide the class into three sections to perform your new dance rhythm. Experiment with the instrumental and vocal versions, or combine the two. Invite student volunteers to act as the conductor, cueing the entrances and exits of each of the parts.

Literacy Extension: Biblioburro: A True Story from Colombia

Follow the journey of Luis Soriano and his bags of books in Biblioburro: A True Story from Colombia by Jeanette Winter. Luis, an avid reader, and his two burros embark on a long trip to El Tormento to deliver children there the gift of books. Luis’s love of reading inspired many trips to villages throughout Colombia with his biblioburro, or “burro library.”

Musical Word Wall

Add the words refrain and rhythmic layers to the Musical Word Wall.