Almost everything known about music and musical performance in the Americas comes from archaeology, iconology, mythology, history, ethnology, or current practice. Since antiquity, culture bearers, conquerors, missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers, politicians, grave robbers, scholars, students, travelers, visitors, and many others have contributed to musical knowledge in the Western Hemisphere.

The Archaeological Record
The Iconographic Record
The Mythological Record
The Historiographic Record
Ethnology and Practice

Probably all ancient cultures in South America, Middle America (i.e., Mexico and Central America), and the Caribbean—as, indeed, throughout the world—have used music for religious and social reasons. Many have used musical instruments for rhythmic or melodic purposes or as some type of reinforcement of vocal sounds or dancing. Through archaeology it is possible to see (and even to hear) some of the musical instruments of ancient people because many extant musical instruments have been unearthed. Many of these, found in tombs, temples, and other ruins, are available for study in private and public collections. It is possible to see how musical instruments may have been held, which ones may have been played together, and what activities—such as dancing, sacrificing, healing, parading, hunting, and so on— they may have been used for. When musical instruments and performances are depicted in pottery, wood, and any other medium, their study is called music...
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iconology. When such artifacts have been recovered from tombs, temples, and other sites lost in time, music iconology is a branch of archaeomusicology.

Nearly everything said about ancient musical instruments and events has to be qualified with the words possibly, may have, and other modifiers indicating speculation; people living today can never be certain about artifacts from prehistoric times. The materials of ancient musical instruments can usually be ascertained, and the age of the instruments can be roughly determined—by carbon-14 dating for wood and bone, thermoluminescence (TL) for pottery, and other methods of dating. Instruments can be measured and physically described. Beyond these limits, however, archaeomusicologists must speculate.

The primary drawbacks in the study of ancient musics are the absence of emic points of view (what the bearers of the culture might say about it), observable cultural contexts, and actual sounds. Even if sounds are obtained from ancient musical instruments, it is still the researcher, rather than the bearers of the extinct culture, who causes the sounds to be made. For economic and other reasons, counterfeit artifacts—fakes!—are constructed and circulated, and determining the validity of supposed artifacts can be problematic. Furthermore, carbon-14 dating is not always possible because the procedure destroys part of the artifact, and it may not always be reliable because a buried instrument may receive contamination from seepage, garbage, vegetable matter, the chemical composition of the soil, and other sources, becoming nearly impossible to date by that method. TL dating is rare because few laboratories can do it, and its margin of accuracy is often too wide for it to be useful.

Sometimes, researchers designate as musical instruments ancient objects that may actually have been constructed and used for other purposes: a ceramic water vessel or beaker may be called a drum with its skin missing, a pipe for smoking may be said to be a flute, and so on. At other times, what may be termed an artifact may actually be an ecofact, as when a so-called bone flute is just a bone, or a geofact, as when a so-called polished stone is a naturally polished stone rather than a human-crafted lithophone or stone chime.

Archaeomusicology is the study of music through archaeology, and music archaeology is the study of archaeology through musical instruments. Scholars who study the former are usually trained musicians, while those who study the latter are trained archaeologists (Hickmann 1983–1984). Because no etic conclusions (by an outsider) can be made with certainty since no emic evaluations (by the ancient musician or maker of the instrument) are possible, both fields of study raise more questions than the answers they provide. Musical artifacts can be measured and described, but archaeomusicologists may never know beyond what they can speculate about the use and function of ancient musical instruments, and though the term scientific speculation seems like an oxymoron (a self-contradiction), some speculation can be undergirded by the methods of scientific inquiry. New World archaeomusicologists often consult the writings of Spanish chroniclers from the early years of the Encounter, though these writings may not always be accurate and reliable, may contain prejudiced or biased views, and may even transmit misinformation from their native American respondents who may have had some familiarity with their music-making ancestors. There may be difficulties translating the flowery language of early chroniclers—writers who themselves may not have clearly understood what they were describing. Ad-
ditional scientific speculation can be based on the technique called ethnographic analogy (commonly used in ethnoarchaeology), whereby interpretations of the use and function of ancient culture are made by comparisons with modern cultures. This method can be particularly valuable when the cultures being compared are from the same geographic region, and especially when the living culture claims to be a descendant of the ancient one.

Within the Caribbean, few archaeomusicological studies have been conducted; most come from the Dominican Republic. Within Mexico, Central America, and South America, however, many studies exist; the cultures receiving the most frequent archaeomusicological investigation come from Mexico and Guatemala, including the Aztec, Maya, Nayarit, Olmec, and Toltec; the Central American countries of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama, including the Chorotega and Nicaraoc; northwestern Colombia, including the Sinú and the Tairona; the northern Andean countries of Colombia and Ecuador, including the Bahía, Chibcha, Guangala, Jama-Coaque, Manteño, Nariño, Piartal, Tuza, and Valdivia; the central Andean countries of Peru and northern Bolivia, including the Chancay, Chimu, Inca, Moche, Nasca, and Tiwanaku; and the southern Andean countries of Bolivia and Chile, including the Diaguita and San Pedro. Hundreds of ancient cultures thrived in these areas, each with musical activities that were possibly similar, judging by music iconography. This essay describes some extant musical instruments and suggests ideas about ancient musical performance as determined from ancient pottery.

**The Caribbean**

Archaeological investigations in the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Puerto Rico have revealed the existence of ancient bone flutes and ceramic vessel flutes with two or three holes for fingering (Boyrie Moya 1971:14–17; Moldes 1975:6–7; Veloz Maggiolo 1972:49). Specific details of their cultural derivations and contexts are unknown, and their use may have been ceremonial, for personal protection, or for diversion. A musical instrument used by the ancient Taíno is the conch trumpet, which may have had a signaling function, as it does today in the Caribbean. It may also have had a ceremonial function, because the protuberances on it resemble those on a Taíno idol (*zemi*), and they may symbolize a volcano or a sacred mountain (Fred Olsen 1974:96).

**Middle America**

Between 200 B.C. and A.D. 500 along the rugged coast of west-central Mexico, in the present states of Colima, Jalisco, and Nayarit, there lived some of the earliest Mexican cultures to produce musical instruments and depictions of musical performance, both done mostly in fired clay. These artifacts, buried in shaft tombs cut into the volcanic rocks of the highlands, were probably the belongings of a religious elite of shamans and rulers. The instruments include many idiophones (scraped, struck, and rattled); bodies of membranophones; and aerophones, such as ceramic duct globular flutes, duct tubular flutes, panpipes, and conch trumpets. In central Mexico are similar musical instruments plus more elaborate tubular flutes with flared or disk-shaped distal ends that represent flowers or perhaps the sun (Figure 2.1).
Ancient multiple duct flutes have been discovered in other parts of Mexico and as far south as Guatemala. Their existence suggests that multipart musical textures were used in Mexican and Central American antiquity, though a theory of polyphony is debatable, since no ancient flutists survive to prove or disprove it, and multi-tubed duct flutes are no longer used in the area.

Other types of duct tubular and globular edge aerophones, however, are common in Mexico today, and all have prototypes in ancient times (Crossley-Holland 1980). Robert M. Stevenson (1968) published the most comprehensive study of the ancient instruments and many others. Basing his findings on historical and archaeological records, he showed how native American—mostly Aztec (Nahuatl-speakers) and Maya—musical instruments and performing continued during Mexican colonial times, albeit with changes affected by or as a result of Spanish authority. These changes were structural (instruments made from cane rather than clay, six to seven holes for fingerering rather than four, unornamented tubular rather than affixed with a disk at the distal end, a pipe-and-tabor rather than pan-pipe-and-rattle “solo” ensemble) and contextual (instruments no longer used for sacrificial rituals, but for Christian-related ceremonies).

Aztec and Maya influence stretched as far southward as Costa Rica and even Panama, and Chibchan and other South American influences are found in ancient Panama and northward into Costa Rica (Andrews V. 1972; Boggs 1974; Hammond 1972a, 1972b; Rivera y Rivera 1977). Among the former, northern influence is the use of log idiophones similar to Aztec and Maya examples. The latter, southern influence includes ceramic ocarinas (similar to those of Colombia) in the realistic shapes of animals, birds, fish, humans, and reptiles.

In the southern lowlands of the Nicaraguan Pacific Coast, archaeologists have found small tubular and globular duct flutes and evidence for the existence of a log idiophone (called teponaztli by Nahuatl-speaking people further north, whence early Nicaraguans probably came). It is believed that the Chorotega and Nicarao of Costa Rica also migrated from Mexico, and the ancient people from the Diquís region of Costa Rica show possible influences from South America, probably through and as an extension of the Chiriquí of ancient Panama (Acevedo Vargas 1987; Ferrero 1977). Many archaeological sites appear in Panama, though none of them were large ceremonial centers or cities. As found farther north into Mexico and farther south into Colombia, many of the musical instruments excavated by archaeologists in Panama are tubular and globular flutes made from clay.

**South America**

Hundreds of prehistoric sites are found throughout the northern extension of the Andes and the northern Caribbean littoral of present Colombia. The Spanish conquistadors regarded this region of South America as most probably the land of the fabled El Dorado (The Golden Man), and they made great efforts to locate his supplies and depositories of precious metal. As a consequence, indigenous nations were quickly destroyed. In the north, the great cities of the Sinú and the villages of the Tairona were sacked and the people were killed, enslaved, or forced into the interior. Musically, the Sinú and Tairona are the most important cultures in the region now known as Colombia because of the numbers of their
globular and tubular flutes that have been unearthed (Dale A. Olsen 1986, 1987, 1989, 1990). Colombia, however, is a grave robber’s dream (an archaeologist’s nightmare), and few excavated artifacts have been properly documented. Many sit today in museums in Bogotá, in private collections, and in stores that specialize in selling antiquities alongside numerous fakes.

The Sinú lived in large cities with elaborate ceremonial centers, situated in the lowlands of northwestern Colombia, along the Sinú River in the present department of Córdoba. Most of their musical instruments are elongated duct flutes made of fired clay. Rather than being tubular, they resemble two cones joined lengthwise at their widest points. Each instrument has four holes for finger ing and is in the shape of a fish, or on the proximal cone has the adornment of a long-nosed reptile (Figure 2.2). What these instruments were used for, and what the designs meant, are unknown. There are no living Sinú descendants who can interpret them. It is possible, judging from historical and current cultural attitudes about fish and reptiles, that the instruments had magical power, possibly for protection against supernatural powers (Dale A. Olsen 1989, 2000).

More is known about the Tairona, who lived in villages in the rugged coastal foothills of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in the present department of Magdalena. Most Tairona musical instruments are vessel flutes in the shapes of animals, birds, reptiles, and humans, or anthropomorphic tubular flutes. Because Tairona terrain is higher and drier than the Sinú River basin, archaeologists have been able to excavate houses, ceremonial sites, and tombs, with yields of hundreds of ceramic and gold artifacts. Most ancient aerophones were unearthed in houses or tombs, but not in ceremonial centers, suggesting a personal rather than priestly use for them. To avoid slavery and death at the hands of the Spaniards, the Tairona escaped into the higher elevations of the Santa Marta mountains. Today, the Kogi claim to be their descendants. The Kogi do not play Tairona musical instruments, but they have interpretations for many Tairona artifacts, to which they attribute great power.

The Andean region of Colombia is archaeologically known more for its gold and statuary (as in the San Agustín area) than for its musical instruments. The myth of El Dorado probably began here among the ancient Chibcha, with the legend of the consecration of each new leader, who would have his body coated with gold dust. As an act of rebirth, he would dive from a raft into Lake Guatavita (near present-day Bogotá), to surface reborn as a pure being, free of his golden coating, and filled with the power of the spirit of the lake.

Little is known of the extant musical instruments of the Colombian Andes other than that they were primarily vessel flutes with little decoration. The Nariño (in the southern region of

**proximal**
The portion of a musical instrument closest from the mouthpiece.

![Figure 2.2](image_url)
A ceramic double-cone-shaped tubular flute with a duct mouthpiece, four fingerholes, and an adornment of a long-nosed reptile on the proximal cone. Sinú culture, Colombia, about A.D. 1300–1500.

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Colombia) and ancient cultures in northern Ecuador, however, had large numbers of decorative artifacts shaped like the shells of large land-living snails—artifacts that may possibly have been ductless vessel flutes (Nyberg 1974), though they may not have been flutes at all, but ritual vessels (Figure 2.3).

Farther south, into present-day central Ecuador, the coastal lowlands have yielded numerous musical artifacts made from clay. Most of them are ductless vessel flutes in the shapes of animals and birds. The culture known as Bahía or Valdivia produced elaborate humanoid-shaped vessel flutes with two chambers and four holes for fingering. These instruments, capable of many multiple pitches, are elaborate in their exterior and interior design (Cubillos Ch. 1958; Hickmann 1990).

Possibly the richest area of the Americas for ancient musical artifacts is coastal Peru, from Lambayeque in the north to Nasca in the south (Bolaños 1981, 1988; Donnan 1982; Jiménez Borja 1951; Dale A. Olsen 1992, 2000; Stevenson 1968). One of the oldest known musical cultures in Peru, however, is Kotosh, high in the Andes in the department of Huánuco. There, what is thought to be a bone flute (with one hole exactly in the middle of its length) was discovered in the Tomb of the Crossed Hands, dating back to about 4500 B.C. (Bolaños 1988:11). Indeed, the precise uses of artifacts are not always clear, and what may seem to be a musical instrument may in fact be something else. In coastal Peru, some artifacts are undoubtedly tubular flutes because of their notched mouthpieces and holes, and numerous ceramic ductless and duct globular flutes have been found (Dale A. Olsen 1992, 2000). It is curious, however, that though cross-blown tubular ceramic flutes existed in ancient Peru, tubular duct flutes did not—at least, none have been discovered.

Ceramic panpipes from the Nasca culture of southern coastal Peru have been unearthed and studied in detail (Figure 2.4), and precise scientific measurements have been made of their pitches (Stevenson 1960, 1968; Haeberli 1979; Bolaños 1988); the measurements have dispelled the often-believed
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myth that Andean music had pentatonic roots. They have dispelled another belief: that Nasca panpipes were played in pairs using interlocking parts, as they are today in the southern Peruvian Andes. Scholars now believe that those panpipes were played in ensembles, because many instruments with nearly identical tunings have been discovered in common archaeological sites.

Trumpets, aerophones with cupped mouthpieces, were frequent among ancient coastal Peruvians. The Moche made instruments from the shells of conchs and ceramics shaped to resemble such shells. According to music iconography, these musical instruments were used by priests and shamans, or by the fanged deity in the afterlife. The Moche also played ceramic tubular straight and coiled trumpets, the latter depicting open-mouthed jaguars at their distal ends. The inland Recuay used trumpets that sometimes coiled around vases or beakers (Figure 2.5). Farther south, on the southern Peruvian coast, straight trumpets were used by the Nasca and their neighbors in Paracas. These were often painted with motifs of feline, piscine, or solar deities (Figure 2.6).

Numerous ceramic membranophones, some with skin intact, have been discovered at Moche, Nasca, and Paracas sites. Those from the Nasca and Paracas civilizations are the largest and most ornate. Some, reaching two meters high, are profusely painted with cat and snake deities (Figure 2.7).

Farther south, in the area of present-day highland Bolivia, musical instruments have been archaeologically discovered from the Tiwanaku culture (1000 B.c.–A.D. 1000), an influential civilization. These artifacts include ceramic vessel flutes and panpipes, bone tubular flutes, and wooden trumpets...
(Figure 2.8). The Tiwanaku culture influenced the Diaguita and San Pedro cultures in the Atacama Desert region of northern Chile, where similar forms and designs among ceramic artifacts can been seen. María Ester Grebe (1974) has done a thorough study of the ancient musical instruments of Chile.

**THE ICONOGRAPHIC RECORD**

Music iconography is closely related to music archaeology because the source of information is artifactual. Iconography, however, studies the meanings attached, usually pictorially, to artifacts. Music iconography is the description (music iconology, the science) of music through its representation in sculpture, painting, and other plastic arts. Through it, researchers can gain an understanding of events, processes, and performances during the era in which the artifact was authentically used. It is a record of knowledge that is not fully reliable in itself, but when added to archaeological, historiographic, and ethnographic records, can tell much about a culture. Another aspect of music iconography is the study of the designs on musical instruments. One reason for iconography's unreliability is that so much is available only in secondary sources: the originals are difficult to locate because they are rare paintings, drawings, engravings from rare books, or sometimes have disappeared altogether.

In South America, Mexico, and Central America, pre-Encounter musical iconography tells us about the uses of music among the Aztec, Maya, Moche, Nayarit, and other ancient civilizations. In the early post-Encounter period, paintings and drawings from codices and other compilations by chroniclers, missionaries, and others are valuable for their visual commentaries about music. After the Encounter, however, biases appear, and are often represented in art. Flutes, trumpets, and other instruments may be represented larger than life (or smaller), as more complex (or simpler), being played together in unlikely combinations, or in any number of incorrect ways. For this reason, music iconography must be joined with other types of documentation in a check-and-balance manner. As nationalism developed, painting and graphic arts became more detailed and representational. Artists were usually interested in more or less faithfully depicting life in their new countries, and this often included musical life, featuring such activities as playing instruments and dancing. Especially important are paintings of religious festivals, music during work, and music for pleasure. With the growth of tourism since the 1950s, music iconography in the form of items made for sale to tourists (carved gourds, figurines, statues, paintings) has proliferated. Once again, realism is not prevalent, and caricature is common.

**The Caribbean**

Drawings by chroniclers are somewhat informative about music in the Caribbean during historical times. The chronicler Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés included two drawings of a Taino idiophonic H-drum, a struck idiophone (which I call an “H-drum” because of the pattern formed by its two prongs cut into the top of a hollow wooden log) closed at both ends (1851, reproduced by Rouse 1963a:plate 90). These drawings are
valuable because they suggest a possible connection with the Aztec teponaztli or the Maya tunkul farther west on the mainland. The Taíno idiophone is called mayohuacán by Moldes (1975:6), but Loven (1935:495) writes its name as maguay, the term for the century plant (magüey), from which it is made. The Taíno H-drum was a large instrument according to René Currasco (former director of a noteworthy folkloric ballet in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic), who built a reproduction inspired by the historical drawings, and played it while sitting on the floor as his ensemble performed a reconstructed Taíno dance; his instrument stood about 1.2 meters high and measured about one meter in circumference. Loven explains that the Taíno idiophonic H-drum was played by the chief (cacique) to accompany the festive song (areito) rather than a dance, though this song was possibly danced to. No mention is made of any melodic or linguistic communication on this particular instrument, though it could produce at least two tones. Ferrero (1977:133) reproduced an engraving by Benzoni from 1542, showing a similar instrument of the Gran Nicoya of Costa Rica, having three tongues and played with two sticks.

Rouse (1963b:plate 95) prints a picture by Picard (Fewkes 1907) showing container rattles being used in a Carib war-related dance. The instrument is apparently a large calabash rattle with a long stick handle, on the top of which are numerous vertically extending feathers, in the fashion of each player’s headdress. The picture gives evidence of the importance attached to this seemingly sacred rattle, as it is shown being played by priests or shamans—three men of apparently high status, judging from their headdresses and costumes. Each man plays one rattle, while sixteen other men, without headdresses or costumes, dance in a circle around them.

According to music iconography, membranophones (skin drums) may have been used in the ancient Caribbean. A picture (Fewkes 1907, reproduced in Rouse 1963a:plate 92) depicts an Arawak dance to the goddess of the earth, in which two membranophones are played, each with two sticks in the European military-drum fashion. Lewin (1968:53) refers to skin drums among the Arawak during ceremonies of worship, explaining they are “made from the hollow stem of the trumpet tree with manatee skins stretched tightly across.” If these portrayals of Arawak ceremonies are accurate, then perhaps European-style membranophones replaced the H-drum idiophones.

**Middle America**

The figurines of musicians unearthed in west Mexico (Nayarit, Colima) provide many details of instrumental performance, such as what instruments existed, who played them, and which instruments have been continuously used to the present. Some people depicted are musical soloists; others are members of musical ensembles. These were probably ceremonial musical performers, maybe shamans. Container rattles, rasps (Figure 2.9), and tortoise-shell struck idiophones (Figure 2.10) are commonly depicted on figurines as being played by men who often are shown speaking or singing. Single-headed drums and struck conch shells are shown being played in west Mexican iconography (Figure 2.11). Players of aerophones are commonly depicted, giving us valuable information about performance that no longer occurs. Foremost are the player of a three-tubed flute (in Figure 2.12, the
way the flutist’s fingers overlap the holes suggests that multiple sounds were used) and a panpipe-and-rattle “solo” ensemble (Figure 2.13).

Though some musician-depicting artifacts are molded together in clay (Figure 2.14), museums often display individual musician-depicting artifacts together as if to indicate ensemble playing (see Figure 2.11). Grouping such artifacts together is purely speculative. Curators are often influenced by how musical instruments are played in combination today. This technique, called ethnographic analogy (Dale A. Olsen 1990:170), is usually the only way to determine the collectivity of musical instruments unless they are all arranged together in an archaeological site, but even that would not establish the orchestration of specific ensembles or explain how each instrument was used in relation to the others.

Music iconography can reveal information about musical contexts, but it cannot tell us many details about techniques of playing. It can suggest the big picture but not the little picture, the focus of musical detail. For
example, the player of the single-headed drum pictured in Figure 2.11 is probably playing with a mallet, but we cannot tell how he hits the drumhead (in the middle? on the rim of the skin? with his fingers? also with his palm?). Similarly, the player of the three-tubed flute in Figure 2.12 is obviously playing with his fingers, but we cannot tell which parts of the fingers (tips or middle joints), nor can we tell which holes he covers with which fingers (this would be important information to know for the purposes of determining whether or not ancient Mexicans played multipart music on their multi-tubed flutes).

More important, music iconography can show how particular musicians were attired, and from that evidence, scholars can speculate about the performers’ social status. For example, the drummer in Figure 2.11 may have been a priest, judging from the elaborate headdress and fancy necklace, and the flutist in Figure 2.12 may have been a commoner, judging from the simple hat and lack of fancy clothing. This is speculation, but scholars have nothing more on which to base their conclusions about musical contexts and musicians’ status. Music iconography, at best, offers suggestions about how musical instruments might have been played and what sort of people the players might have been.

Stevenson explains that “at least forty codices record material of interest to the ethnomusicologist. Even late picture books such as the Codex...
Azcatitlán (painted ca. 1550 in the northern part of the Valley of Mexico) can yield extremely useful documentation on precontact Aztec music” (1968:10). The Bekker Codex (Martí 1968:83–86) pictures Mixtec musicians playing a variety of instruments in great detail. The Florentine Codex of Bernardino Sahagún shows how Aztec flutists smashed their flutes on the steps of the temple before being sacrificed (Figure 2.15).

Another important source for ancient musical iconography of Middle America is Maya murals, originally painted in temples and tombs. The most famous is from Bonampak, Chiapas, Mexico. It shows numerous Mayan musicians performing together (Martí 1968:facing page 68). Such tomb art is found as far south as Honduras.

In Panama and Costa Rica, several excavated gold artifacts are interpreted as depicting musicians. One of the most famous is from the Coclé culture (about A.D. 1300–1500) in Panama. It is often called the little man flutist (Figure 2.16). The Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) uses this fig-
ure as its logo (a choice made in 1955 by David P. McAllester), and today its form graces the journal *Ethnomusicology* and other SEM-published items. What is not known is whether the little man is actually playing a flute or a trumpet, smoking a cigar, or chewing sugar-cane. Other figurines are clearer. These include a gold biped from the Panamanian Veraguas culture (about A.D. 800–1540), who seemingly plays a flute with one hand and a rattle with the other (Figure 2.17). This is a fine example of evidence of the one-man-band personage, who often plays a pipe and tabor in present Middle and South America (Boilès 1966). In this ancient artifact, however, the musician is playing a pipe-and-rattle combination. From Palmar Sur, an ancient Costa Rican site, Luis Ferrero (1977:plate 38) reproduces a photograph of a gold figurine of a double-headed flutist: each head plays what may be a flute that resembles the instrument in the Veraguas exemplar; this double-headed flutist is unique in the musical archaeology of the Americas.

**South America**

Perhaps nowhere in the Americas is music iconography so rich as among the prehistoric Moche of the north Peruvian coast [see Peru], who depicted musical instruments, singing, whistling, instrumental playing, dancing, and costumes on ceramic pots, often in exquisite detail. Some artifacts are difficult to interpret, such as deathlike figures who are playing pan-pipes (Figure 2.18) (Benson 1975; Olsen 2000). Others are quite clear, such as scenes of panpipers where the instruments of two players are connected by a cord, suggesting that panpipes were played by paired musicians—perhaps in an interlocking fashion, as is commonly done today in southern Peru and Bolivia, though this is not known and can never be proven.

In colonial and more recent historic times throughout South America, many paintings, drawings, etchings, and other examples of the plastic arts have depicted musical instruments, singing, instrumental playing, and dancing. These are valuable for learning about colonial music. In colonial paintings of life in Rio de Janeiro, people of African descent are seen playing *mbira*-type plucked idiophones, instruments that have disappeared in modern Brazil.
THE MYTHOLOGICAL RECORD

People in all cultures tell stories. In English, stories passed on orally are called by a variety of names: folklore, folktales, mythology, myths, narratives, oral history, oral literature. Misunderstanding often arises when these terms enter into colloquial speech, because people usually think of a folktale, a myth, a story, and so on, as something that is not true. Actually, mythology is not concerned with proving or disproving truth. It is simply the study of a particular form of discourse. It may be true, or it may be false. Usually it is a little bit true and a little bit false.

Although such communications are often perceived as something other than fact, it is not for persons of one culture to determine whether or not the mythology of another culture is fact or fiction. The mythological record can be an important repository of information from which we can learn something about the meaning and contextualization of another culture’s music. Much of what is learned may not exist in current practice (or perhaps it never existed, or exists only for the supernatural), but it may provide a framework on which cultural understanding can be built. This cultural understanding takes place, not usually with details that can be physically measured or scientifically studied, but with emotions, ideas, morals, and beliefs.

A myth is an artifact. Unlike an archaeological artifact, it cannot be dated. Nevertheless, it can often provide data that researchers can use comparatively to help reconstruct cultural history. As a repository of historical fact, a myth is usually unreliable, though ideas about great tragedies (massacres, famines, plagues), large-scale migrations, wars, and other memorable events and situations may be related in narratives or songs. More often, myths may relate ideas about the creation of the universe, taboos on human conduct, and the daily lives of gods, cultural heroes, and ogres. Myths contextualize many musical instruments, and these native (albeit mythological) contexts can be compared with historical or contemporary uses of the same musical instruments. Likewise, myths may contextualize singing and dancing in ways that provide information about cultural continuity, acculturation, and cultural extinction.

Most of what we know from the mythological record of South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean comes from the twentieth century, the age of ethnographic investigation. Myths, usually transmitted orally, have been collected and written down by historians, travelers, missionaries, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and others. Written collections are important for study, but also important are the original rules of preservation (some myths are guarded by shamans, priests, elders, women, and so on) and dissemination, because those processes are essential in maintaining cultural cohesion and continuity. Therefore, mythology has tremendous internal importance for cultures. Scholars can learn much about a culture by studying such internal dynamics (how, when, and why myths are preserved, transmitted, and remembered), and studying the myths themselves (what they mean, inside and outside the culture).

The Caribbean

Much of the folklore of the Caribbean region is Afro-Caribbean in origin. Telling stories,
reciting proverbs, and singing songs—possibly African retentions passed on from generation to generation—are commonplace in areas where African slaves and their children lived in great numbers. Many Afro-Caribbean narratives refer to musical performance, musical instruments, dancing, and so forth. The following tale, entitled “Mérisier, Stronger than the Elephants” comes from Haiti, and portions of it tell us important information about local music (Courlander 1976:64–66):

There was an old man with three sons. One day he fell ill, and he sent a message to his sons, asking them to come to his house. When they arrived, he said to them, “I am an old man, I am sick. If I should die, how will you bury me?”

One son answered, “Father, may you grow strong again. But if you should die, I would have you buried in a mahogany coffin.”

Another son answered, “Father, may you live long. But if you should die, I would make you a coffin of brass.”

And the third son, named Brisé, replied, “Father, I would bury you in the great drum of the king of the elephants.”

“The great drum of the king of the elephants! Who before now has ever been buried so magnificently!” the old man said. “Yes, that is the way it should be.” And he asked the son who had suggested it to bring him the drum of the king of the elephants.

Brisé went home. He told his wife: “I said I would do this thing for my father, but it is impossible. Why didn’t I say I would make him a coffin of silver? Even that would have been more possible. How shall I ever be able to do what I have promised?”

Thereupon Brisé sets off on a journey, looking for elephants so he can acquire the elephants’ great drum. He travels far and visits many people, until he meets Mérisier, a Vodou priest. The story continues:

Then Brisé understood that the old man was a houngan, a Vodoun priest with magical powers. The old man took out his bead-covered rattle. He shook it and went into a trance and talked with the gods. At last he put the rattle away and said: “Go that way, to the north, across the grassland. There is a great mapou tree, called Mapou Plus Grand Passe Tout. Wait there. The elephants come there with the drum. They dance until they are tired, then they fall asleep. When they sleep, take the drum. Travel fast. Here are four wari nuts for protection. If you are pursued, throw a wari nut behind you and say, ‘Mérisier is stronger than the elephants.’”

When day came, Brisé went north across the grasslands. He came to the tree called Mapou Plus Grand Passe Tout. He climbed into the tree and waited. As the sun was going down, he saw a herd of elephants coming, led by their king. They gathered around the mapou tree. The king’s drummer began to play on the great drum. The elephants began to dance. The ground shook with their stamping. The dancing went on and on, all night. They danced until the first cocks began to crow. Then they stopped, lay down on the ground, and slept.

Brisé came down from the tree. He was in the middle of a large circle of elephants. He took the great drum and placed it on his head. He climbed first over one sleeping elephant, then another, until he was outside the circle. He traveled as fast as he could with his heavy load.

The story continues to explain how the elephants come after Brisé, and how Brisé stops them each time by throwing a wari nut. The first nut produces a huge forest of pines as a barrier to the elephants, the second a large freshwater lake (which they drink to cross), the third a large saltwater lake (which they drink to cross, but all except the elephant king die). The story continues:

Brisé came out of the grassland. He followed the trails. He went to his father’s house with the drum. When he arrived, his father was not dead; he was not sick; he was working with his hoe in the fields.

“Put the drum away,” the father said. “I don’t need it yet. I am feeling fine.”
Brisé took the drum to his own house. He ate and slept. When he awoke, he heard a loud noise in the courtyard. He saw the king of elephants coming. The elephant ran straight toward the great drum and seized hold of it.

Brisé took the last wari nut that the Vodoun priest had given him and threw it on the ground, saying, “Mérisier is stronger than the elephants!”

Instantly the great drum broke into small pieces, and each piece became a small drum. The king of elephants broke into many pieces, and each piece became a drummer. The drummers went everywhere, each one taking a drum with him.

Thus it is that there are drums everywhere in the country. Thus it is that people have a proverb which says: “Every drum has a drummer.”

This tale explains—though with tongue in cheek, of course—why Haiti has so many drums and drummers, but it also explains why Haiti has no elephants. It says the Vodou priest (*houngan*) plays a bead-covered rattle (similar to today’s West African and Afro-Cuban instruments), which contrasts with container rattles often found in Haitian Vodou.

**Middle America**

Much of the mythology of Middle America is native American in origin. Probably all Amerindians have tales that can teach us something about their music. Especially noteworthy are narratives of the Aztec (Nahua), the Huichol, the Maya, and the Kuna. Some are creation myths. Others are everyday stories about animals, life in the forests, and so on. Musical performance, especially singing, is often a part of them.

Peter Furst and Barbara Myerhoff have shown (1966) how an elaborate cycle of myths, which they call an epic prose-poem, provides information about the birth, life, and death of a master sorcerer known as the Tree of the Wind. Also known as the Datura Person, he was responsible for introducing the powerfully dangerous hallucinogen datura to the Huichol of northern Mexico. The cycle provides information about the power of singing and playing the violin by the Huichol, who consider the violin “among their most ancient instruments” (personal conversation, Ramón Medina Silva, a Huichol shaman, 1971). Similarly, Julio Estrada has shown how an Aztec (Nahua) myth explains the creation of the world through the power of the sacred conch trumpet of Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec cultural hero (Estrada 1992:341):

But his shell horn had no holes: [Quetzalcoatl] then summoned forth the worms, which made the holes; thereupon the male and female bees flew into the shell and it sounded.

Estrada interprets this myth as explaining the “cultivation of the earth. When the shell is played, the wind god and the bees together spread the seed of a new culture” (1992:341). Many cultures (Aztec, Inca, Maya, Moche, and others) venerated conchs and used them as trumpets for sacred purposes; but for native Americans, conch trumpets have power especially when they are sounded, and myths help us understand why.

The sound of the trumpet, significant in prehistoric America, remains an important symbol. A week before Carnaval (Carnival) in Chamulá, Mexico, in 1969, the master of ceremonies gave the following oral proclamation to the village (after Bricker 1973:85–86):

Chamulas!
Crazy February!
Today is the ninth of February, 1969.
The first soldier came to Mexico.
He came to Guatemala;
He came to Tuxtla;
He came to Chiapa;
He came to San Cristóbal.
He came with flags;
He came with drums;
He came with trumpets.
Viva! Viva!

The last cavalier came to Mexico.
He came to Guatemala;
He came to Tuxtla;
He came to Chiapa;
He came to San Cristóbal.
He came with fireworks;
He came with cannons;
He came with fifes;
He came with bugles;
He came with flags;
He came with trumpets.
Mariano Ortega and Juan Gutiérrez came with their young lady, Nana María Cocorina.
They go together into the wood to make love.
They return eating toffee, eating candied squash, eating blood sausage.
Viva Mariano Ortega!

Here we see trumpets, bugles, and other wind instruments as symbols of power, not only of victory in war (the Spanish conquests of Mexico, Guatemala, and Chiapas), but also of spreading the seed—because Nana María Cocorina becomes pregnant (Bricker 1973:118).

South America

The mythology of South American native people is rich. Telling stories is a way of life, and often the distinction between speaking and singing stories is slight. Among South American Amerindians, music is often a part of most myths, and numerous examples portray musical situations that differ from musical situations of the 1990s. Women do not usually play flutes; in myths, however, they are as likely to play flutes as men. An excerpt from a Warao narrative reveals how a woman plays a bamboo flute and sings for magical protection against a jaguar, who is actually a transformed man (Wilbert 1970:164–165):

He had collected a lot of bamboo and threw it down, “Kerplum.” When it became dark he lapped up some water with his tongue, “Beh, beh.” After having built up the fire, the boys began to dance. She herself played the flute made of bamboo, “Tea, tea, tea, tail of a jaguar,” she said.

The jaguar rushed towards the woman, but she grabbed a piece of firewood and stuck him in the eye. The jaguar stopped. Again, in the dance place, she took the bamboo flute and played, “Tea, tea, tea, tail of a jaguar. Tea, tea, tea, tail of a jaguar.” Again the jaguar rushed toward the seated woman. Again, she stuck a piece of firewood into his eye. …

By dawn, he could take no more. He sat with his back to them. The woman’s little brother arrived with arrows and spear. “Sister, you all survived the night?”

In anthropology, this is known as a reversal of social order (as when a musical instrument at one time was the domain of one sex, but then switches at some point in history), and
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often, mythology is the only record of such musical behavior. Furthermore, mythology often elaborates on the processes that produce such cultural changes.

Another trait seen in the above myth, and common in most narratives, is onomatopoeia, as when the jaguar throws the bamboo down and goes “Kerplum.” Often such sounds symbolize musical instruments and the noises of everyday life, including the sounds of humans, animals, and spirits. Among the Kalapalo of Brazil, and possibly among most native South American people, spirits have an especially musical language: “Powerful beings are … capable of inventing musical forms, whereas humans are capable only of copying those forms in their performances” (Basso 1985:70). This is one of the main reasons that music has so much power among Amerindians, as shamans and nonshamans alike sing for protection, for curing, and for other types of theurgy (Dale A. Olsen 1996).

THE HISTORIOGRAPHIC RECORD

Musical historiography is essentially musical information written by chroniclers of a culture contemporary with their own. These writings are either emic (insider), such as the Maya writing about the Maya or the descendants of the Inca writing about the Inca (problematic because the notion that descendants have an emic claim on their ancestors can be controversial), Jesuits writing about music at their missions, and so forth, or etic (outsider), such as Spanish chroniclers (cronistas) writing about the music of ancient American civilizations, in which case the information may be biased. Another type of historiographic information is philology, which includes descriptive treatises about musical instruments, musical practices, and language. (Early dictionaries are important sources about music.) Another area is oral history, though oral historians, folklorists, and anthropologists often disagree about whether oral history is history, folklore, or ethnography. Basically, historiographic information consists of ethnographies or travelogs from the past. Such sources can be quite different: some are objective, some are subjective, and some, because of bias or carelessness, may contain misinformation. Sources must always be carefully analyzed and compared with other types of information.

The Caribbean

Early chroniclers (cited in Boyrie Moya 1971:13–14; Loven 1935:492–497; Moldes 1975:6–7) described several musical instruments of the Taíno, even though those Arawak-speakers were nearly extinct. These instruments included what the writers called a skinless drum made from a hollowed-out tree, with an H-shaped incision on the top forming two tongues that players struck; a small gourd or calabash container rattle used during a harvest festival; a large, double-handled gourd or calabash container rattle used by shamans for curing illnesses; snail-shell rattles strung around dancers’ legs, arms, and hips; small, metal, castanet-type instruments held between a dancer’s fingers; flutes; and conch trumpets. Most of these instruments were used to accompany the singing of religious songs (areito).

J. M. Coopersmith (1949:7–8), describing the Taíno log idiophone, quotes the chronicler Oviedo y Valdés:
They accompany their songs with a drum, which is made from a hollowed trunk of a tree, often as large as a man and sounding like the drums made by the Negroes. There is no parchment on the drum but, rather, holes or slits are made, from which the sound emanates. … The drum … (is cylindrical) in form and made from the trunk of a tree, as large as desired. … It is played with a stick like the tympanum (atabal). One sound-hole in the form of an “H” is cut in the middle of one side of the trunk. The two tongues formed by the “H” are beaten with a stick. On the opposite side of the trunk-section, near the base of the cylinder, a rectangular hole is cut. The drum must be held on the ground, for it does not sound if held elsewhere. … On the mainland, these drums are sometimes lined with the skin of a deer or some other animal. Both types of drum are used on the mainland.

This description is better than those of many other chroniclers, but it is typical because of what is not said. It was apparently uncommon to write about the cultural significance of musical instruments, their origins, or anything else about their seemingly extramusical functions. The obvious question, whether or not the Taíno H-drum was borrowed from the Mexican mainland, was apparently never asked. Few other Taíno instruments are mentioned, and musical occasions are not described at all.

The ancient Carib, by contrast, had more musical instruments, which the chroniclers (unknown writers cited in Petitjean-Roget 1961:51, 67–68 and Rouse 1963b:561; Rochefort 1666, cited by Stevenson 1975:52) described in fuller detail. Among them were container rattles made from gourds; a single-headed drum (membranophone) made from a hollowed tree; bamboo flutes and bone flutes; panpipes; conch trumpets; and even a single-stringed instrument made from a gourd. The chroniclers mentioned that mothers used rattles to soothe their children; men played flutes in the morning while women prepared breakfast and people bathed; panpipes accompanied dancing; and conch trumpets were blown to signal wars and hunting or fishing expeditions.

**Middle America**

Historical accounts of Amerindian music from Middle America—the area known as the Viceroyalty of New Spain, including the Caribbean islands—date from the early 1500s and were written mainly by Spanish chroniclers. Foremost among them was Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who lived between about 1492 and 1581 (Stevenson 1968:12–14). His accounts vividly describe ritual music for human sacrifices, music for battles, and festival music of the Aztecs.

During the colonial period, religious scholars produced many sources about Amerindian music because they believed that knowing about native music would help missionaries convert the Indians to Christianity. The Franciscan order was dominant in Mexico, where Pedro de Gante was the leading missionary who described Amerindian music during the early years of the conversion process. He wrote in letters to King Charles V of Spain about the Indians’ musicality: “I can affirm that there are now trained singers among them who if they were to sing in Your Majesty’s Chapel would at this moment do so well that perhaps you would have to see them actually singing in order to believe it possible” (Stevenson 1968:157). The printing of music appeared in Mexico as early as 1556, forty-five years before it appeared in Peru, and elaborate polyphonic scores attest to Amerindian choristers’ musical skills.
South America

Spanish and Portuguese conquerors, explorers, religious zealots, and others wrote extensively about the new lands of South America—known as the Viceroyalties of New Granada, Peru, La Plata, and Brazil, the latter under Portuguese rule. One of the most important writers about sixteenth-century Peruvian music was Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala (1936 [1612–1615/16]), who described Inca music and musical instruments in detail; Guaman Poma’s source provides many drawings of Inca musical performance. Another sixteenth-century author, Garcilaso de la Vega (1966 [1609]), the son of a Spanish nobleman and an Incan princess, also wrote extensively about music among the Inca and other Amerindians.

The major religious orders in Spanish South America were the Augustinians, the Dominicans, the Franciscans, and the Jesuits; the last were musically active in Peru and Paraguay until their expulsion in 1767. Their goal was basically the same as that of missionaries in New Spain: spiritual conversion. Like those missionaries, they trained many musicians, chronicled many events involving music, described many musical instruments, and in essence provided some of the first ethnographies of native cultures.

Writings in the historiographic process often become ethnographies when they deal extensively with the behavior of a culture. Likewise, ethnographies become historiographic sources. Indeed, the difference between histories and ethnographies is often slight. Studies about the music of South America that are now important historiographic sources are numerous. Many of them are listed within the particular article references and in the general bibliography of this volume. They include such famous monographs from the first half of the twentieth century as An Introductory Study of the Arts, Crafts, and Customs of the Guiana Indians by Walter E. Roth (1924), La musique des Incas et ses survivances by Raoul and Marguerite d’Harcourt (1990 [1925]), and Suriname Folk-Lore by Melville and Frances Herskovits (1936).

ETHNOLOGY AND PRACTICE

Studies that go beyond the mere description of a culture and include analysis, interpretation, and synthesis based on participant observation, participation, and interaction have moved out of ethnography into ethnology, the science of culture. These include studies in anthropology, ethnobotany, ethnolinguistics, ethnomusicology, folklore, poetics, religion, and so forth, and they number in the thousands of volumes that add to our musical understanding of South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.

In the realm of specific musical study, participation in and writing about the music of a culture by its bearers themselves (the emic, or “insider” approach) or by non-culturebearers (the etic, or “outsider” approach) has often resulted in the cultivation of knowledge acquired through practice. Two studies that help describe this approach are Capoeira—A Brazilian Art Form: History, Philosophy, and Practice by Bira Almeida, known professionally as Mestre Acordeon (1986), and Ring of Liberation by J. Lowell Lewis (1992). Both treat the same musical phenomenon, capoeira, a form of Afro-Brazilian music, dance, and
martial art, from Salvador de Bahia, Brazil. Because these books differ widely in their approach to this topic, reading them both side by side will provide a better understanding of *capoeira* than reading only one of them. A thorough understanding of a particular musical topic requires the exploration of all the forms of musical scholarship available.

**REFERENCES**


