

63. Familia Valera Miranda

Se quema la chumbamba

(For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

Background information and Performance Circumstances

- The Familia Valera Miranda is a Cuban family of musicians and singer.
- *Se quema la chumbamba* is a Cuban *son* – a type of traditional song that is generally recognised to be the forerunner of the *salsa*.
- To be more exact, it is a *son montuno* – a sub-style that originated in the work songs of agricultural workers, hence the lyrics, with their references to burning land.
- The *son* was originally a purely vocal call and response form, but when it began to be used at dances, an instrumental chordal accompaniment was added.
- Cuban music is a fusion of musical elements from the Spanish, who colonised Cuba, and African slaves that they imported.
- African elements include syncopated rhythms, call and response and the use of percussion instruments developed from African models.
- Spanish (European) elements include the use of functional (if limited) chords, the minor scale patterns used in the melody, and the presence of the cuatro and double bass.

Performing forces and their handling

- This is an all-male vocal group, with a leader (*pregón*) and a chorus (*coro*). The *pregón* improvises the verses, while the *coro* refrains, in two-part homophony remain fixed.
- The vocal setting is syllabic, with quite a limited range in all of the vocal parts (minor 6th in *pregón* and diminished 7th in *coro*).
- The cuatro (a form of guitar) plays a mixture of solo melodic lines and strummed chords: the octave tunings of the four pairs of strings produce a thicker sound, with the brightness of the upper octaves ringing through the texture.
- The cuatro has a short, repeated melodic pattern which acts as an introduction, and also as an accompaniment to the singing. The cuatro solo, later in the piece, is more adventurous, covering a much wider range and including slides and chords as well as single-line melodies.
- The plucked double bass line consists of only a small number of notes, all from dominant or tonic chords.
- The percussion section, in typical Latin-American style, uses continuous maracas quavers and improvised bongo patterns, all held together by the characteristic 3/2 *son* claves rhythm on the claves.

Texture

- The texture is homophonic, with all of the instruments supporting the melody at the top.
- The solo vocal part contrasts with a two-part chorus refrain.
- The call and response texture between the vocal parts is integral to this piece, and to the *son* in general (as well as to the *salsa*, which developed from it).
- Textural variety is supplied by the instrumental solo section, involving Bongo improvisations against the main cuatro 'riff'.

Structure

- After the cuatro introduction, there is a regular succession of 8 bar *pregón* 'verses' (which change each time in detail) and 8 bar (mostly) unvaried *coro* 'refrains'. This pattern is sometimes slightly varied by the *pregón* singing a virtually unchanged version of the *coro* refrain, both with regard to lyrics and melody.
- The lengthy cuatro solo (and bongo improvisation within it) provides variety.
- There is no contrast of key or modulation.
- Diatonic G minor throughout, without any modulations.

Tonality

- Diatonic G minor throughout, without any modulations.

Harmony

- Chords restricted to I and V7 in G minor in a regular four-bar pattern which repeats throughout:
 - I (Gm) - V7(D7) - V7(D7) - I (Gm).
- However, the frequent use of the note E flat over the D7 chord does make the harmony slightly richer, implying either the dominant minor ninth chord or, at times, the diminished seventh chord.
- In the cuatro solo section, the cuatro itself uses a wider range of chords, sometimes as sliding parallel progressions as part of a chordal figure, and sometimes the major subdominant chord of C major.

Melody

- The main 'riff' played in the introduction by the cuatro consists of two related phrases, both of which feature rising and falling thirds.

- Balanced two- and four-bar phrases are a major feature of the vocal sections of this piece.
- The vocal refrain '*Candela es*' is similar each time it occurs, beginning on either the third or fifth of the tonic chord in the first phrase, to land on an unprepared seventh (c) in the second bar. The second phrase begins on the supertonic, then leaps to the dominant before falling to the tonic.
- Most of the 'improvised' *pregón* phrases begin on the upper dominant (D) followed by E flat.
- The melodic language of the cuatro solo is much more varied, with a wider range and use of all the notes of the G harmonic minor scale. In addition, a chromatic C# is used quite frequently, normally as a chromatic inflection onto the dominant. Later in the solo, more E naturals and F naturals are used, as the player strays a little further from the harmonic minor pattern of the vocal sections.

Rhythm and metre

- A strong feeling of two in a bar, but heavily syncopated, so that the position of the first beat is sometimes 'disguised'.
- The rhythms mainly fit the *son* claves 3/2 rhythm (see bars 9 and 10 in the score). This rhythm, which is present or implied throughout, is vital to most Latin-American styles, and is African in origin.
- The bass line anticipates the strong beat in bar 5.
- Elsewhere it places the root of the chord on the fourth crotchet beat.
- The cuatro solo varies the rhythmic divisions of the beat by including triplet crotchets as well as quavers and syncopations.
- Each vocal phrase begins on the second crotchet of the bar, while the fourth bar always uses three 'straight' crotchets to anchor the rhythm to the beat briefly.