

## The History and Development of the Cajon

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The cajon has recently become one of the most prevalent world percussion instruments in popular music. From recreationalist to professionals, the cajon has found its way into homes and studios worldwide. Though it has had a humble past, this instrument now comes in many shapes and sizes, which allow it to adapt to many musical genres.

The cajon is a six-sided box that is considered a creation of the Americas, with a long ancestry of wooden drums deriving from Africa.<sup>1</sup> The lineage of African drums in South America comes from the slave trade that started in 1521.<sup>2</sup> The drums that migrated to the coastal cities in South America served religious purposes, and were soon banned due to racial discrimination.<sup>3</sup> However, when slavery in Peru ended in 1856, these African instruments started being used by Peruvians as documented by Peruvian painter, Ignacio Merino.<sup>4</sup> In the late 1800's, Cuban and Peruvian port cities, which were predominately populated by former slaves, would accumulate both large and small wooden shipping crates full of bacalao and candles.<sup>5</sup> Dockworkers would play on these crates with their hands to create different sounds; consequently making them serve as the first versions of the cajon. These crates became very convenient musical instruments in Havana, Matanzas, and Pisco because they were cheap, and readily available. Also, the port cities that discovered the first cajon were relatively poor and lacked drum-making materials, so the cajon can be viewed as a creation of necessity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nolan Warden, "Afro-Cuban Traditional Music and Transculturation: The Emergence of Cajón pa' los Muertos," VDM Verlag Dr. Muller, 2007, Saarbrücken: 67.

<sup>2</sup> Héctor Morales and Alessandra Brivio. *The Afro-Peruvian Percussion Ensemble: From the Cajon to the Drum Set*. Petaluma, CA: Sher Music Co, 2012, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Guerra Fuentes, Jesús Gómez, and Grisel Gómez. *Cultos Afrocubanos: Un Estudio Etnolingüístico*. La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 1996. Web.

<sup>4</sup> Héctor Morales and Alessandra Brivio. *The Afro-Peruvian Percussion Ensemble: From the Cajon to the Drum Set*. Petaluma, CA: Sher Music Co, 2012, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Warden.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Schweitzer. *The Artistry of Afro-Cuban Batá Drumming: Aesthetics, Transmission, Bonding, and Creativity*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. Web.

Though the initial function of the cajon served a purely secular purpose, this instrument became integrated into ceremonies for Santería in the early 1900's.<sup>7</sup> Because of racial and religious discrimination against African slaves in South America, those who would conduct ceremonies of Santería would be persecuted.<sup>8</sup> Drums were confiscated during the migration of these African slaves so they could not perform their traditions ceremonies. Being that bata drums were a large part of ceremonies of Santería, their use was greatly reduced after persecution began.<sup>9</sup> The cajon became a suitable substitution for the bata drums to avoid discrimination because it was a 'Mulatto' instrument, meaning it had less African lineage.<sup>10</sup> The substitution of cajon for bata drums also came with certain unintended benefits. Because of the low cost of the cajon ensembles, their popularity quickly increased, which helped spread the popularity of this instrument. The cajon also had a less sacred function as compared to bata, so moderately religious people were more comfortable hiring such ensembles.<sup>11</sup> Cajon ceremonies also came with no pre-ceremony rituals, further cutting cost and reducing inherent religious obligations.<sup>12</sup> The functions of Cajon al Muerto ceremonies were to heal sickness, break unlucky streaks, and to honor the spirits of the deceased. Though these ceremonies had strong ties to religion, a secondary function was to bring people together, allowing for the cajon to remain in both sacred and secular music simultaneously.<sup>13</sup>

The first model of the cajon that was created for purely musical purposes was made of hardwoods such as cedar around 1950.<sup>14</sup> As this instrument evolved in Cuba in the early 1950's, rattles were placed inside of the cajon to create a buzzing sound. Lazaro Pedroso even invented a cajon that is played across the lap much like a

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<sup>7</sup> John Amira and Steven Cornelius. *The Music of Santería: Traditional Rhythms of the Batá Drums*. Crown Point, IN: White Cliffs Media Co., 1992. Web.

<sup>8</sup> Heidi Feldman. *Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2006. Web.

<sup>9</sup> Amira and Cornelius.

<sup>10</sup> Warden.

<sup>11</sup> Feldman.

<sup>12</sup> Warden.

<sup>13</sup> Schweitzer.

<sup>14</sup> Warden.

bata drum.<sup>15</sup> This instrument became popular in the 1960's because performers were able to avoid religious persecution during traditional Santeria ceremonies such as Cajon al Muerto.

1950 to 1970 is known as the Afro-Peruvian Revival, with prominent artists such as Nicomedes Santa Cruz, Victoria Santa Cruz, and Jose Durand forming groups that typified the modern Afro-Peruvian ensemble. In particular, the work of Nicodemus Santa Cruz is important because of his efforts to preserve and develop Afro-Peruvian music and culture.<sup>16</sup> His group, Cumanana, is responsible for consolidating these ensembles, which allowed instruments like the cajon to later migrate to different musical genres such as flamenco, jazz, and pop.

In the 1970's, Spanish flamenco guitarist Paco de Lucia and Brazilian percussionist Rubem Dantas discovered the cajon, which led to the migration of the cajon to flamenco music. These men altered the Peruvian cajon by placing a guitar string against the back of the playing surface to create a 'snare' sound.<sup>17</sup> This buzzing sound is the predominant difference between Cuban, Peruvian, and Flamenco cajons. Peruvian cajones do not typically have a 'snare' sound, Cuban cajones sometimes have a 'snare' sound, and Flamenco cajones always have a 'snare' sound.<sup>18</sup>

The cajon has proven to be a useful, reliable, and adaptable instrument in the last century. Because of its ability to change timbre very easily, this instrument has become a favorite of many drumset artists, world percussionists, and recreational musicians for soft acoustic settings. As more and more manufacturers produce cajones, new innovations have quickly been developed. With this progress, the cajon may become a standard part of the percussionist's repertoire.

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<sup>15</sup> Warden.

<sup>16</sup> Héctor Morales and Alessandra Brivio. *The Afro-Peruvian Percussion Ensemble: From the Cajon to the Drum Set*. Petaluma, CA: Sher Music Co, 2012, 7.

<sup>17</sup> David Kuckhermann "Cajon Flamenco," <<http://www.framedrums.net/instruments/cajon-flamenco/>>.

<sup>18</sup> Kuckhermann.

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