

## THE GUIRO – A FRUIT INSTRUMENT



Latin America is home to many different types of musical instruments. Several of these instruments have entered the music of other world cultures as well. Some of the most interesting Latin American instruments are in the percussion family and include; the Bongo and Conga drums, the Maracas and the Claves, which are a pair of round wooden, sticks that are tapped. The guiro however, is probably the most unique percussion instrument, as it is made from a fruit, which grows from the vine of the güira and can be found in the tropical zones of the Americas.

The fruit that the güira produces is elongated and cylindrical. When it ripens, it curves slightly and extends from 12 to 18 inches in length. After the fruit matures, the fruit is picked and set to dry. In a few weeks the bark dries and a hard shell is formed. There are many ways to remove the seeds and pulp from the gourd. The most commonly used technique is to make two holes on the back of the fruit and scrape out the shell until it is completely clean. These holes allow the sound to escape and also serve as finger holes for the player to hold the güiro. After one or two more weeks of drying, the gourd is ready for serrating. This is done using a hacksaw blade or file. The grooves are cut 1/8th of an inch deep and approximately five inches long across the front of the gourd. They are set parallel, with about 1/4-inch separation from each other. This ensures uniformity of sound when the surface is scraped with a small stick or wire fork.

The type of sound produced by the güiro depends on the thickness of the shell, the type of scraping implement used, and by the pressure applied by the player as he scrapes the surface. A thin shell scraped lightly with a wire fork will produce a light, bright tone, and a thick shell scraped with a stick will produce a deep tone. However, performers usually use a wooden stick. The güiro is nevertheless generally easy to play and does not require any tuning.

The güiro is one of the oldest Latin American folk instruments, and is used to accompany folk songs, religious music and popular tunes. Its ancestry dates back to ancient times when cavemen made scrapers from serrated bones, shells and stones. The exact time period of the instrument's development however remains unknown. Nevertheless, it is a well - known fact that the Arawak people took it with them from South America to the Caribbean islands and it was there when Christopher Columbus arrived. The Spaniards upon their arrival in the Caribbean islands discovered that the native Taino' dances and songs were accompanied by scrapers and rattles. Just after the Africans came to the New World they had to reinvent their percussion instruments, using the materials available to them in their new setting. The fusion of the two cultures produced the scrapers known today as güiros and the rattles we call maracas. During colonial times, the güiro was the only form of accompaniment to the guitar. As a result, it is heard in early recordings of danzas, criollas and mazurcas. The güiro later provided counter-rhythms along with other percussion instruments as big orchestras became more popular.

In Puerto Rico, the güiro is an integral part of the rhythmic background for Puerto Rican Danza music and symphonic orchestras. There is even a complete industry developed around the instrument. In two small towns on the island of Puerto Rico, artisans grow the gourds and manufacture the instruments according to very special specifications. The town of Peñuelas, near the southern coast, and the city of Ponce are known as the "Capitals of the Güiro." Las Piedras, on the eastern zone of the island and near the city of Humacao, has been called the "Land of the Güiro." and produces the largest number of güiros in Puerto Rico. There are several acres planted with the gourd

vines, and thousands of güiros are harvested. The fruit that grows in Las Piedras is brownish in color and produces a deep sound that can be heard at a distance.

In Cuba, the güiro is an essential part of the charanga band instrumentation. A number of celebrated güireros have performed with those bands. For example: Cecilio Vergara with Belisario López; Jesús Pelegrín and Gustavo Tamayo with Arcaño and José Palma Cuesta with Orquesta Aragón. Similarly, in the small town of Peñuelas, they have made a science out of the production of güiros. The area is combines an agricultural laboratory and a musical academy, where special seeds, as well as new methods of execution are developed. The güiros from Peñuelas are yellow and produce a soft, sharp tone. This refined sound is thought to be more appropriate for recording studios and concert halls.

Notwithstanding the humble beginnings of the percussion instrument, the güiro has an intriguing past and a respectable present. Over the centuries, the rudimentary instrument has undergone tremendous development which is evidenced by the presence of an electronic güiro today. Another modern type of guiro is made of metal and is called a *guayo*, meaning "grater" (like a cheese grater) as well as the *cacho*, from El Salvador, which is quite similar to the fruit instrument, except that it is made from an animal horn. The Bantij music in Africa also uses a device very similar to its Latin American counterpart. This exceptional instrument has also been given several names, depending on the region where it is played. In the Caribbean zone, it has been called güiro, *calabazo*, *guayo*, *güicharo* and *charrasca*.

© The Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish, 2007

**For more information about the Spanish As the First Foreign Language (SAFFL) initiative, please contact the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish (A Division of the Ministry of Trade and Industry) Riverside Plaza, Besson Street, Port of Spain. You can contact the Secretariat at 623-2931-4 or [spanishsecretariat@gmail.com](mailto:spanishsecretariat@gmail.com).**