Tumbao, from Sinfonia No. 3, *La Salsa* by Roberto Sierra I. (1953 - Present)
*Lesson plan by Kate Ferris Richardson*

Click here to watch the BSO perform this piece.

About the Composer

Roberto Sierra was born on October 9, 1953, in Vega Baja, Puerto Rico. He studied and taught music composition in both Puerto Rico and in Europe. One of his European teachers was Ligeti, a famous avant-garde composer. Sierra is currently one of the most frequently performed American composers and his writing style incorporates jazz, Afro-Caribbean, and Latin American music with European classical music forms. Sierra’s piece *Júbilo* was premiered at Carnegie Hall in New York by the Milwaukee Symphony in 1987. The BSO first performed Sierra’s work in 2012 (*Fandangos*) and as recently as the 2019 season (Concerto for Saxophones and Orchestra). Sierra has been nominated for and won many awards, including Academy Awards, Grammys, and the Tomás Luis de Victoria Prize (2017), the highest honor given in Spain to a composer of Spanish or Latin American origin. He teaches music composition at Cornell University in upstate New York.

About the Composition

“As the title of my work implies (“La Salsa”), this symphony is about the music of the Spanish speaking Caribbean: Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Cuba. In the true spirit of salsa music (*salsa* means “sauce” in English), I mix diverse types of older and newer rhythms from the music I remember growing up in Puerto Rico. The first movement is in actual Sonata-Allegro form. The different themes evoke the piano riffs (or *tumbaos*, as in the subtitle I gave the movement), heard in many salsa pieces. The second and third movements (*Habanera* and *Danzas*) evoke older music. The habanera is the rhythm that during the 19th century traveled from the coasts of Havana to Europe, and the danza is the main music form used in Puerto Rico during the same period. The symphony closes with a *jolgorio*. This word was used traditionally to describe a happy celebration, and in the movement I use the lively rhythm of two different types of rhythmic patterns of Afro-Caribbean origins: the merengue from the Dominican Republic and the piena from Puerto Rico.” “I wanted to write a piece that takes off from the riffs of the salsa. I’m drawing on the vernacular. Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn—they all did that. It’s nothing new.” —Roberto Sierra

(Source: Wind Repertoire Project)
Teaching Ideas

Salsa: The History
Salsa is a modern form of music born in New York City from various Afro-Caribbean styles; the Cuban son montuno, rumba, bomba, and plena fused with the harmonies of jazz, R&B, blues, funk, and soul. The big band era had a huge influence on the development and commercialization of Caribbean music but salsa kept its urban roots, reflecting the experiences of the postwar Spanish Caribbean migration. After World War II, Caribbean brass bands were the favored instrumental format for festivities in the Puerto Rican neighborhoods of New York City, producing the combo instrumental format that we hear in salsa today. Famous salsa musicians include Willie Colón, Héctor Lavoe, Ray Barretto, and Tito Puente.

Salsa: The Rhythms
Salsa music is driven by the rhythmic structure of the tumbao and the beat of the son clave. Percussion is highlighted in this genre with congas, timbales, bongos, maracas, guiro, claves, tambourines, and cowbells. See the Salsa Rhythms sheet on the next page to explore this style with your students.

Salsa: The Dance
Salsa dancing developed into a particular style in the 1940s and comes from a tradition of Latin dance styles that dates back to the early 1900s. As people moved to new locations and assimilated into new cultures, salsa dancing evolved into fresh styles. Some of today's most popular forms of salsa include styles influenced by the cultures of Cuba, New York, Puerto Rico, and Los Angeles.

Additional Resources

Explore Latinx Classical Music:

https://www.npr.org/sections/altlatino/2016/05/19/478227143/alt-latino-goes-classical-orchestral-music-from-latin-america
http://latinomusicfest.org
http://www.latinorchestralmusic.com

Learn Salsa dance steps:

https://youtu.be/cLojiIqUBpM

Audio/Visual resources

https://www.robertosierra.com/audio/audio.html

2:3 Salsa

https://www.libertyparkmusic.com/salsa-drum-rhythms/

3:2 Salsa
https://scphillips.com/dance/salsarhythm.html
Basic Salsa Rhythms

Clave (claves)

The clave is a 2 bar pattern that repeats throughout the entire song.

Montuno (piano)

A montuno is a vamp or riff that repeats for the entire song and outlines the chord progression. Because Latin bands can have many instruments, the montuno is often played two handed and doubled an octave apart to create a louder sound.
Tumbao (congas, bass, piano)

Tumbao, the bass line in salsa, creates the feel of music, allowing all the elements to come together to make something unique. It is the heartbeat of the song. Tumbao roughly translates into "groove or "swing". The tumbao has two distinct parts; the bombó on the upbeat of beat 2, and the ponché which falls on beat 4. The combination of the bombó and the ponché are the important main ingredients of the tumbao.

The tumbao alternates between the fifth and the root of a chord. One side of the tumbao will be in near unison with the clave, while the other side is syncopated against the clave.

The tumbao bass line glues the piano montuno to the conga tumbao. It provides the rhythmic integrity against the tension of the syncopation. If there is no bass player, the pianist is responsible for playing both the tumbao (left hand) and montuno (right hand).