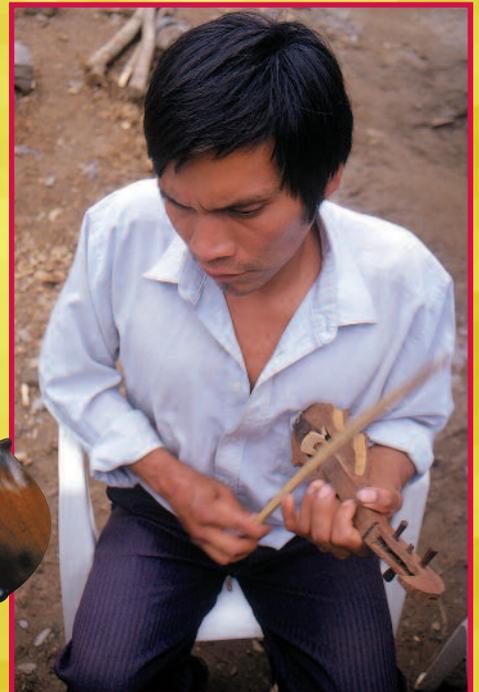




*Among Sones and Huapangos  
Music and Fiestas in  
The Huastec Region*

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The Huastec region's development has been intimately linked to the effervescence of ceremonial life. The celebrations follow each other one after another, relatively subtly, linked together like a rosary of flowers. The fluidity of day-to-day time is thus interrupted by small festive knots. The communities finger each flowery bead to make sure of its precise location in time and space, and so remember the roads traveled and prepare future actions. The fiesta is a solution of continuity of secular time; it is then that music and dance

erupt with great force in the events of daily life. The sounds of the instruments, the songs, the movements of the bodies, the alcoholic beverages, the food and everything implied in being "*de fiesta*", partying, warp reality with the power of transfiguring it.

The Huastec region's musical system is bounteous, diverse and changing. It is related to a large degree to the system of dance, though they mutually determine each other so much that in some cases the borders between the two blur. Music and dance make up a basic unit linked mainly to the cycles of fiestas, to agricultural ceremonies, to rites of passage and healing practices. In general, these arts are a vital component in the region's communities, making up an important part of the cultural scenery, as well as being diacritical elements of the Huastec identity. Given the great diversity of musical

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expressions in the area, in this article we will deal with only a few examples.

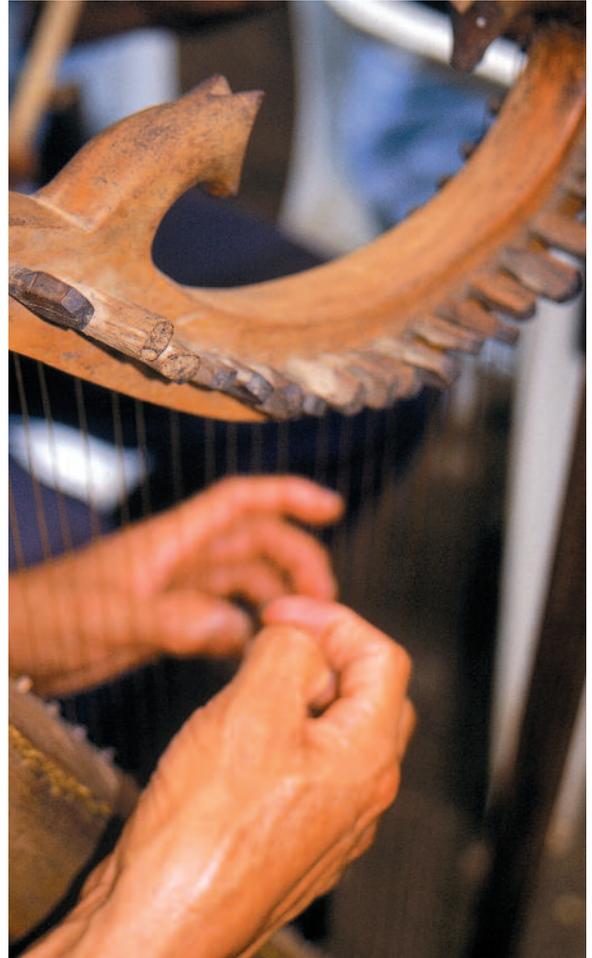
#### THE HUAPANGO FIESTA

In the Huasteca, the *son*, also called the *huapango*, has been characteristic of regional music and dance. It is linked to the popular fiesta also known as the *huapango* in which people congregate around a moveable platform or dais where participants tap-dance, beating out a rhythmic sound accompanied to the strains of the violin, creating songs like the “Petenera,” “Cielito Lindo,” “Apasionado,” and “Malagueña.” In many indigenous communities, the dance is performed directly on an earthen floor that has been watered and swept, where the women’s bare feet seem to caress the ground. The pairs of dancers follow

the *son*’s itinerary: they alternate vigorous tapping during the musical interlude with “changes” or shuffling during the couplets. The *huapango* is danced to conclude the effervescence of patron saint fiestas or to enliven weddings and birthday parties.

Among the elements that create the specific *huapango* sound is the Huastec trio, made up of a violin, a *jarana* and a *huapanguera*.<sup>1</sup> Another is the style of singing, which is somewhat nasal, and the use of the falsetto, which consists of a breaking voice used to sing very high. This style makes the voice a melodic coronet to ornament the stanzas.

Some *sones* have specific *trovos*, or four-to-six-line couplets, usually developing the theme indicated by the song’s title. Also, some lyrics can be used for different tunes. In addition to the couplets of specific *sones* and those that can be used in different *hua-*



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*pangos*, the lyrics are enriched by improvisation, so the performers are not only singers, but poets. Themes vary, although in general they tend to describe different aspects of the Huastec region: the flora, the fauna, local topography, customs and production, but undoubtedly love continues to be the favorite theme.

#### SAINTS DAY FIESTAS

The music for the different dances constitutes another of the region's faces. Mostly associated with the Huasteca's indigenous cultures, the dances are performed during saints day fiestas because people think that the patron saints are pleased by these artistic offerings. On the eve of the festi-

val of this or that saint or virgin, the groups of dancers and their musicians meet in the church to "accompany the little saint," playing and dancing. This accompaniment usually lasts all night, and the participants' sacrifice consists of enduring the exhaustion and is one of the most precious offerings that can be made to the deities.

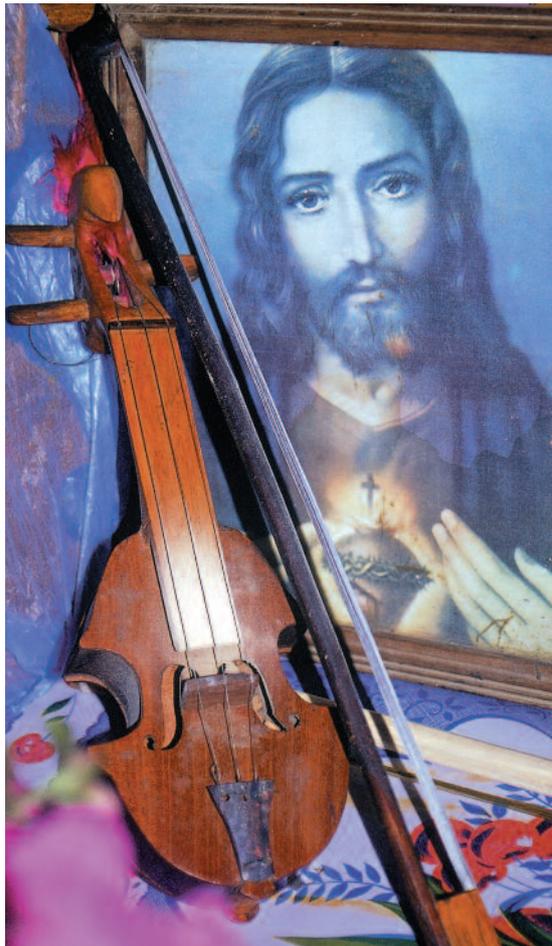
The dance music expresses a cyclical conception of time through the reiteration of melodic structures. After several hours of playing and dancing, the melodic repetition and the stridency produced by the different ensembles gathered together, the fireworks and the general murmuring of the participants contribute to creating a collective catharsis that makes the experience of the sacred possible.

To give a general idea of the great variety of dances and music in the Huastec

region, we will list some of them, grouping them by the instruments they use. The dances that are played by the Huastec trio are the “Three Colors,” the “Xochitines,” “The Shawl,” the “Chul,” the “Montezón,” the “Matlachines,” the “Cuanegros” and the “Indian Women”, among others. A group made up of a flute and a percussion instrument has several variations: 1) a three-holed flute and a square two-headed drum played by a single musician who accompanies the dance called “Varitas” or “Cuaxompiates”; 2) a small, slender, three-holed flute and a small, round, double-headed drum that accompanies the “Dance of the Flyers,” also known as the “Sparrow-Hawk,” the “Bisom Tiu” or the “Putaswiwiyu”.<sup>2</sup> This dance is done around a 25- or 30-meter high pole from the top of which the dancers descend, hanging from ropes tied around their waists. The musician plays the *sones* dancing on top of a small circle at the top of the “flying pole”; 3) a flute with a *mirlitón*, or a thin, vibrating membrane stretched over one of the holes, apparently of pre-Hispanic origin, played by itself or accompanied by a double-reeded idiophone commonly known as a *teponaztle*. This combination of instruments is used for the dances called “Nakubson,” “El tigrillo” and “The Ruckus.”

There are two kinds of harps in the Huasteca: a small one used for the “tzacamson” or “ayacaxtini” dance<sup>3</sup> accompanied by one or several *rabeles* (an instrument descended from the predecessors of today’s violin, also called a *rebec*) and a small *jarana*; and a large harp played with a violin for the “pulisson” dance or a half *jarana* for the “Montezumas” or “Moctezumas” dance.<sup>4</sup>

A violin played with a guitar is also common in the Huastec region and is used to accompany the “Little Negroes” dance, which depicts a legend about a group of Negro slaves, or *tocotines*, and the conquest



of Mexico, and “Toreadors”, which portrays work on the haciendas.

#### AGRICULTURAL FIESTAS

The music played for agricultural rituals is considered a prayer offered up to the deities of the land, generically called “Lords of the Earth,” and to corn in its different mythical forms. The names of this musical genre vary from place to place, but the most common ones are “custom *sones*”, “*xochitlsones*” or “*canarios*.” The instruments played are those of the Huastec trio, although in some communities a small harp is used or a flute with *mirlitón* and a *teponaztle*. The direct contact with the deities of the land makes both the music and the instruments

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sacred, which is why they are also used for therapy.<sup>5</sup>

#### CARNIVAL AND XANTOLO

Despite Carnival and Xantolo, or All Saints Day, being two different celebrations, they have certain similarities.<sup>6</sup> They both display a diversity of music and dance, but we can say that what most characterizes them is the different old men's masquerades, among them the "Huehues," the "Huehuenches," the "Coles," the "Xoxos," "The Comanches" and the "Mecos". These usually feature dancers disguised to represent the souls of the ancestors who return to the world of the living. These dances are both playful and sexual; they often constitute discourses on the basis of which the communities express their criticisms of local, national and even international events. The music that accompanies these masquerades is generally called "Old Men's *Sones*" for Xantolo, and "Carnival *Sones*" for the fiestas before Lent. The "Vinuetes" deserve special mention: they are a genre of instrumental music played during Xantolo to welcome the blessed souls of departed relatives.<sup>7</sup> The "Vinuetes," the "Old Men's *Sones*" and the "Carnival *Sones*" are all usually played by a Huastec trio.

This brief article has attempted to present a general panorama of music in the Huastec region to motivate the reader to delve into this fascinating and complex topic. ■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Huastec *jarana* is a kind of little, five-single-string guitar; and the *huapanguera*, also called the

*quinta* guitar, has five sets of strings, two single and three double. For information about the instruments and how they are tuned, see Guillermo Contreras, *Atlas cultural de México* (Mexico City: SEP/INAH/Plañeta, 1988) and Gonzalo Camacho, "El sistema musical de la Huasteca hidalguense. El caso de Tepetitla," J. Jáuregui and M. Olavarria, comps., *Cultura y comunicación. Edmund Leach in Memoriam* (Mexico City: CIESAS/UAM Iztapalapa, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> In the Teenek language *bisom tiu* means "dance of the sparrow-hawk." Guy Srtesser-Pean, "Los orígenes del palo volador y del comelagatoazte," Lorenzo Ochoa, ed., *Huastecos y totonacos. Una antología histórico-cultural* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes/Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo, 1989). In mountain region Totonaco, *putaswiviyu* means "a fixed, twisted object that turns." Alan Ichon, *La religión de los totonacos de la sierra* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista/SEP, 1973).

<sup>3</sup> In Teenek, *tzacamson* means "little dance", and in Nahuatl, *ayacastini* is the name for the maracas the dancers play.

<sup>4</sup> In Teenek, *pulitson* means "big dance."

<sup>5</sup> For more information about therapeutic practices, see Gonzalo Camacho, "A small harp accompanies 'dance of the little rattlers'. The traditional indigenous healing dance of the Huastec region of San Luis Potosí," *The Harp Therapy Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2 (summer 1997).

<sup>6</sup> See Amparo Sevilla, *De Carnaval a Xantolo: contacto con el inframundo* (Mexico City: Ediciones del Programa de Desarrollo Cultural de la Huasteca/Conaculta, 2002), and Gonzalo Camacho and María Eugenia Jurado, *Xantolo: el retorno de los muertos* (bachelor's thesis in ethnology, National School of Anthropology and History, Mexico City, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Other names for *vinuetes* are *minuets* and *minuetes*. See Lizette Alegre, *El vinuete: música de muertos. Estudio etnomusicológico en una comunidad nahua de la Huasteca potosina* (bachelor's thesis in ethnomusicology, UNAM National School of Music, 2004).

