



What is Chôro?

by Marilyn Mair

Chôro is a style of Brazilian popular music that originated in the late 19th century and is still performed today. Chôro pre-dates samba and bossa nova as a national music style, and developed from Brazilian performers interpreting European dance music with African-influenced rhythms. At first chôro was an unwritten performance practice, but it soon developed into a genre of instrumental music, usually in 2/4 meter and rondo form, marked by characteristic syncopation and harmonic modulations. Chôro today is a written music that involves a degree of rhythmic improvisation, variation and ornamentation in performance.

Chôro has been played in a wide variety of instrumentations since its birth. The original chôro group, called a “terno,” was a trio of flute and two guitars. During the 1920’s chôro was influenced by Dixieland ensembles and performed in larger bands including trumpets, saxophones, trombones, and string bass, in addition to flute, guitar, and native percussion. Today, traditional chôro ensembles, known as conjuntos, usually include 5 or 6 players. The melody is typically played by a bandolim, the Brazilian mandolin, or a flute or clarinet. Two violões, a type of Brazilian guitar, are usually included, a 6-string that plays a rhythmic accompaniment based on written chord symbols, and a 7-string that improvises a bass-line. The cavaquinho, a small guitar-shaped instrument similar to the ukulele, is used as a high rhythm instrument, and sometimes also plays the melody. The pandeiro, a tambourine-like hand drum, is the main rhythm instrument and is played in a steady accented sixteenth-note pattern. Solo chôro are also written, combining elements from the various lines of the conjunto into written scores for piano or classical guitar. There is wide variation in instrumentation for contemporary chôro performance, from duos to large groups, some including electric instruments.

Originally chôro conjuntos were social organizations whose private parties and jam sessions would occur almost spontaneously in neighborhood homes and cafes. Chôro players, as they are called, were highly respected musicians since chôro music is quite virtuosic, but they generally played in exchange for food and drink and earned their living by other means. There is an almost spiritual quality attached to chôro performance, and many players feel it is the most deeply Brazilian of all the national music styles. Today the chôro community is far less pervasive in Brazil, as MPB, Brazilian popular music, has continued to evolve, and traditional chôro conjuntos are often considered formal and old-fashioned. But contemporary chôro groups are modernizing the genre, extemporizing on traditional

forms and writing new pieces. Brazilian jazz and pop musicians, revisiting the musical roots of their youth, are also playing and recording chôro, presenting it to a new audience. The world music boom of the 1990’s has introduced chôro to a global market as well, and it is increasingly popular outside of Brazil, both with audiences and performers. As we start the 21st century, chôro is enjoying a revival, reinventing itself through new performers at home and abroad, and finding a new audience and a new community.

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In the pages of this issue you will find an article on the history of chôro, an overview of the involvement of the mandolin in chôro, the music for three early pieces by chôro pioneers, and an annotated guide to books and CDs of chôro music, including information on where you can obtain copies of your own. Later this spring I will be assembling all my chôro information on the internet, as part of my webpage: www.UncommonStrings.com. If anyone has further information on chôro or chôro resources they’d like to bring to my attention, please contact me through *Mandolin Quarterly*, or by email at mail@UncommonStrings.com.