



## Review

Bellaviti, Sean. *Música Típica: Cumbia and the Rise of Musical Nationalism in Panama*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

**CHRISTINE WISCH**  
**Indiana University**

From its opening pages, Sean Bellaviti's *Música Típica: Cumbia and the Rise of Musical Nationalism in Panama* asserts itself as a pioneering work that brings to light a popular form of music ubiquitous in Panama yet largely unheard beyond the country's borders and equally unknown in scholarship. As with so many studies of Latin American music, the constructions of the nation and of a national musical style are the core issues addressed by this book. Over the course of seven chapters, Bellaviti provides a multi-faceted approach to understanding the socio-cultural framework of the Panamanian nation and the complicated power structures governing the relationship between it and *música típica*. Ultimately, Bellaviti argues that the popularity of *música típica* and the formation of musical nationalism in Panama were concomitant, with the two processes mutually reinforcing each other. In doing so, he carefully balances historical research with ethnographic fieldwork that together uncover interactions within a complex and multi-layered musical network of musicians, dancers, producers, folklorists, and political figures, all invested in cultivating and identifying this music as their own.

Acutely aware of the limited knowledge a general reader may possess about Panama beyond its location and canal, Bellaviti invites readers into the world of *música típica* in a way that requires no previous expertise and welcomes a variety of backgrounds. In the book's introduction, we join Bellaviti as he relates his own path to understanding what this music is and what this music is called and how it is known within Panama—an interrelated set of questions that form the core of the book. What may appear to be a simple question—what is this music called?—is actually the subject of intense and ongoing debates within Panama, which Bellaviti carefully unpacks and explains: in Latin America, “*música típica*” (literally “typical” music) most often refers to “musics that are tied to tradition” and “thought to have a very strong connection to their particular region of origin” (3). Within Panama, however, “*música típica* can denote one particular music, which is marked by its characteristic rhythms and fixed instrumentation, its popularity among social dancers, and the fact that it is performed by bands that lead a life on the road that calls for virtually nonstop travel and takes them to every corner of the country (3).” As Bellaviti realizes upon his arrival in Panama, the operative word in this description is *can*, for the locals assume he wishes to investigate traditional and vernacular musics, as they have been historically the focus of scholarship. In efforts to better explain the music he seeks to study, at the suggestion of a folklorist, he adopts the word “*pindín*,” but he soon discovers the negative connotations of this word and ultimately resorts to calling the music “the music you hear everywhere on the radio” (5). Bellaviti returns to the problems of terminology in Chapter 7, emphasizing its current relevance, by detailing a 2017 legislative proposal in Panama's National Assembly to recognize “*pindín*” as the appropriate term for the music and dance genre in question and the subsequent backlash the proposal spawned. Here, Bellaviti explains both the historical and contemporary usage of the term “*pindín*” and its mixed connotations. The

book's title, *Música Típica: Cumbia and the Rise of Musical Nationalism in Panama*, thus sensitively identifies the music in question in a way that recognizes its historical and stylistic relationship to the the musical genre and folk dances known as cumbia and its connection to constructions of Panamanian national identity.

Like the writing itself, the book's chapters flow logically and ensure the reader's success by beginning with foundational material in Chapter 1 before moving to a historical overview of the development of *música típica* and later chapters that address the ethnographic present. The first chapter offers a short history of Panama, focusing on the stages of nationalism and nation-building projects in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with significant discussion of the role of liberalism, particularly in the wake of the construction of the canal. Central to this discussion of cultural nationalism is what Bellaviti identifies as a dynamic "folkloric project," which shaped notions of Panamanian culture and identity through associations of *hispanidad* with the rural interior, prompting later concerns by folklorists to preserve what was understood as traditional and protect against the perceived threat of cosmopolitan influences. Here, the author sets up one of the primary themes that runs throughout his study: the ability of *música típica* to adapt to changing tastes and technologies while remaining connected to the region.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 trace the origins and development of *música típica* from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. Although the chapters together form a seamless history of the genre's expansion, they are different in their scope and aims. Chapter 2 establishes the deep connection between *música típica* and the Azuero peninsula, focusing on the important role this music played in the daily lives of the rural poor and the environments in which this music was performed. A discussion of common song themes demonstrated through analyses of lyrics reinforces the topical connection of the songs to the Azuerense people. In this chapter, Bellaviti not only traces the standardization of instruments and singers but also articulates the formal characteristics of *música típica*, identifying rhythmic and harmonic patterns in a way that makes clear the musical connections shared between *música típica* and its cumbia and danzón relatives. Chapter 3 focuses on the effects of commercialization, taking the 1940s as its point of departure and tracing the genre's increasing popularity amidst changes in instrumentation. It is here that Bellaviti's argument is perhaps most clearly and easily observed, as he reveals the symbiotic relationship between *música típica* and Panamanian folklorists. The strength of this observation in this chapter is, however, perhaps overshadowed by Bellaviti's careful and comprehensive documentation of changes in instrumentation and visual appearance among *conjuntos* (musical groups) during this era. Chapter 4 continues the discussion of the historical trajectory of the genre, documenting the influence of new technologies such as electro-acoustic instruments and sound systems while also highlighting the role of dancers and fans of the genre in securing its cultural importance. Between discussions of innovations and their effects, Bellaviti pauses to describe the functions of the conjunto's seven parts—vocals, accordion, timbales, conga, churruca, bass, and guitar—and to provide detailed descriptions (with frequent rhythmic transcriptions) of musical characteristics and subgenres of *música típica* as they are at the end of this historical trajectory. Here Bellaviti's thoroughness and attention to musical detail shine, as he works his way meticulously through descriptions of rhythms and ostinati, harmonic patterns, percussion techniques, formal structures, articulations, and composite grooves. The presentation and explanation of these musical elements are nuanced and provide the foundation necessary for appreciating and assessing distinctive conjunto styles.

With the historical arch completed and the musical foundation laid, Chapters 5, 6, and 7 turn their attention to the ethnographic present, documenting the lives of performing conjunto musicians, furthering discussion of individual musical style, and acknowledging contemporary challenges to performing and discussing this music respectively. Chapter 5 provides a unique insight into the day-to-day activities of professional musicians, addressing a wide range of topics from travel logistics and personal relationships to common characteristics of a baile and its patrons. Chapter 6 returns to issues of musical style but addresses it in terms of a conjunto's need to develop a signature sound to gain acceptance. Here again, both interviews and transcriptions of rhythms and patterns articulate and demonstrate these musical nuances that are so essential to the music yet difficult to express in written form. In addition to addressing the aforementioned problems of terminology, the concluding chapter focuses on current challenges musicians face in performing and promoting this music both locally and to outsiders. The short epilogue, written in 2018, reminds the reader of the genre's relative obscurity beyond Panama but the promise this dynamic form holds for wider appreciation.

*Música Típica* showcases the vibrancy of this genre, and it demonstrates the agency of multiple participants from both historical and contemporary perspectives. The opening vignettes—short anecdotes drawn from the author's own experiences with the genre—create an immediacy that draws readers in. Bellaviti writes in a clear and engaging style that makes the work both enjoyable and accessible for specialists and non-specialists. The theoretical discussions are considerably few considering the scope of the book and the current penchant among many Latin Americanists to steep their work in critical theory and constructions of nationalism. Bellaviti draws on Anderson's definition of a nation as an "imagined community," noting its adaptability and wide usage among scholars and proceeding to offer a Panamanian case study that demonstrates its emphasis on social constructs. The novelty of Bellaviti's study—aside from its geographical consideration—is how he "challenges rigid bottom-up/top-down analyses of cultural nationalism and reveals the complex realities of the musical and social lives of popular musicians" (15).

The first book in the rapidly growing series of Currents in Latin America and Iberian music to focus entirely on a Central American musical tradition, *Música Típica* is a welcome and much-needed addition that boasts broad interdisciplinary appeal. The book's extensive discussions of musical style and generic characteristics make for an illuminating and rewarding read for ethnomusicologists and musicologists alike. Both technical and colloquial terms are consistently translated and described for readers. Bellaviti writes with detailed, descriptive elegance, and the ample photographs—the majority of which were taken by the author—are a welcome addition that not only capture the highly social nature of this art form but also illustrate concepts and practices that may be difficult for non-specialists to imagine such as timbale setups and mixers or the physicality of dancers. Cultural historians, anthropologists, and scholars interested in the relationship between artistic expressions and constructions of nationalism will also benefit from Bellaviti's work, as will scholars interested in processes of commercialization and exportation of musical styles and genres. Like *música típica* itself, this book is nuanced and complex and is a rewarding experience for a wide audience once discovered.

Wisch, Christine. "Review: Bellaviti, Sean. *Música Típica: Cumbia and the Rise of Musical Nationalism in Panama*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020." *Diagonal: An Ibero-American Music Review* 6, no. 3 (2021): 76–78.