



Edgardo Civallero

Traditional “violins” of Latin America

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1. Introduction

The many traditional forms of bowed string instruments, both Indigenous and Creole, found throughout Latin America descend from the small group of string instruments brought to the Americas by Europeans from the late sixteenth century onward, including *rabeles*, violas (or bowed *vihuelas*), and early violins. Working from a shared structural principle, a given number of strings stretched over a resonating body and sounded with a bow, and from a handful of broadly standardized playing positions, either upright on the knees or horizontally against the chest or shoulder, Latin American communities developed their own models, forms, and styles. These reflected the materials available to them, their own artistic experience, pre-existing elements, their musical cultures, and their preferred sounds.

2. Chile

Indigenous musical bows sounded with a bow are not included in this study (see Civallero, 2014). In many cases, they may be regarded as conceptual predecessors of present-day violins and *rabeles*, although not as structural or performance-related antecedents.

The Violin in Chile

The violin used in traditional Chilean music is based on the standard European model. Both standardized commercial instruments and a range of handcrafted varieties are played. The latter are not especially common today and are made by luthiers who often give each instrument a distinctive character reflecting the region in which they work.

The surviving craft tradition, heir to a long history of violin making, uses local woods such as *alerce* (*Larex sp.*), *coihue* (*Nothofagus dombeyi*), *ciruelillo* or *notro* (*Embothrium coccineum*), cypress, and hazel. Handcrafted instruments generally have a flatter body than



commercial violins and tend to be larger, which gives them a characteristic volume and timbre. Some parts, such as the tailpiece, locally known as the *tiracuerdas*, may be quite roughly fashioned or, at the other extreme, may be exquisite pieces of craftsmanship. The four strings, tuned in fifths, are now made of metal. In the past, however, Chiloé was also home to the celebrated violins known as *barraquitos*, which were strung with sheep gut.

Historical records show that the violin was used in Chile to perform several traditional rhythms from the north of the country, including the *cachimbo* (see Fuentes Gutiérrez, 2008) and the *huachi-torito* (see Claro Valdés, 1997). Accompanied by guitar and bass drum, it also carried the melodic line in every variety of *cueca* (Loyola and Cádiz, 2010).

Image 1 (prev. page).

Traditional violin from Chiloé.

[Photo: Portal Patrimonio de Chile | Flickr].

The instrument made on Chiloé, locally known as the *violín chilote*, has a highly distinctive structure and sound. It is used to perform old local dances such as the *periconá*, *cielito*, *nave*, and *trastasera*. Jesuit missionaries brought the violin to the island in the early seventeenth century, and Chiloé's geographical isolation allowed distinctive construction and performance practices to develop there. Claro Valdés (1997) suggests that the instrument may have been introduced by Father Luis Berger (1589-1639), a French priest whom the Jesuit historian Father Pedro Greñón identified as one of the principal promoters of systematic musical practice in the Spanish territories of the Southern Cone.

The violin is now losing ground within Chilean traditional music. Both its construction and its use by folk performers have declined markedly. A few pockets remain, fortunately, where it can still be heard. One is Chiloé, where the violin forms part of the ensembles known as *bandas de Cabildo*, together with guitar, accordion, transverse flute, bass drum, and snare drum. These ensembles play processional music during religious processions honour-



ing saints and the Virgin Mary (FIDMTC, n.d.).

The Chilean *Rabel*

The *rabel* was introduced into what is now Chile by the Spanish conquistadors. On the Iberian Peninsula, this bowed string instrument was, and in some areas remains, a pastoral chordophone made by the performers themselves and used primarily to accompany singing. Spanish varieties have wooden bodies of many different shapes and between one and three strings, traditionally made of gut, horsehair, or metal. They may be played upright, resting on the musician's knees, or horizontally, held against the chest or shoulder.

The variety that survived most widely in Chile was the three-string *rabel* (Radio Antumapu, 2011), played upright with a bow strung with horsehair or hair from a

black mule. It has a bridge connected to the soundpost and a strongly defined waist. Other forms also existed. In the eighteenth century, Friar Antonio Sors i Leonart mentioned "the *rabel* played by Indigenous [Mapuche] hands, with only one string" (Rondón Sepúlveda, 1982). In Cauquenes Province, Maule Region, makers used *raulí* (*Nothofagus alpina*) and cedar. In Ñuble Province, Biobío Region, and Valdivia Province, Los Ríos Region, they used *alerce*, hazel, *mañío* (*Podocarpus sp.*), walnut, *lingue* (*Persea lingue*), chestnut, and *canelo* (Lavín, 1955).

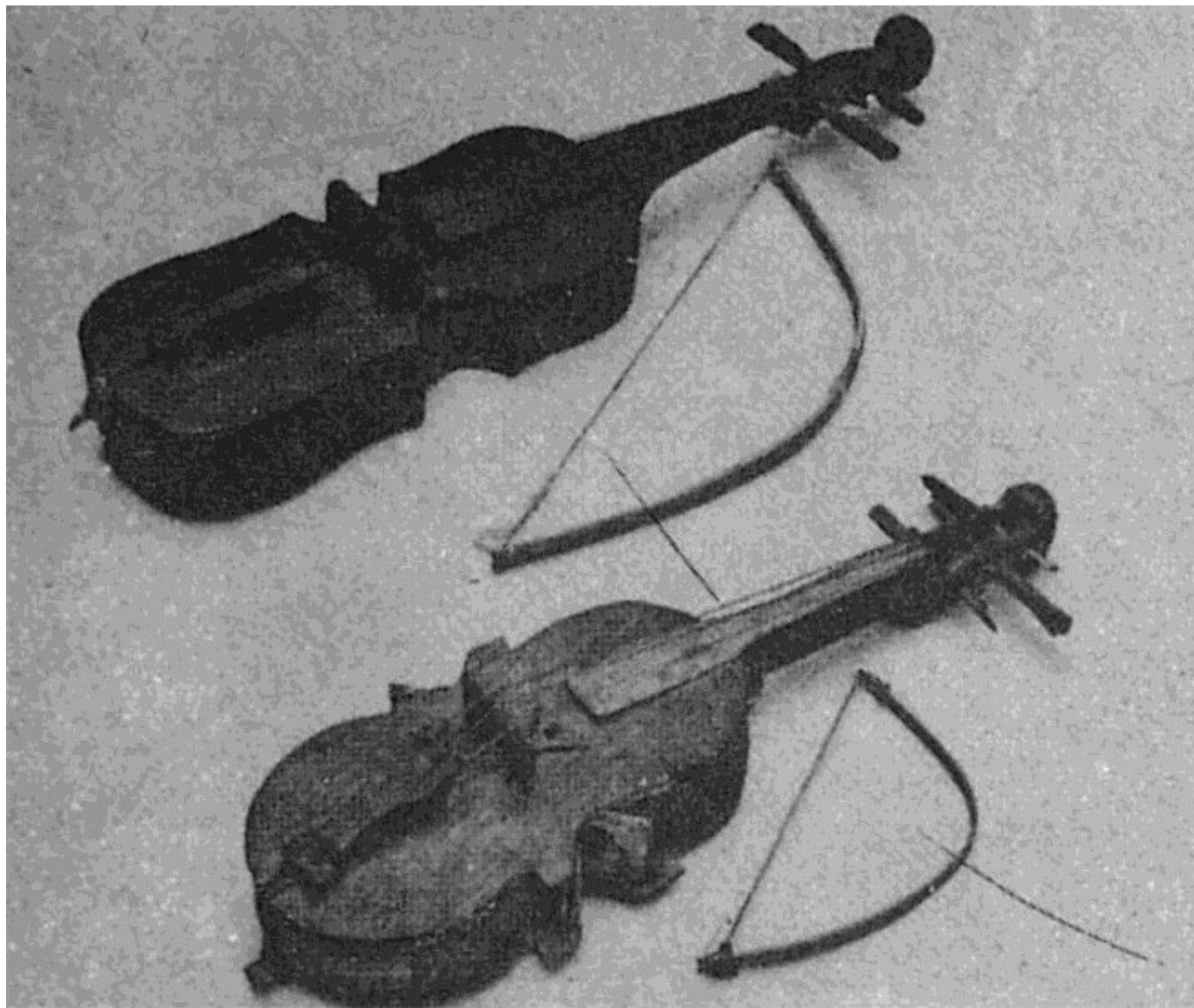
The earliest historical records place the instrument at the funeral of Catalina de los Ríos y Lisperguer, "La Quintrala," in 1665: "two *rabel* players and five singers attended the ceremony" (Rondón Sepúlveda, 1982). It was later mentioned frequently in chronicles and travel accounts and appears to have been highly valued by the popular musicians known as *rabelistos*.

Evidence for its historical presence in the Norte Chico remains tentative, particularly in mining settlements along the Choapa River in the province of the same

Image 2 (prev. page).

Traditional violin from Chiloé (detail).

[Photo: Portal Patrimonio de Chile | Flickr].



name, in the Coquimbo Region. Its presence on Chiloé is also disputed, since the island's traditional bowed instrument was the violin and the *rabel* may have arrived relatively late. There is no doubt, however, that its main area of distribution was central Chile, especially the inland valleys of Colchagua Province, O'Higgins Region, and the Coastal Range in Linares Province, Maule Region.

Lavín (1955) describes a golden age for the *rabel* in the late nineteenth century, when it accompanied songs and dances in rural areas and on the outskirts of cities such as Santiago. The instrument appears in several early twentieth-century chronicles, including Sandoval's account of

Image 4.

Modern Chilean *rabel* and standard violin.

[Photo: <http://victoriaortega2medio.blogspot.com.es/>].

Image 3 (prev. page).

A couple of Chilean traditional *rabel*.

[Photo: <http://tomasrabel.blogspot.com.es/>].





Image 5.
Players of Chilean *rabel* and guitar.
[Photo: <http://www.memoriachilena.cl/>].

the September celebrations of 1942, which mentions "a scruffy instrument shaped like a violin, with only three strings and an enormous bow." It then seems to have dis-

appeared. In 1964, however, it was found in use again in the commune of Linares. The University of Chile's Institute of Musical Research contacted one of its last tradition bearers, Emelina Crespo de Fuentes, in Cueva del León. Accompanied on guitar by her daughter, she was recorded performing two of the finest and oldest examples of the rural women's *rabel* tradition.

Women traditionally used the instrument to perform dances and *tonadas*, while men played it alongside the *guitarrón* to accompany *canto a lo poeta*, including *verso a lo humano* and *verso a lo divino*. In this genre, the *rabel* supported the *entonaciones* by carrying the melody and playing preludes and interludes (Astorga Arredondo, 2000). The strings were generally tuned in fifths and fourths. The tonic was chosen so that the overall tuning, or *temple*, would suit the singer's voice or match the tuning of the accompanying guitar or *guitarrón* (Urbina, n.d.).

On Chiloé, the *rabel*, like the violin, was once used in processions and was played braced against the chest or

shoulder (Lavín, 1955). Although it was never widely played on the island, and even less so elsewhere, the *rabel chilote* has become better known in recent years through the unusual designs of luthier Matías Millacura. He has said that he began making *rabeles* in the early 1980s by copying instruments illustrated in an encyclopaedia (La Estrella, 2011).

Efforts to revive the instrument are now under way, particularly in central Chile, led by researchers, performers, and cultural associations.

Image 6.
Modern Chilean *rabel*.
[Photo: <http://www.dibam.cl/>].



3. Bolivia

The *Violín Chapaco*

As its name suggests, the *violín chapaco* is traditionally played in the department of Tarija in southern Bolivia. It is a rural instrument, made locally according to long-established patterns and from whatever materials are available.

It is generally smaller than a standard violin, although its dimensions, shape, and proportions vary from maker to maker. Cavour (1994) lists several woods favoured by Tarijeño luthiers: *quina quina* (*Cinchona officinalis*) for the pegs, *chañar* (*Geoffroea decorticans*) for the pegbox, *arrayán* (*Myrtus communis*) for the bow, and cedar for the body. When the body is made from thin

sheets of pine or willow, the instrument is known as a *suyao*. In addition to commercial rosin, resin from the *molle* tree (*Schinus molle*) is commonly applied to the bow.

The tailpiece, or *tiracuerdas*, is made of cattle horn, or sometimes tin, and is one of the instrument's defining features. The soundpost is made of cane. Its four strings are generally metal mandolin strings, although cat or sheep gut was used in the past. Tuning varies according to the performer's preference and the characteristics of the piece being played and is not standardized in any way. Indeed, it is said that there are as many tunings as there are violinists.

Because the instrument is difficult to make, until recently musicians wishing to learn would turn to simpler, more affordable alternatives. Beginners made a "vi-

Image 7.
Violin player in southern Bolivia.
[Photo: <http://www.cocha-banner.org/>].



olin" resembling those of the Guarayo of eastern Bolivia: a thick length of cane served as both body and neck, the strings were made of horsehair, and the bow was made of cane and horsehair.

The use of traditional *chapaco* instruments, the *caña*, *flautilla*, *erque*, and violin, is governed by Tarija's strict ritual calendar, which is marked by the principal Catholic festivals. The calendar clearly specifies when each instrument may be played. Each instrument is associated with a particular musical genre and with specific forms of song and dance, as well as with the occasions and circumstances in which it may appear, generally within religious celebrations. To play an instrument outside its allotted time or place is a transgression, a breach of taboo.

Within this system, the violin may be played during the Easter season, from the burial of Carnival at the end of summer until the Feast of the Cross in mid-autumn. For this reason, performers often call it the *violín pascuero*. During this period it accompanies *zapateos*, traditional

circle dances (Vacaflares Rivero, 2011). The violin is nevertheless the only traditional Tarijeño instrument that may also be played without restriction outside its assigned ritual season. It appears mainly at smaller celebrations such as *jaleyus*, or children's burials, *jierras*, or livestock-marking ceremonies, patron-saint festivals, sowing and harvest celebrations, and similar occasions. It is also used for non-ritual dance music, including *chacareras* and *cuecas*.

Like many other traditional Latin American violins, the *violín chapaco*, or *pascuero*, is threatened by competition from commercial instruments, particularly inexpensive Chinese violins that have flooded the market. It is also subject to pressure from dominant sectors of society to standardize its tuning and performance according to classical or academic norms (Sánchez, 2010).

The *Violín Chaqueño*

The *violín chaqueño* is played in the Bolivian Chaco, part of the much larger phytogeographical region known as

the Gran Chaco, which in Bolivia covers much of the department of Santa Cruz.

According to Cavour (1994), the violin played in this area resembles, but is not identical to, Tarija's *violín chapaco* or *pascuero*. As elsewhere in the South American lowlands, Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries introduced the instrument. Like its Tarijeño neighbour, the Chaqueño violin is made by local craftspeople from regional materials and takes a variety of forms and sizes. As in Tarija, novice violinists begin on a simple instrument made from a thick length of cane. Cavour (1994) also notes the unusual use in the lowlands of violins made from alcohol tins and wooden boxes, or fitted with only two or three strings. These were probably learning instruments.

The instrument is played mainly by mestizo musicians, since Indigenous societies in the Bolivian Chaco generally play their own forms of violin. It is associated with popular events such as livestock-branding ceremonies, festivals, weddings, and horse races, and commonly provides the music for traditional dances such as the *gato*

and *chacarera* (Sánchez, 2010). In these dances, the violin plays a central role. The distinctive style of Chaqueño violinists, with its almost excessive use of devices such as glissando and portamento, gives the melodies an unmistakable character.

The Guarayo Violin

The Guarayo live in a small number of communities in Guarayos Province, in the department of Santa Cruz, including Urubichá and Ascensión.

They are now regarded as an Indigenous people of eastern Bolivia and speak a Tupí-Guaraní language, although their origins remain unclear. The Jesuit and Franciscan missions active in Moxos and Chiquitanía, in the lowlands of present-day Bolivia, brought different Indigenous societies together in mission settlements, or *reducciones*. Their traces and identities were lost as they were homogenized to varying degrees within the missions. As a result, several peoples today, including the Guarayo, Chiquitano, and Mojeño, consider themselves



"Indigenous" because they retain cultural features of their own, such as language, although their recent histories appear to begin within the Catholic reductions.

During the republican period, the name "Guarayo," also written Gwarayu, became associated with the notions of "savage" and "uncultured." It was also applied to the Esse Eja, another Indigenous people of the Bolivian lowlands.

Franciscan missionaries introduced the violin among the Guarayo, who developed three distinctive varieties that are still made today. The most common is European in style. Although based on the standard model, it is made according to local designs and from local materials, especially cedar, known as *kaikachingui*. It is used in church and to perform all kinds of religious music during cele-

Image 8.
Guarayo boy with a bamboo violin. Ca. 1930.
[Photo: García Jordán, 2009].



brations, ceremonies, and festivals in the Catholic calendar.

The other two varieties are played outside the church, although their use may still be connected with religion. The *yata miöri* is made from a single length of *takuara* cane that forms the body, neck, and pegbox. The *takuar miöri*, by contrast, is a hybrid instrument with a cane body and a European-style neck made from guava wood (*Psidium guajava*) or *gabetilla* (*Euterpe precatoria*). The two parts are joined with resins from wild plants (Sánchez, 2010).

Cane varieties, collectively known as *yata*, are used throughout the Bolivian lowlands as inexpensive, simple instruments for beginners. Over time, some may have become popular in particular regions and acquired identities of their own. Their construction is relatively

straightforward. Sections of *takuara* approximately 8-10 cm in diameter are cut and left to dry in a cool place for a week. The pegbox is carved, sound holes are opened in the cane body, and a simple tailpiece, or *tiracuerdas*, is made, generally from wire. The four strings are now metal, although in the past they were made from dried peccary gut, *tayasugwaikuchi repo'i ryvir*, or monkey gut. The bridge was once made from a small piece of the same cane, but today it is fashioned from mara or cedar. *Tajibo* (*Tabebuia impetiginosa*), *tarara* (*Centrolobium microchaete*), *kukí*, or *gabetilla* is used for the pegs. The bow, which Cavour (1994) identifies as the *iquitizá*, is made from wood or a palm rod and strung with horsetail hair. It is treated with resin from the *isiga* tree (*Myrocarpus sp.*) or simply with turpentine.

Until 1940, Guarayo cane violins were used to play *chovenas* and *taquiraris* during Carnival, to accompany wakes and funeral processions, to perform traditional and ceremonial pieces on All Saints' Day, and for music and socializing after communal work such as harvests and *mingas*. The violin could be played alone or accom-

Image 9 (prev. page).

Guarayo violin.

[Photo: <http://conar.senip.gob.ar/>].



Image 10.

Guarayo bamboo violin and standard violin.

[Photo: <http://www.elsol.com.bo/>].

panied by the "Guarayo guitar," made from *ichiquii* wood with a *tutuma* body, the fruit of *Crescentia cujete*, as well as by various kinds of flutes and small drums.

The violin was primarily an instrument for men and was formerly subject to ritual restrictions. It was said that

merely using the violin bow would cause a woman's hair to fall out. This taboo has disappeared in recent times.

These violins have no soundpost and therefore produce very little volume (Vaca Céspedes, 2010). Because they are so quiet, and because commercial violins are widely available and inexpensive, the *yata miöri* has largely fallen out of use. It continues to be made, however, both as a handicraft and as a means of reclaiming and affirming Guarayo identity (Ministerio de Educación de Bolivia/CIPCA, n.d.).

The Violins of the Chiquitano and Mojeño

The Chiquitano, Chiquito, or Bésiro people inhabit the plains of Chiquitos and the Bolivian Chaco, in the department of Santa Cruz and part of Beni. This society emerged from a mixture of Indigenous peoples brought together in the Jesuit missions of Chiquitanía in the late seventeenth century.

The Mojeño, also known as Moxeño, Mojo, or Moxo, live

in central and southern Beni. Like the Chiquitano, they descend from several pre-existing peoples brought together in Jesuit missions, including Trinidad, Loreto, and San Ignacio.

Both peoples play their own versions of the *violín chaqueño*: locally made instruments based on the European model and generally fashioned from fine woods such as cedar, *mara*, or *tajibo*. They commonly have a relatively short neck running parallel to the body, a feature characteristic of the Baroque violin, and are played with a thick bow that curves outward (Huseby, Ruiz, and Waisman, 1995).

Among the Mojeño, the violin is associated with church services and may not be used at secular festivals. It appears, for example, in the "Gran Cabildo" procession (Ministerio de Culturas de Bolivia, 2012a), accompanies the celebrated *bajones* and the flutes in hymns, processions, and vigils for saints and the Virgin Mary (Ministerio de Culturas de Bolivia, 2012b), and is heard at the *Ichapekene Piesta*, the principal festival of San Ignacio de



Image 11.
Ensamble Moxos, San Ignacio.
[Photo: <http://www.ciberandes.com/>].

Moxos (UNESCO, 2012). Among the Chiquitano, its use is primarily religious. It is heard both at domestic observances such as funerals and in church, where it is used to perform Holy Week music: the *suiyai*, or Lord's Prayer; *santoxteyo*, or Holy Cross; and *siborikix*, or Gloria. The violin also appears in festive contexts (Sánchez, 2010), including Carnival *tonadas* (Arias, 2010), and forms part



of the region's celebrated Baroque orchestras, such as the orchestra of Santa Ana de Velasco (see Eglau, 2012).

The violin became established among the Chiquitano and Mojeño through the work of missionaries, who taught people not only to play the instrument but also to make it (see Claro Valdés, 1969, for a description of the process). Among the Chiquitano, the most influential missionaries in this respect were undoubtedly the Jesuits Martin Schmid, Johannes Messner, and Julian Knogler (Rozo López, 2011a). The musical structures created by the missions survived within Indigenous communities. Indeed, the Chiquitos Music Archive holds some 5,000 scores from the Jesuit period by both known and anonymous composers.

Image 12 (prev. page).
Chiquitano girl playing the violin.
[Photo: <http://www.paginasiete.bo/>].



Image 13.
Mojeño violin player.
[Photo: <http://www.landscapes.org/>].

The Violins of the Masetén and Cavineño

The Masetén live in the Bolivian departments of La Paz and Beni, specifically in the Quiquibey River region and the Masetén TCO (Tierra Comunitaria de Origen, or Indigenous Community Territory).

Known as *seke'nakdye'* (OPIM, 2011) or *sëkë'nakdyë'*, the Mositén violin is a rural instrument generally made with little more than a machete. It is traditionally fashioned from cedar or *manzano de monte* (*Billia rosea*). Its parts are joined with an adhesive made from natural resins and gums. When commercial strings are unavailable, strings are made from the gut of capuchin monkeys, ant-eaters, or tamanduas (Gómez-García, n.d.). The bow is strung with horsehair or cotton fibres rubbed with incense resin.

Franciscan missionaries introduced the violin among the Mositén in the eighteenth century, after the expulsion of the Jesuits. Its use is now in marked decline, as is much of this people's culture (Ministerio de Educación de Bolivia, 2012a). The instrument is associated with the church, although many violinists also play it in other settings, including rituals held in the homes of *shipa*, or shamans, and performances of sentimental or bawdy songs while *chicha* is consumed (Ministerio de Educación de Bolivia, 2012b).



Image 14.
Mositén violin.
[Photo: Ministerio de Educación de Bolivia (2012b)].

The Cavineño of the departments of Beni and Pando also played violins, known as *biuri*, inherited from the religious missions established in their territory. There is, however, little documentation of their present-day use (Ministerio de Educación de Bolivia, 2012c).

Violins of the Bolivian Highlands

In Bolivia's Andean valleys and Altiplano, the violin is played by folk musicians and is sometimes made by rural luthiers. Particularly noteworthy is its presence among blind musicians who beg in the region's cities, as well as its use in several musical genres from the valleys of Cochabamba.

In the department of Potosí, in Nor Chichas and Sud Chichas provinces, especially around Calcha and Cotagaita, a locally made chordophone is known from its place of origin as the *violín chicheño* (Rozo López, 2011b). This variety of Andean violin, sometimes called a *rabel*, is generally made from local woods. Its body is smaller than that of the standard instrument, thick and roughly finished, with a soundboard that often has no sound holes. It has three sheep-gut strings with an unusual tuning: D-G-F. Today, the finest examples are made from cedar and fitted with steel strings. The solid bow is approximately 30 cm long and has a small peg used to tighten the horse-hair.

The instrument is commonly played from Easter until the Feast of Saint Peter in late June, as well as at livestock-marking celebrations, especially in August. It is used to perform *tonadas*, *takipayanaku* or *taquipayanacus*, witty or bawdy verses sung in Quechua, and *tukuchas*. In rural communities it is still accompanied by the *guitarra chicheña*, a rustic, locally made instrument with five single strings.

On the Andean foothills overlooking the lowlands, particularly in Vallegrande Province in the department of Santa Cruz, musicians play the so-called *violín vallegendino*. This variety is hollowed from a single block of cedar. Its bridge is shaped like half a wheel, with fins and a base into which a semicircular piece of bone is set. *Quina quina* resin (*Cinchona officinalis*) is used on the bow (Cavour, 1994; Sánchez, 2010).



Image 15.
Violin player from the Bolivian highlands.
[Photo: <http://www.cocha-banner.org/>].

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5. Images

Image 01.

https://c1.staticflickr.com/5/4117/4905857838_cb82ba356a_z.jpg

Image 02.

https://c1.staticflickr.com/5/4137/4905857752_c65d74449b_z.jpg

Image 03.

tomasrabel.blogspot.com.es/2013/04/el-rabel-en-sudamerica.html

Image 04.

<http://victoriaortega2medio.blogspot.com.es/2013/03/identidades-musicales-y-grupos-humanos.html>

Image 05.

http://www.memoriachilena.cl/602/articles-79406_thumbnail.jpg

Image 06.

<http://www.dibam.cl/614/w3-article-50361.html>

Image 07.

<http://www.cocha-banner.org/>

Image 09.

<http://conar.senip.gob.ar/>

Image 10.

http://www.elsol.com.bo/index.php?cat=360&pla=3&id_articulo=69

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Image 11.

http://www.ciberandes.com/typo3temp/_processed_/csm_EM_2_9b2724bff5.jpg

Image 12.

http://www.paginasiete.bo/u/fotografias/m/2014/6/9/f620x480-26324_68856_3.jpg

Image 13.

<http://www.landscapes.org/glif-2014/>

Image 15.

<http://www.cocha-banner.org/>

