

History of the Cueca

The cueca is the national dance of the Republic of Chile. Chile occupies a thin strip of land located on the west coast of South America. It resides between the Andes Mountains, to its east, and the Pacific Ocean, to its west. Chile is 4,300 km (2,670 mi) north to south, but only 350 km (217 mi) at its widest point east to west.

The music that was initially present in Chile was that of the Mapuche people who used many variations of wooden flutes and percussion to accompany their religious ceremonies. As the Spaniards started to settle in this area, during the mid-16th century, musical culture and instruments were exchanged. The two main instruments the Spaniards introduced to the Mapuche people were the harp and the guitar, which are still used in Chilean music to this day.

Political revolutions are vast throughout Chilean history and the music of this time played a very important role in gaining support for change in political justice. The most prominent style of music used on both sides of the political aisle was the cueca. It soon became the national dance of Chile.

The cueca is known as a handkerchief style of dance which is traditionally performed between a man and a woman. Described as a courting dance, the cueca depicts courting rituals between a rooster and a hen. The feathers of these birds are represented by the dancers with a handkerchief. During the first section of the dance,

called the *cuarteta*, the two dancers circle each other while the music starts. In the next section called the *seguirilla*, the lyrics of the song start and the dancers turn to face each other. The man dances while circling the woman, moving towards and away from the woman but never touching her. The woman performs similar gestures while in the middle of the circle. The final section, called the *remate*, involves the man offering his hand to the woman to end the performance dancing together.

The traditional instrumentation of the Chilean style of *cueca* is accordion, guitar, and percussion. It usually has two main musical ideas, which are used for improvisational moments, AB of four measures each set as an overall form of ABB, though there are variations to this structure especially during the *remate*. The time signature of the music interchanges between 3/4 and 6/8. Primarily, the *cueca* uses a simple harmonic sequence of tonic to dominant and incorporates rhythmic characteristics of the *hemiola*, which shifts between triple and duple meter.

Today, this traditional dance can be found in many Latin American countries. Variations of the style can also be found in Europe, the United States, and Africa. While instrumentation varies, the structure of the musical form and dance has stayed relatively constant.