

Brass In Andes

The hills are alive with the sound of... sousaphones.

Josh Katz-Rosene takes a trip to the mountains of Peru.

During the bus ride from Peru's capital, Lima, to a region in that country's central highlands called the Mantaro Valley, one rises from sea level to almost 4,000 meters in only seven hours. Although the Valley's largest town, Huanayo, sits at the more manageable altitude of about 3,300m, I was nevertheless feeling rather light-headed after I first made this trip. Following the popular prescription for altitude sickness, I drank a coca-leaf tea and decided to try to sleep it off. Feeling much better the next morning, I headed out in search of the brass bands I had come here to research.

I soon learned that an encyclopedia article I had read back home, which stated that brass bands were "ubiquitous" in the Andes, was by no means an exaggeration.

On my very first day, I found four bandas (that's what brass bands are called in Peru) of more than 25 musicians each, playing on the first day of a Saint's Day fiesta in the town of Matahuasi. That night, the eve of another fiesta began in nearby San Jéronimo, where two brass bands would provide the music for the six-day-long celebration. I spent almost every single day of the next five weeks attending communal festivals in different towns in the Valley, listening to and recording the numerous professional bands that create the soundtrack for these events, and getting to know some of the bandsmen that make (at least part of) their living in the process.

The first brass bands were integrated into the Peruvian armed forces by the late 19th Century, modelled on European military bands. In the early 20th Century,

Andean peasants returning home from army duty spread this instrumental configuration in their own villages, since many of them had learned to play wind instruments during their service. Civilian village bandas spread quickly from town to town, as they soon became indispensable for the fiestas that occur throughout the year. Today, at least 25 professional brass bands operate as small businesses in the Mantaro Valley, supplying their services for the busy fiesta system there. Important traditions of brass band music can be found throughout the Andean region of Peru, and south into Bolivia.

In some more remote regions of the Andes, where the culture is perceived to be closer to indigenous sources, brass bands have sometimes been seen as symbols of a foreign modernity that threatens

Clockwise from below top left: A band accompanies costumed dancers in a procession through town; One of the most famous bands from the Mantaro Valley, the Banda Tupac Amaru, marches by the town square;

The Banda Continental's baritone section and snare drummer; A band advertises its name on its three sousaphone bells (most bands only have two).



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The Banda Continental ("the original white shoes")

local traditions. In the central Andes of Peru, though, where people proudly assert their mestizo (mixed Hispanic and indigenous heritage) identity, my impression was that the performance of banda music was so vibrant precisely because it bridged two competing inclinations: on one hand, people's need to maintain regional customs, and on the other, the drive of some towards cosmopolitan musical influences. Part of the reason this type of ensemble can achieve this delicate balance is because of its great musical versatility, a quality that can be easily appreciated by simply taking a look at the sheer diversity of a band's repertoire during a single day of performing at a Saint's Day fiesta.

At the core of the Mantaro Valley banda's musical inventory is the *wayno*, a song and dance form that flourished during the colonial period and is still the most popular genre in the Peruvian Andes. Bands must know the special waynos from each town, those that are popular across the region, and the more mainstream songs that have garnered national radio play. While waynos are played for just about any occasion, other moments of the fiesta call for more specific types of music. For the religious procession of a town's patron Saint around the main plaza, bands turn to marches, each player attaching his sheet music to the back of the player in front of him with a clothes pin, and following the procession in march formation.

Of course, there is a reason these events are called 'fiestas'. For one, they are the occasion for the presentation of a countless number of colourfully-costumed folkloric dances, each of which is accompanied by a different musical genre. The afternoon bullfights and nightly fireworks displays unfold to the sound of the *marinera*, a genre that originated among the so-called Creoles (Peruvian-born folks of Spanish descent) on the coast and has become Peru's de facto national folkloric dance. Performing during bullfights is one of the riskier parts of bandsmen's work, since they usually stand in the actual bullfighting ring while playing, scampering into the stands if the bull comes close. Several musicians told tales of being injured by bulls while carrying out their musical duties!

Finally, a fiesta wouldn't be a fiesta without plenty of recreational dancing, and participants take every opportunity to engage in this activity. While waynos are key to getting bodies moving, the latest cumbia (the style that originated on the Colombian coast but has become popular throughout Latin America) hits are obligatory for the long sessions of social dancing that stretch into the night. Less commonly played, and eliciting less of a danced reaction from listeners, are arrangements of classical masterpieces as well as the odd '80s rock tune – for some reason unbeknownst to me, several bands got a kick out of playing Dire Straits' *Walk Of Life*.

Although cumbias bear a strong resemblance to the popular Latin styles that are by now well-known outside Latin America, the sound of brass bands playing waynos and other local styles are striking for their use of pentatonic scales – these are five-note scales, as opposed to the seven-note major and minor scales heard predominantly in global pop. The sound of several brass bands playing long medleys of these tunes in the heavily reverberating outdoors is remarkable.

But it is not only the different musical styles and scales that might sound novel to a listener more accustomed to European or North American brass bands, or even those familiar with the now trendy Balkan brass sound. The entire aesthetic is different. On my first few days of listening to bands in the Mantaro Valley, I couldn't help thinking that the musicians were out of tune with each other, and played in a manner that a critic of Euro-American bands might disparage for its lack of 'tightness'. One explanation for this performance style might be the poor quality of many instruments, along with the very long days of playing – bandas often play on and off for 16 hours a day, several days in a row (all this at 3,500m altitude, you might recall) – and the sometimes high quantities of alcohol consumed, which undoubtedly have an effect on group

intonation and articulation. But I also learned that being perfectly in tune and playing in absolute synchrony are simply not aesthetic priorities either for the musicians or the people who hire them.

What, then, are the musicians aiming for? As mentioned, dancing is a focal point of the fiestas, and so for brass bands, a dense and loud sound that will propel the festive atmosphere and move people to dance, is prized. The different bands playing at the same fiesta compete on these terms, and when the event reaches its peak moments of celebration, it is not uncommon to see one group march into the territory that had been previously staked out by another. At this point, the volume of each band increases and the players shift to their higher ranges. The pounding bass drum beats of different bands might begin to cross each other, and one group's melody might blur together with another's, but fiesta sponsors and participants consistently respond to these encounters with enthusiastic dancing.

The drive for a louder and denser sound has meant that the size of Andean bandas has steadily increased over the years, expanding from the prototypical village groups, which numbered from 10 to 12 musicians in the early 20th Century, to an average size today of 25 to 30 musicians, for ensembles in the central highlands. Brass bands in southern Peru and Bolivia are even larger, numbering upwards of 40 players. One video I bought of a brass band festival in the Bolivian town of Oruro showed dozens of large bands crowded into a stadium and playing simultaneously, the total number of musicians easily reaching into the several hundreds!

Given the banda's crucial role in the festive life of the Andes, it's not surprising to observe the high degree of professionalism with which these groups conduct their business. The importance of these organisations to the culture and economy of the Valley can be seen on the buildings that surround the Parque Inmaculada, a small plaza in central Huancayo; their outer walls are covered with large signs advertising the names of dozens of ensembles whose offices are housed there. Anyone interested in hiring a group can visit the office to negotiate and sign a contract. Taking every opportunity to advertise widely during performances, each band prints its name on the large bass drum and on the sousaphone bells. The director of any band always has flashy business cards – many of them displaying a photograph of the ensemble digitally edited onto a flashy cityscape background – on hand to give to potential clients. Each group has a distinctive uniform and often a nickname or slogan, and each even has its own musical tag that it plays at the conclusion of each piece. One band I spent time with was known as "the original white shoes," as per the requisite colour of its members' footwear. In a playful nod of respect to the older (and presumably less cold-resistant) musicians of the Sinfonía Junín de Jauja, one of the longest-running bandas in the Mantaro Valley, musicians call the long underwear they wear on cold nights the "sinfonía".

Although the ride back down from the Mantaro Valley to Lima features the same preposterously tight turns skirting terrifying precipices as the ascent, the return to sea level is much easier on the body. After spending several weeks at Andean fiestas, I couldn't help seeing the capital's musical landscape through a different lens. Walking by the Plaza Mayor in the heart of downtown Lima, I noticed that the brass band that marks the changing of the guard ceremony every noon hour at the Government Palace is not all that dissimilar – notwithstanding their shinier instruments and more regal dress – from their Andean civilian counterparts; this stately band even plays waynos, the hallmark of Andean Peruvian music. Shopping for music at the sprawling Mesa Redonda market, I found kiosk after kiosk with a vast selection of locally produced CDs and videos of bandas from all over the country for sale. I even saw a typical banda featured on a Peruvian soap opera!

But it's not just in recordings or symbolic displays like the Government Palace band that the Andean brass band tradition is represented in coastal Lima. With the so-called 'Andeanisation' of the capital spurred by intense migration from the highlands beginning in the 1950s, numerous migrant associations from all Andean regions have begun recreating condensed versions of the festivals from their homelands. Bandas can be heard at these fiestas nearly every weekend of the year in Lima, and it is not uncommon to see a brass band accompanying a procession of the icon of a tiny Andean village's patron Saint through the city's streets. With so much brass band activity taking place here, it's not surprising that at the numerous musical instrument shops concentrated around the Plaza Dos de Mayo, row upon row of brass instruments glimmer in the glass displays, and photocopied brass band arrangements are available by the hundreds. For most people abroad, the panpipes are the wind instruments that are probably most closely associated with Andean traditional music, but it may not be too long before the vigorous brass, woodwinds, and percussion of the mighty Andean banda begin to take their place. 

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