CLASSIC MAYA MUSIC

Part I: Maya Drums

By NORMAN HAMMOND

Music, like dancing, drama and poetry, is one of the least known aspects of prehistoric societies. Without specific documentary records we are left at best with tantalizing hints of these intellectual and aesthetic accomplishments in cultures well-known from their architectural, sculptural and graphic arts. This is as true of the Classic Maya as of Pharaonic Egypt or Mycenaean Greece.

Music is, however, not quite such a hopeless case as the other aural arts, for the instruments used in its production may be preserved or illustrated and some idea of their sound obtained from surviving specimens or reconstructions. For the ancient Maya we have four types of evidence, two contemporary and archaeological, one semi-contemporary and semi-documentary, and one wholly documentary and much later: 1) the actual remains of musical instruments; 2) portrayals of instruments in sculpture and on murals and painted vessels recovered from archaeological contexts of the Classic period; 3) three Maya manuscripts or codices of which the Dresden is probably copied from a Classic original; 4) the documentary accounts of Postclassic Maya culture as the Spaniards found it in the sixteenth century: the principal Postclassic and prehispanic influence on the Maya came from Central Mexico and musical instruments were doubtless among the many features introduced into Maya culture at that time. The first two classes of evidence with Codex Dresden are positive indications that certain types of instrument were used by the Classic Maya, while the other Maya manuscripts (actually books of bark), the Codices Paris and Madrid, and the Spanish documents may include Mexican introductions.

Methods of percussion include beating, shaking and rasping. The widest class of beaten instruments is the drum, for which evidence exists in the Maya area of four types: *tunkul* (horizontal drum), *pax* (upright drum), pottery hand-drum and large circular drum.

The *tunkul* was still in use early in this century by the Lacandon Indians and its existence in the seventeenth century among the Itzá of Petén is noted by the Spaniard Lopez de Cogolludo, who writes that it is "made of hollow wood, and there are some so large that the sound is heard two leagues away when the wind comes from that direction." The 16th century Bishop of Yucatán, Diego de Landa writes that it was "made of hollow wood, with a heavy and sad sound. They beat it with rather a long stick with a certain gum from a tree (i.e. rubber) at the end of it."

It had remarkable carrying power and the Spaniard Juan Ponce remarks "the drum, which was an instrument of wood, was heard half a league away." The *tunkul* was also known in the Maya Highlands, as in the Quiché drama of Rabinal-Achi where a character says "... see the bone of my leg, which will become the beater of the teponovoz and of the drum." Clearly the *tunkul* was widespread in the Maya area at the time of the Spanish conquest, but there is no evidence for its existence there in the Classic period; it is not shown on the famous Bonampak frescoes where other musical instruments appear, and no other representations are known on figurines or vessels. It is, on the other hand, well known in Mexico, where depictions in pottery and stone and in codices are supplemented by a number of surviving precolumbian teponaztli and would seem to have been introduced into the Maya area during the Postclassic.

(Opposite) Polychrome drum of the "lamp-glass" type, from Lubaantun, (Belize, British Honduras), 8th Cent., of our era; height, ca. 30 cm.
The pax, a Classic Maya drum, depicted on the Bonampak frescoes, Chiapas, Mexico.

An animal-impersonator beating a pax is depicted on a Classic vessel in the Dieseldorff Collection.

The bulbous bodied pax, from the Santa Rita fresco, now destroyed.

A miniature pax depicted in a Maya codex of the Postclassic period.

A double miniature pax from the Classic-derived Dresden Codex.

A seventh-century pottery drum of "lamp-glass" type from Barton Ramie, British Honduras.
The other large drum, the pax, was used by the Classic Maya, although no specimens survive (a fine Aztec example is in the Toluca Museum). A number of Classic and Postclassic depictions of it do exist. The most detailed and exact dates from the end of the Classic and is in Room 1 of Structure 1 at Bonampak which shows a drum with a cylindrical body and a triple molding just over halfway down. The same form of molding is found in Chenes and Puuc architectural decoration. Below this the base is pierced by an inverted-triangular aperture on at least two opposite sides. Stretched over the top is a tawny membrane, which since no cords or pegs are shown was perhaps glued on. The skin could be that of a tigre or a large monkey. The body was probably made by hollowing out a tree trunk, a much easier process than making a tunkul with its integral sounding-tongues. The drum comes up to the chest of the player. If we assume that the depiction is accurate, and adopt ethnographic estimates of Maya stature of about a meter and a half for men, the Classic pax at Bonampak must have been about one meter, twelve centimeters high and forty centimeters in diameter. Allowing for the removal of bark, trimming to shape and the carving of the projecting molding, a tree of at least fifty centimeters diameter would have been felled to make it.

Another Late Classic representation is on a polychrome cylinder vase from Chamá, Alta Verapaz, which shows four animal-impersonators of whom three play musical instruments. One, dressed as an armadillo, beats with both hands on an upright drum of cylindrical form, with a basal aperture and a decorated band just above it. The membrane has a reticulate pattern which suggests the use of snakeskin. The figures are much smaller and more stylized than those at Bonampak, but if the same estimate of stature is applied, the drum would be about one meter, thirty centimeters high and thirty-seven centimeters in diameter.

A Postclassic depiction of the pax existed on the Santa Rita frescoes, beaten by the merchant god Ek Chuah with one hand while the other waved a rattle and the god of 8 Ahau swung two trophy heads in time to the beat. The drum has a splayed top, bulbous body and splayed pierced base, but the design is stylized, with sound shown emerging from the top of the drum and from the body through the mouth of a skull. This may be a visual reference to the “hoarse sound” of the pax described by the Spaniard Herrera. Around the top and body of the drum are bands such as are seen on the Chamá vase, perhaps depicting twisted cords. Using the previous estimate of stature, the drum would be about one meter, eight centimeters high and forty-three centimeters across the body. The membrane would seem to have been stretched over the wide mouth and held in place by its own contraction around the narrower neck.

All three of these representations are of the “high” huehuetl (ranging from 1.8 m. to 1.3 m. in height and 37 m. to 43 m. in diameter). The “low” type does not seem to have been used by the Maya, although it is noted in Mexican sources such as Codex Becker, but the Maya did have miniature pax of pottery. A bulbous example similar in form to that at Santa Rita, played by a squatting figure, is seen on Codex Madrid 37a, while a cylindrical specimen is seen on the Late Classic fresco at Uaxactún. This is brownish-pink in color, suggesting ceramic, with a broad tan spiraling down the side, a narrow tan band around the base above an open foot, and a tan membrane. By comparison with the figures in the scene it would be about forty centimeters high, and is played by a man sitting cross-legged.

The bulbous-bodied pax is found in north Yucatán, while the cylindrical form is found in Petén and the adjacent Alta Verapaz, to judge from the representations discussed above. This, though statistically nugatory, may nevertheless reflect a regional and/or chronological dichotomy, and the depiction of a bulbous-bodied miniature drum, albeit a double one, in the Classic-derived Codex Dresden 34a suggests that the geographical division is the more likely.

In addition to the depictions of miniature drums on the Uaxactún fresco and in Codex Dresden, a number of specimens survive from the Classic. They are of two basic forms: the “lamp-glass” variety with a bulbous body between a tall base and long neck, both trumpet-shaped, and the “pedestal-vase” variety with a wide body with outflaring sides mounted on a narrow cylindrical base. A monochrome specimen of the lamp-glass type and of Tepeu 1-equivalent date was found at Barton Ramie and polychrome examples are known from Uaxactún (a Tepeu 1 piece surviving to twenty-four centimeters high) and Lubaantún of Late Classic, probably Tepeu 2-equivalent, date. A double drum of this form, possibly Maya although reputedly from an unknown location in
A fine pottery drum with lobed body, from Nebaj, Guatemala.

A pedestal-vase drum with polychrome decoration, from Uaxactún, Guatemala.

A drum of pedestal-vase form from San José, British Honduras.

A fine specimen of a variant on the form, with a lobed body rather than bulbous body, was found in Tomb IV at Nebaj. It is cream-slipped over a light brown fabric except at the top where the membrane was attached, probably by glueing, and at the base where it is slightly worn. D. M. Pendergast suggests that a drum of similar form from Altun Ha had a membrane at each end to produce two different notes. This specimen is decorated with a grotesque face in appliqué, and another, miniature example only eight centimeters high from Barton Ramie is in the form of a human figure. The dating of the majority of these lamp-glass drums is in Tepeu 1-2, the earlier part of the Late Classic.

The pedestal-vase variety is clearly recognizable even in fragmentary form by the abrupt "shoulder" between the wide body and the narrow base. Several specimens are known, from Uaxactún, Barton Ramie, Benque Viejo and Tecolpan, (Tabasco) as fragments, and complete examples are known from San José, (two others of comparable form being in the Campeche Museum), Piedras Negras and Jaina. All are monochrome; the one from Piedras Negras has an incised glyphic inscription. They range in size from the San José example, only 15.6 centimeters high and that from Benque Viejo, 18.4 centimeters to the 30 centimeter specimen from Barton Ramie and Thompson's estimate of 60 centimeters for that from Jaina. A variant form is...
A pedestal-vase drum with very narrow base, from Barton Ramie.

A figurine from Lubaantún, British Honduras, showing a man with drum and rattle, and a cacao-pod pendant.

Two trumpeters and a man with drum and rattle, from the Bonampak frescoes.

known from Barton Ramie with a very narrow cylindrical base, broken off after ten centimeters or so, and a body with incurved sides some twenty centimeters high. Another variant, with a wide base and polychrome decoration, comes from Uaxactún and five fragmentary polychrome specimens ranging in diameter from more than twenty centimeters down to eight centimeters are also known from the site. Other polychrome drums of similar form are reported from Yalloch, Nakum and Flores. A double drum of pedestal-vase form of Fine Orange ware comes from Altar de Sacrificios, and dates to late in Tepeu 3 (in spite of Lehmann's attribution of it to Tepeu 2).

The dating of the pedestal-vase form of drum spans the whole Late Classic, from the Tepeu 1 polychrome specimens at Uaxactún to the Tepeu 3 Fine Orange example and the Tepeu 3 or later (San José V) one from San José.

In spite of Pendergast's suggestion about the Altun Ha drum, I think that they were covered at only one end with a membrane, and stood on the ground or held under the arm to be played; when held they were sometimes played accompanied by a rattle, as can be seen on the figurine from Lubaantún illustrated on this page and the left-hand figure in the band at Bonampak (above) which show in frontal and profile view respectively this combination of instruments. The membrane would have been of animal skin, as the English friar Thomas Gage observed after the conquest and Alfred M. Tozzer noted early this century. Tozzer saw the drums used in pairs by the Lacandon, recalling the double drums from Salvador, Tabasco and Altar de Sacrificios, and says that the drum was known as qaiyum, "the singing god," bringing to mind the singing skull on the Santa Rita fresco.

The fourth type, a large round drum similar to the bass drum in a modern brass band is known
Figurine-plaque from Lubaantún depicting a conference in a house with a band of musicians below. The figure at lower right seems to be carrying a circular drum.

Figurine of a man sitting astride a circular or cylindrical drum, from Lubaantún.

A man beating a turtle-shell with an antler, from the Bonampak frescoes.
only from three Late Classic figurine plaques from Lubaantún. On two of these, a man is shown sitting astride the instrument and tapping it near the rim with both hands, while on the third a man appears to be carrying one in procession. The instruments would have been about fifty centimeters in diameter and presumably of wood covered with skin. This third specimen is however very worn, and the identification as a drum is not certain. A figurine from Nayarit in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City shows a man sitting astride a cylindrical horizontal drum and beating the end. This may be the type of drum, a sort of horizontal pax, depicted in end-view on the Lubaantún figurines.

The friction drum, a cross between a string and a percussion instrument, is currently used in Petén as a tigreño to lure unsuspecting jaguars within gunshot range and is of gourd, skin and resinated hair, but no Precolumbian specimens or representations are known. The archaeologist Cottie Burland suggests that a scene in Codex Madrid 74b shows four gods playing these instruments, but I do not accept this identification.

Related to the drums in that it is a beaten instrument is the turtle carapace. Its use at the time of the Conquest is attested by Lopez de Cogolludo who describes an ambush at Ake in Yucatan in 1528 where the Maya “beat the shells of large turtles with deer horns,” while Bishop Diego de Landa mentions “another instrument made of a whole tortoise with its shells, and having taken out the flesh they strike it with the palm of the hand. The sound is doleful and sad.” Herrera agrees: “. . . taking out the flesh they make another instrument from the whole turtle, which has a sad sound.” The ethnologist K. G. Isikowitz notes that in South America part of the shell is coated with wax and rubbed with a moist hand, i.e. a friction instrument. The use of turtle carapaces in the Classic is shown by their representation on the Bonampak frescoes, where proportional to the figures they were just over fifty centimeters long and about thirty-five centimeters wide, and on the Chamá vase in the Dieseldorff Collection where one of the animal impersonators carries one about forty-three centimeters by thirty centimeters. The Classic representations show them beaten with branched antlers, not with the hand; those at Bonampak would be about forty centimeters long. Experiment shows three notes can be obtained by striking the shell in different places.

In the next issue we will review other Classic Maya percussion instruments as well as the wind and stringed instruments.