

MODERN MERENGUE PIANO BASICS

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If you've found this article, you probably don't need to be told what merengue is. But let's run things down very briefly to start us off.

Merengue, the Latin-American musical style originating on the island of Hispaniola (comprising the Dominican Republic and Haiti), has over the past two or three decades become one of the most popular Latin styles on the planet. Why should this be?

All Latin styles have their own unique rhythmic drive and excitement, but merengue has a killer advantage – it's easy for clumsy beginners to dance to. Even shy, uncoordinated rhythm-illiterate Europeans and North Americans. Sure, merengue dancing can be elevated to a beautiful art form, but it can easily be learned and enjoyed by anyone in five minutes flat.

Basically, it's a fast two-step – little or no fancy footwork required. Just cling on to each other for ballast and rock from foot to foot – left right left-right, one two one two. Rotate if you like. If you want to get a bit more fancy, try keeping your head roughly still while the rest of your body moves from side to side, one-two one two. Wiggle the hips and twirl your girl from time to time. Sorry girls – Latin music is a very macho business – I'm afraid you have to be willing to be *led*.

Oh, and of course merengue is terribly sexy since it combines easy couple dancing with close-up “bump and grind” action. A Mexican friend of mine can't be alone in reckoning that while salsa is pretty sultry, merengue is responsible for far more “conception” situations...

The UK “salsa boom” of a few years ago (when it dawned on clumpy Anglo-Saxons that there are types of dancing where you're actually allowed to and supposed to touch each other) demonstrated an interesting little thing to me. A lot of first-timers in those dance clubs went away thinking they loved salsa – but what they'd actually been listening to for most of the night was merengue...

BTW folks, in case you're getting the wrong idea, I'm not putting salsa down – I love it... but that's another article for another day.

A NOTE ON PIANO TECHNIQUE

The piano part in merengue is a string of eighth-notes, played fast. Very fast, particularly in the modern style. Classical octave arpeggio technique will come in very handy.

You have to start off slowly and rhythmically accurately, and gradually build speed. Play with a clean legato, not hard, and try to be as economical as possible with hand movement. The most important thing is to keep the hands and wrists totally relaxed. It's a natural impulse to tense up when playing faster – but tension will wreck your rhythm and hurt your hands. So develop the sensitivity to monitor even the slightest tension in your hands as you play and continually relax when you feel things tightening up. Unless you can eliminate tension in the hands, you won't make it through one song, let alone the night...

PIANO OR KEYBOARD?

I'm one of those people that gets irritated when people describe what I do as “playing keyboards”. This isn't really snobbery (well okay, maybe a bit) – it's more that I regard piano and keyboard as different instruments, requiring different skills and played in different ways.

Now I've got that off my chest, let's get to the point. While you can play actual piano in a merengue band, it's far more common to play a keyboard – often standing up.

There are two reasons for this. First, the lighter action on a synth keyboard lends itself much more to the rapid arpeggiation essential to this style. Second, smaller merengue lineups often dispense with the services of a horn section (a commercial consideration, more often than not), so the keyboard player takes care of the horn parts. In fact, even when there are horns, the keyboard will often play lines with them at certain parts in the tune.

What's more, the traditional merengue lineup contained button accordion rather than piano – a keyboard player can evoke this texture by using an accordion (perhaps even guitar) sound.

Typically, during the verse the keyboard player plays simple patterns, or provides hornlike backings or synth/string pads. The fuller arpeggiated piano work is usually reserved for when the music shifts up a gear at the extended chorus section (known as the jaleo).

So you'd do well to set up your keyboard with at least the following patches easily accessible: piano, accordion, guitar, strings, brass, saxes (although I reckon most synthesised sax sounds are more reminiscent of a warped pitch pipe than a sax...)

CLAVE ORIENTATION

In common with a lot of Caribbean music, merengue contains the core rhythm of *clave*, in this case the same figure as found in Cuban son (ignore the pitch):

3/2

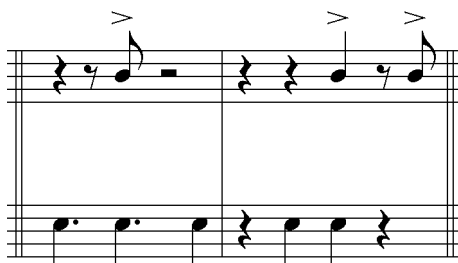


Some general guidelines:

The 3 side of clave contains more activity/tension/syncopation. Typically, the *one* on the 3-side bar is anticipated by an eighth-note (the final eighth-note of the previous bar) and the *two-and* is accented.

The 2 side tends to be more regular, with more accents placed squarely on the beat and the *three* is accented.

So the beats that get a lot of action are these (again ignore the pitch):



All the patterns below are given in 3-2 direction, which is by far the most common direction in merengue.

A word on notation. As the dance steps suggest, merengue is played with a two-feel – it's often written in 4/4, but always *felt* in two. Tapping the clave in one hand and the pulse in the other is a good preparatory exercise to internalise this two feel:

RH

LH

HARMONY

Overwhelmingly, merengue harmony is just V-I, repeating over and over, in either a major or minor key. On occasion merengue tunes may contain sections of more involved chordal motion, but you'll find you spend 95% of your time seesawing between the dominant and tonic chords, so this is where you need to put in the practice.

The patterns below are given in minor – the chords are G7b9 Cm. To adjust them for use over G7 C, just convert the Abs to As and the Ebs to Es.

By the way, typical merengue keys tend to be the piano-friendly ones. The flat keys beloved of jazz horn players are rarer. If you've read any of my jazz literature, you'll know that I advise getting things down thoroughly in one key before going through all the others. It's good exercise to take these patterns round the clock, but get comfortable in one key first.

THE PATTERNS

The basic chord shapes are similar to what you play in classic Cuban son – a four-note octave triad in the RH and a three-note triad in the LH.

G (7b9) Cm

The image shows two chord shapes side-by-side. The first is G (7b9) and the second is Cm. Each chord is represented by a four-note octave triad in the right hand (RH) and a three-note triad in the left hand (LH). The notation is in 4/4 time and uses a treble clef for the RH and a bass clef for the LH.

We can think in terms of “classic” and “modern” merengue – the dividing line between the two being roughly the 1960s. There are changes in instrumentation and specific rhythmic patterns, but the main distinction between classic and modern merengue is velocity. Modern merengue is played much faster, and this has implications for the piano part.

You should practise these patterns with at very least a metronome set to tick on one and three. A drum machine is far better – there are some pretty useful MIDI merengue patterns out there.

To begin with we'll take a brief look at some typical patterns for classic merengue.

CLASSIC MERENGUE

The basic piano pattern in this style is this (remember that the final eighth note in bar four is an anticipation of the downbeat in bar one and should be thought of as belonging to that bar):



There are two common ways to simplify this pattern. The first just omits the top of the octaves in the RH part. You can then adjust the fingering to make the pattern more comfortable to play at speed. This pattern then has a much less frenetic character due to the lack of prominent higher notes. It can be used when the arrangement calls for a less lively, less obtrusive piano part:



The other simplification substitutes the thirds for some of the octaves to avoid some of the fast octave motion. This too is a somewhat less active pattern:

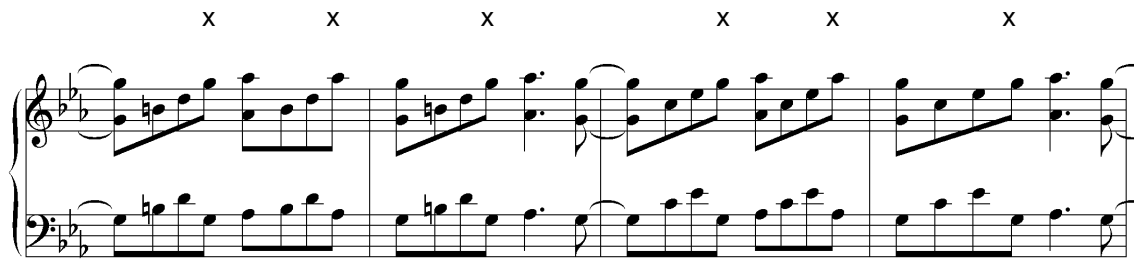


It's common to creatively vary the basic pattern with extra arpeggiation. The fullest expansion of this approach comprises an almost constant barrage of eighth-notes:



Actually, you could take this approach to the extreme and arpeggiate on every eighth note (play bar 1 twice then bar 3 twice, both without the ties). This achieves maximum activity, but results in a clave-neutral pattern.

The RH octave jumping bits (da-da) are very effective, but can get tough at speed. Don't let on that I said so, but it's possible to cheat at these bits by leaving out the RH thumb where marked:



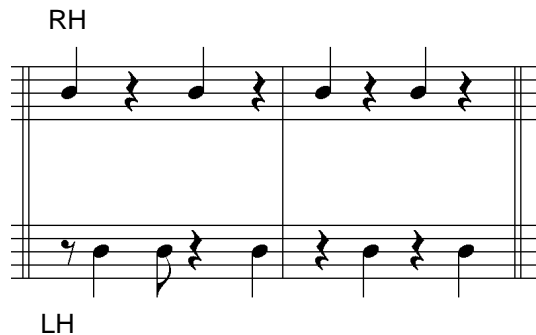
Further variation is achieved by altering the notes used for the octave seesaw bits.

It's good to get these classic patterns under your fingers, even if your chops aren't up to maintaining them at fast tempos. They are often interspersed occasionally to add variety to the more modern patterns.

MODERN MERENGUE

At the warp-speed tempos of modern merengue, the classic patterns are not only liable to cause tendonitis, they are also far too busy and tend to obscure the rhythm.

What we do in the faster modern style is to split the rhythm implied by the classic pattern between the two hands (rhythm only, ignore the notes):



Try tapping this cross-handed rhythm for a while. Note that we've slightly smoothed out the classic rhythm by adding the four in the final bar and shifting the anticipated note at the end of the final bar forwards onto beat one of the first bar. The basic modern pattern, then is this:



Start off by practising the hands separately – I'd recommend starting with the more complicated LH part. Once you have that ingrained, it's relatively simple to add the RH part, which is just the downbeat pulse.

So far, so good, but it's a bit ordinary. The next step is to arpeggiate the LH triad (the RH stays the same):



This immediately sounds more active. You don't have to do this arpeggiation on just the first and fifth LH "hit" as written. You can arpeggiate any of the "hits" in any combination (or even all of them – but again, the pattern will become busier and more clave-neutral).

A common RH variation doubles up some or all of the RH hits like this:



As with the LH arpeggiations, these can be freely mixed and matched.

Some of these doubled-up RH patterns sound great with LH arpeggiation. However, when doubling up the RH hits, you often simplify the LH part in one of the following ways:



The four notes of the RH chord don't have to alternate octaves and thirds. They can be divided up in lots of different ways, and you can add 7ths or 9ths to the dominant chord. This can give the pattern more of a melodic flavour (a bit like harmonised horn stabs).

There are also seesawing possibilities (usually in the RH only) such as the following:



And similar ideas that incorporate seesawing or extra chordal motion on extra beats:



And wherever you have a crotchet chord in the RH part, you can arpeggiate it, usually but not necessarily upwards, over two eighth notes.

THE NEXT STAGE

That's pretty much all there is to the basic merengue piano vocabulary. Run through the patterns one at a time at first, then practise improvising by switching freely between them.

There are limitless possibilities for variation – try using different inversions of the chord voicings in either hand or both hands, for instance. This can make for some interesting harmony between the hands on those occasions where the two parts coincide.

Various syncopations are also used – for instance, the classic merengue anticipation over the barline into the 3 side of clave can also be used in the modern style. But it's best to do some solid work on the basic patterns before experimenting with more advanced offbeat figures. That way, you internalise the definitive rhythmic figures so that your ear (and gut) can guide you as to what kind of syncopations will best fit.

Once you've internalised these patterns, you'll hear variations of them all over the place. If you hear a variation you like, transcribe it and add it to your bag of tricks. All good merengue pianists have spent time transcribing dozens of little patterns and partial figures.

With the basic vocab given here under your belt, you should find it quite easy to hear variations clearly. But if the piano part is moving too quickly for you to get it, there are some very good computer programs available that allow you to slow down a music clip without altering the pitch.

Of course, you should also play around and come up with your own ideas.

Occasionally there'll be a piano solo, and soloing in this style tends to be the very busiest level of comping, rather than the single-line solo style of jazz.

THE GOLDEN RULE

Never forget that merengue is *dance* music. Groove is all that matters. Everything you play should be directed towards one goal – to make that roomful of people move...

Best of luck with this stuff. Free to e-mail me with any (preferably constructive) comments at jlyon@opus28.co.uk.

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