

# The Clave: Its Transformation and Development



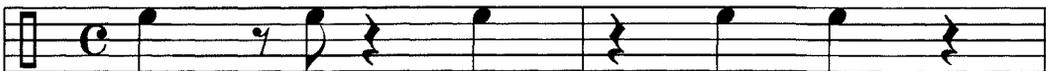
Fig 3.0

## THE CLAVE & THE PULSE

Perhaps the most outstanding and unique characteristic in Cuban music is the binary concept - and rhythmic pattern - called *clave* (klah-veh). This pattern is often played on the instrument known as *claves* - two round, polished sticks which are struck together - or on other percussion instruments. (fig. 3.0):

The *clave* pattern is used in today's salsa music, in virtually every rhythmic style. (fig. 3.1):

### 3.1 Clave in 4/4



The *clave* pattern shown above is written in the contemporary notation of 4/4. Traditionally, *clave* was written in 2/4, but has undergone several transformations over the years, as will be discussed. *Clave* is a pattern consisting of two rhythmic figures in a relationship of tension-relaxation. It is structured in a two-measure phrase, which is “held together” by a half-note pulse on beats 1 and 3. It is the pulse which maintains the stability of the rhythm, as many of the polyrhythmic parts played by the various instruments of an ensemble tend to be syncopated, accenting the up-beats. Therefore, one must begin by understanding the relationship between the *clave* and the pulse. (fig. 3.2):

Ortiz refers to the *clave* pattern as one of many Afro-Cuban “rhythmic cells”, which is sub-divided into two distinct parts that remain invariable.<sup>1</sup> It consists of a measure of three notes and another measure of two notes, and can be played two ways: “three-two” or “two-three”, depending upon which measure is first.

<sup>1</sup> Ortiz, Fernando. *La africanía de la música folklórica de Cuba*. Havana, 1950, 276.

### 3.2 Clave & Pulse

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'Clave' and contains a 3-2 pattern: a half note on the first beat, a quarter note on the second beat, and a quarter note on the third beat. The bottom staff is labeled 'Pulse' and contains a 2-3 pattern: a quarter note on the first beat, a quarter note on the second beat, a quarter note on the third beat, and a quarter note on the fourth beat.

We can also refer to each measure individually by differentiating between the “three-side” and the “two-side” of the *clave*. (figs. 3.3a & 3.3b):

#### 3.3a Clave in 3-2 Direction

The image shows a single musical staff with a 3-2 pattern: a half note on the first beat, a quarter note on the second beat, and a quarter note on the third beat. The first two measures are labeled 'three-side' and the last two measures are labeled 'two-side'.

#### 3.3b Clave in 2-3 Direction

The image shows a single musical staff with a 2-3 pattern: a quarter note on the first beat, a quarter note on the second beat, a quarter note on the third beat, and a quarter note on the fourth beat. The first two measures are labeled 'two-side' and the last two measures are labeled 'three-side'.

The *clave* is the foundation of most Cuban rhythms, as instrument patterns, melodic phrases and even improvisation revolve around it. This unique relationship of the *clave* to all of the other instruments remains fixed. That is to say, once the *clave* pattern begins, it does not stop and reverse itself (or, “turn around”). The result is a condition known as being “cruzado”, which in Spanish literally means “crossed”; in English one would refer to this undesirable condition as being “off-clave”, or “on the wrong side of the clave”. This will become more clear as you understand the concept of “phrasing with the clave” (later in this chapter), and the individual relationship of each instrument to the *clave* (Chap. IV, “Instrument Patterns and Clave”). Therefore, the *clave* is the first “cell” or pattern one must understand and practice before moving ahead.

EXERCISE 1: Clap the *clave* while tapping the pulse with your foot; or, tap the clave with one hand (on your lap or a table), and the pulse with the other hand, then switch hands. It is also helpful to use two distinct sounds - such as the voice and hands - in order to hear each part. Begin “three-two”; then stop and begin “two-three”, in order to hear each pattern individually. Continue until it feels comfortable.