

Joropo: Music Inspired by Nature from the High Plains of Venezuela

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What is Joropo, and how is it inspired by nature?

OVERVIEW

In this lesson students will dance, sing in Spanish, and learn the basic rhythm of Joropo music. They will investigate how Joropo culture is inspired by the people of the high western plains of Venezuela and their relationship to the animals, plants, and geography of their natural environment. Students will also learn how oral tradition preserves and celebrates the unique history of the Venezuelan people.



Illustration: Henrique Gomes

Joropo Llanero is a cultural expression from the western high plains (*llanos*) of Venezuela. Like many dance and music styles in South America, it is a mixture of Indigenous, African, and Spanish traditions. During colonialism in Venezuela, enslaved Indigenous and African peoples would watch their Spanish enslavers dance waltzes inside their mansions. As a joke, they created their own dance mocking the waltz by exaggerating its movements. Thus, Joropo was born as a genre of resistance against the oppression of enslavers.

But Joropo is not only a genre of music or dance, it is an event where people come to dance and celebrate. It is a party. Historically, people of the *llanos* might say that they are “going to the Joropo.” In fact, the word “Joropo” replaced the original Spanish word for these festivities, Fandango. Fandango, like Joropo, is not only a genre of music, it is an event of African origin, made popular in Spain, where people gathered to dance and celebrate.

The music of Joropo is also intimately related to the animals, flowers, and landscapes of the region. Its lyrics, chord shapes (the placement of fingers on a stringed-instrument to create music), and themes take inspiration from the natural world, and are an integral part in understanding the culture of the people of the Venezuelan *llanos*. Joropo chord shapes originally had the nomenclature of the animal’s footprint, such as that of a dog, duck, or tapir, and the lyrics of the songs are poems describing the flora, fauna, and daily life of *llaneros* (“people of the plains”) as they interact with their livestock on their farms. The *llaneros* tend to have great knowledge of the behavior of flora and fauna during the cycles of dry and rainy seasons in Venezuela, as it is integral to their survival.

Joropo dance movements have been inspired by the movements of the animals in their natural habitat as well. During the second half of the 20th century, an influential Venezuelan dancer

named Jovita Nieto created new steps from her observation of animals of the *llanos*, such as the heron, the *tuqueque* (salamander), the *danta* (tapir), and the *picure* (large rodent). Each new step has its own name such as “tutequeao step”, “the picurera returns,” and “the return of the picurera”.

Though it is an oral tradition, Joropo has been incorporated into classical music and played in symphonic spaces. *El Sistema*, a famous program in Venezuela that seeks to systematize classical music training for at-risk youth, has a project called “*Alma Llanera*,” where children and young people perform traditional songs in the context of classical music. Joropo Llanero is also heard in eclectic contemporary settings by young artists such as the C4 Trío ensemble, an ensemble of three *cuatro* players who perform percussion, complex harmonies, and unpredictable, energetic breaks on their *cuatros* (a Venezuelan 4-stringed lute) while innovating within the Joropo genre.

Presently, Venezuela is experiencing one of the most massive mobilizations in the history of South America. Due to the economic, political, and social crisis, many Venezuelans have gone to other countries, and the Venezuelan diaspora is now one of the most significant in modern history. Joropo Llanero continues to be a music of Venezuelans the world over. As they listen, play, and innovate within the genre, they feel closer to home while preserving the culture of the high plains. When Venezuelans miss home they might say, “I miss the Joropo,” because they miss the opportunity to come together and play, commune, dance, and eat with friends and loved ones. It is a form of resistance in the face of adversity, inside and outside their country, through the act of playing music.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- How to play the rhythms of Joropo
- How to sing the lyrics of traditional Joropo song and dance
- Spanish vocabulary related to Joropo and the High Plains in Venezuela
- How Joropo music is inspired by animals native to the High Plains in Venezuela

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to draw connections between the natural environment of the Venezuelan High Plains and Joropo by learning the rhythms, dances, and lyrics of the musical style.

ACTIVITIES

VOCABULARY INTRODUCTION

1. Distribute to students **Handout - Joropo Vocabulary Flashcards** (you may need to cut the flashcards out beforehand).
2. Introduce students to the Spanish vocabulary used in this lesson by going through the **Joropo Vocabulary Slideshow**.
3. Explore the document **Suggested Activities for LADAMA Vocabulary Flash Cards** for suggestions on ways students can practice Spanish using the flash cards either before the lesson or as homework.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Inform students they will be learning about Joropo music in class. Play **Clip 1, Joropo Performance**. Then ask students:
 - Can you describe what Joropo music sounds like to you?
 - How does Joropo music make you feel? Does this music make you want to do something (sing, dance, etc.)?
 - How does the musician look while playing? Does she look sad, or serious, or happy? What does this tell you about Joropo music?
 - What might the people in the audience be doing while the Joropo music is being played?

PROCEDURE

1. Show **Image 1, Venezuela and the High Plains**. Inform students that Joropo music is from the High Plains of Venezuela. The plains are called **Llanos** in Spanish, and are tropical grassland that covers the southern and eastern parts of the country. Explain to students they are looking at an artistic rendition of the country and the High Plains. Then ask students:
 - What are some of the things you notice about these pictures?
 - Does the picture on the right of the High Plains remind of anywhere you have lived or visited?
 - How would you compare the image of the High Plains to where you live. For example, do you live somewhere with more trees, or different kinds of plants?
2. Inform students that the people that create this music are known as **llaneros**, which means “people of the High Plains” in English. Practice pronouncing “Llaneros” as a class.

3. Tell students that *llaneros* sing, dance, and eat to Joropo. It helps build their community. Ask students:

- Can you think of any activity that builds a community? For instance, is there a type of event or music that brings your family and friends together?

4. Inform students that young Llaneros learn how to play Joropo by watching and listening to older people play. Because it's not written down, Joropo is an oral tradition. In this case, "oral" means "by mouth." Ask students:

- Are there songs that you have learned through oral tradition? What are some songs that your parents, friends, or family members have sung to you?

5. Show **Image 2, Animals in the Venezuelan High Plains**. Inform students that Joropo is inspired by the animals in the High Plains. As a class, pronounce each animal's Spanish, and then English name.

6. Play **Clip 2, Joropo Chords**. Then ask students:

- How did the animals you saw in the previous picture influence Joropo? (*The musician shapes their fingers like various animal paw prints to play chords on the Bandola*).

(If splitting the lesson across sessions, this would be an appropriate break point.)

7. Inform students that they will now learn how to play Joropo. First, they will be learning to play the rhythms of Joropo. Ask students to stand up, and explain that they will be performing along with this interactive video. Play and perform along with **Clip 3, Joropo Rhythm** (*Note to teacher: feel free to pause and review at any point in the video. To help guide students during the activities, refer to*

Handout - Joropo Teacher's Guide as needed).

After the video, ask students:

- Have you heard this rhythm before? Is it similar to another rhythm you are familiar with?
- How does playing the music feel different than just listening to the music in the previous video?

8. **Activity for General Music Class:** Use **Handout - Joropo Teacher's Guide** and to show students how to play the Bandola chords and melody on the guitar.

9. Inform students that they will now be learning to sing Joropo. Ask students to stand up, and explain that they will be performing along with this interactive video. Play and perform along with **Clip 4, Joropo Song**. . Pause the video as needed to practice the steps, vocals, and pronunciation, or use the below excerpted sections of the clip:

- **Joropo Song: The Tanio**
- **Joropo Song: The Verse**
- **Joropo Song: Playing the Tanio and Verse Together**

10. After the playing the video, ask students:

- Have you ever sung in Spanish before?
- Do you know a song that describes your environment that might remind you of home?

11. **Activity for General Music Class:** Use the last transcription on *Handout - Joropo Teacher's Guide* to teach students how to play the vocal melody on other instruments. and have students play the vocal melody on other instruments.

12. Inform students that they will now be learning to dance Joropo. Ask students to stand up, and explain that they will be performing along with this interactive video. Play and perform along with **Clip 5, “Joropo Dance.”** Pause the video as needed to practice the steps, vocals, and pronunciation, or use the below excerpted sections of the clip.

- **Joropo Dance: Paso Basico**
- **Joropo Dance: Dance with a Partner**
- **Joropo Dance: Zapateo**
- **Joropo Dance: Create Your Own Movement**

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Ask students:

- What was your favorite part of learning Joropo? Did you like counting the rhythms, dancing, or singing?
- Can you think of a song that is inspired by animals, like Joropo?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Invent a new game! What can your class create that builds community and develops the culture of the classroom? Consider all of the tools you have: song, dance, rhythm, language, and your imagination. Teach your new game to friends and family! Games could include:

- **Dance Dance Freeze:** students freeze where they are when the music stops.
- **Mirror Movement:** pair students up, and have one student mirror the dance moves of the other. Follow the leader: Choose a leader, and have the rest of the class copy the dance movements of the leader.
- **Follow the Leader:** Choose a leader, and have the rest of the class copy the dance movements of the leader.

13. Free form dance and rhythm playing! Play **Clip 6, “Pajarillo”**. Encourage students to listen to the song and move around and dance in the room using the tools they have just learned - clapping, singing in Spanish, dance movement. After the activity, ask students how it felt to explore the space with their new tools.

STANDARDS

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION – NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MUSIC EDUCATION (NAFME)

Core Music Standard: Creating

Plan and Make: Select and develop musical ideas for defined purposes and contexts.

Evaluate and Refine: Evaluate and refine selected musical ideas to create musical work(s) that meet appropriate criteria.

Present: Share creative musical work that conveys intent, demonstrates craftsmanship, and exhibits originality.

Core Music Standard: Performing

Analyze: Analyze the structure and context of varied musical works and their implications for performance.

Interpret: Develop personal interpretations that consider creators' intent.

Rehearse, Evaluate, and Refine: Evaluate and refine personal and ensemble performances, individually or in collaboration with others.

Present: Perform expressively, with appropriate interpretation and technical accuracy, and in a manner appropriate to the audience and context.

Core Music Standard: Responding

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

Creating

Anchor Standard 1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 3: Refine and complete artistic work.

Performing/Presenting/Producing

Anchor Standard 5: Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.

Anchor Standard 6: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

Responding

Anchor Standard 7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Core Music Standard: Connecting

Anchor Standard 10: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Anchor Standards 11: Relate artistic ideas and work with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and

multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 9 : Global Connections



RESOURCES

VIDEO RESOURCES

- *LADAMA* - Mafer Bandola Joropo Performance
- *LADAMA* - Joropo Rhythm
- *LADAMA* - Joropo Chords
- *LADAMA* - Joropo Song
- *LADAMA* - Joropo Dance
- *LADAMA* - "Pajarillo"

HANDOUTS

- Handout - Cumbia Vocabulary Flash Cards
- Cumbia Vocabulary Slide Show
- Handout - Suggested Activities for Vocabulary Flashcards
- Teacher's Guide: Joropo