

The Sinaloan Tuba in the Renewal of 21st Century Mexican Regional Music

La tuba sinaloense en la renovación de la música regional mexicana del siglo XXI

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the importance of tuba on *banda* and Mexican regional music, under the actual expansion of tuba and accordion bands. This approach retrieves documental sources and notes of participant observation about musicians of bands and *conjuntos* in Tijuana. In contrast to other studies concerning banda music groups in Mexico, the present work highlights the musical exchanges to and from the United States as catalysts for the technical development of the instrument and its adoption in popular bands. This vision brings a cross-border approach to the studies on the development of banda and conjunto in both sides of the border. In conclusion, it also highlights the importance of tuba for the contemporary Mexican regional music, which was integrated to the transnational music industry as a part of subaltern musical manifestation.

Keywords: 1. tuba, 2. Sinaloan banda music, 3. mexican regional music, 4. transnational music industry, 5. transborder cultural exchange.

RESUMEN

Este artículo reflexiona sobre la importancia de la tuba tanto en la música de banda como en la música regional mexicana, como parte del auge comercial de agrupaciones de tuba y acordeón o *norteño-banda*. Esta aproximación recupera fuentes documentales y notas de observación participante con músicos de bandas y conjuntos de Tijuana. A diferencia de otros estudios sobre bandas de viento en México, el presente trabajo destaca los intercambios musicales desde y hacia Estados Unidos como catalizadores del desarrollo técnico del instrumento y su adopción en las bandas populares. Esta visión aporta un enfoque transfronterizo a los estudios sobre el desarrollo de la banda y el conjunto en ambos lados de la frontera. Finalmente, se destaca también la importancia de la tuba para la música regional mexicana contemporánea, misma que se integró a la industria musical transnacional como parte de una manifestación musical subalterna.

Palabras clave: 1. tuba, 2. música de banda sinaloense, 3. música regional mexicana, 4. industria cultural transnacional, 5. intercambios culturales transfronterizos.

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INTRODUCTION

According to legend, when Gregorio “Goyo” Trejo and his musicians were on their way to the town of San Javier to enliven the town festivities, they had an accident in the Sierra de Sonora. The most tragic consequence was the damage to the instrument “Goyo” himself played: the tuba. Since it was the first time musicians had come to San Javier, the locals took the tuba to the town’s blacksmith, hoping he could repair it. To their surprise, the blacksmith completely straightened the tuba, thinking it had been twisted in the accident. Without a functioning tuba, the musicians decided not to play at the festivities.

The enormous tuba requires special care, dedicated transportation, and a skilled musician to make it sound. The fact that the story of “Goyo Trejo’s” tuba was brought to the big screen highlights the significance of musicians and their instruments in town life, even in the most remote areas. It also underscores the complexities associated with an instrument like the tuba.² Whether the story is true or not, the tuba remains a vital instrument for regional bands. It is essential for traditional ensembles and is now also integral to new groups that combine the tuba with the accordion and *bajo sexto* (Mexican string instrument from the guitar family with 12 strings in six double courses).

The tuba stands as an emblematic instrument in contemporary Mexican popular music. Its prominent visibility and distinctive sound embody the expressive culture found in town orchestras and wind bands. Among these regional musical styles, the Sinaloan *banda* or *tambora* has garnered significant popularity, largely due to its extensive media presence over the past six decades. Since the early 20th century, the sousaphone tuba has been integral to the Sinaloan *banda*, becoming an iconic symbol closely associated with the people of Sinaloa (refer to Photograph 1).

This article aims to highlight the pivotal role of the tuba as a wind instrument in the evolution of *tambora* music in Sinaloa, and its revitalized importance in contemporary forms of Mexican regional music.

To begin the exploration of the tuba’s role in Sinaloan music and its current role in new *norteño* music, a brief overview of the instrument's origins is provided. As will be detailed further on, these origins trace back to technological advancements during the early modern era. The acoustic and industrial engineering progress of the 19th century enabled the production of metallic wind instruments capable of producing audible sound in open fields, meeting the requirements of military bands at the dawn of modernity.³

² This refers to Sergio Galindo’s film *La tuba de Goyo Trejo* (1983), shot in the mountains of the state of Sonora; a *costumbrista* cinema that recreates the customs of the mountain populations.

³ Modernity has been understood as a socio-historical process that began in the 19th century. During this era of capitalism’s consolidation as a mode of production, nation-states emerged focused on individual rights, parliamentary democratic schemes, and cultural identity. This was solidified through wars and armed conflicts that also sought national unification or succession in the decline of imperial powers. According to Francfort (2005), musicians in bands set the rhythm for this era.

Photograph 1. Sousaphone Tuba in Plaza Santa Cecilia,
Zona Centro, Tijuana



Source: Personal archive.

The tuba, the lowest-pitched wind instrument, is also the most striking due to its size and shape. It features prominently in ensembles and groups leading the commercially popular genre known as regional Mexican music, which enjoys wide distribution in Mexico and the United States.⁴ Within this commercial label, the tuba is integral to both banda music and new norteño groups that include the accordion and tuba. In this context, it is important to explain how the sousaphone tuba made its way to Sinaloa from the United States.

The tuba serves as a sonic and iconic emblem of contemporary norteño music and a symbol of identity for both Sinaloan and norteño culture. Therefore, it is essential to highlight aspects related to musical production and creation in the popular urban spheres across the transborder region of Mexico and the United States, where new styles derived from norteño and banda music are emerging. Over the past decade, several popular groups—such as Calibre 50, Los Plebes del Rancho, Los Buknas de Culiacán, Revolver Cannabis, Doble Impresión, Carteles Unidos, and Los

⁴ There is also a significant market and considerable influence of banda music and norteño ensembles in Colombia and Chile, according to the research of Montoya Arias (2014).

Nuevos Elegantes—have successfully fused the tuba with the accordion, both of which are emblematic instruments for *norteño* and wind band music.

It could be argued that the fusion of the tuba and accordion is not entirely novel; however, the use of the tuba has gained an unusual and special significance, becoming more visibly prominent due to its presence in commercial groups of *farabanda*, *norteño-banda*, *bandeño*, and even *technobanda* with tuba.⁵

Finally, if the origin of brass instruments is associated with military uses, it should come as no surprise that the evolution of the tuba's role—both visibly and audibly—coincides with the escalation of the fight against drug trafficking and rampant violence throughout Mexico. This is understandable, as the so-called narcoculture produces aesthetic products that reflect the cultural matrix emerging from these communities.

These popular elements, sometimes portrayed stereotypically, acquire significance through their consumption by an increasingly broad audience. In this context, the tuba has persisted as the imposing instrument that anchors the lowest harmonic line over which the melodies of what is now termed *música bélica*, *tumbada*, or *alterada* unfold.

A MYTHICAL INSTRUMENT

Tubas, like trumpets, are wind instruments within the brass family. According to available organographic and organological sources, they trace their origins to ancient animal horns, likely of Egyptian origin (Lindemann, 1999). However, the earliest metal precursor to these instruments can be attributed to the *salpinx*, possibly of Greek or Etruscan origin, whose sound could carry over a distance and was used in processions and invocations (Ziolkowski, 1999). From these early instruments, the horn, trumpet, and tuba evolved.

Among wind instruments, tubas stand out as the largest, most visible, and capable of producing the deepest sound. The term “tuba” encompasses a variety of metallic wind instruments, each differing in size. It is important to note that the instrument studied here for its role in Sinaloan tambora music is the sousaphone, often interchangeably referred to as a tuba.

Returning to the previous point, there seems to be no foundational myth regarding the creation of the tuba, unlike the somewhat extravagant myths found in classical epic poetry for stringed instruments (such as the lyre), woodwinds (like the pan flute), and percussion instruments. The absence of a divine creation myth for metal instruments is likely not due to a transmission error but rather to the negative associations they held among the Greeks, who linked them closely with war and funerals. This association may have discouraged poets from inventing such myths (Ziolkowski, 1999).

⁵ *Farabanda*, or the fusion of wind band and *fara-fara* (the name given to the ensemble in the state of Nuevo León); *norteño-banda* or *bandeño*, the name used to designate the ensemble of accordion and tuba (González Sánchez, 2016).

On the other hand, biblical references indicate that the walls of the city of Jericho were brought down with a trumpet. In the literary tradition continued by the Romans, however, metal instruments did not receive significant praise beyond their association with war and funerals in the ancient empire or as musical tools associated with lower-class citizens or foreigners.

In the evolution of brass instruments and wind music in the Western tradition, significant influences include other musical traditions, notably that of the Turkish military ensemble known as the *mehter*. This ensemble portrayed a powerful and exotic image of the Ottoman sultan to German armies, who adopted the concept of the Janissary band comprising trumpets, shawms, and drums (Bowles, 2006). This historical context is relevant given that in 18th-century Europe, the *Harmoniemusik* ensemble consisted of oboes, bassoons, clarinets, and horns, later incorporating Turkish percussion instruments such as cymbals, drums, tambourine, and sistrum (Ruiz Torres, 2002). While it could be argued that these Turkish-style bands were somewhat superficial imitations and overly Westernized (Pirker, 1990; Signell, 1968), they contributed to the development of distinctive musical forms in Central and Eastern Europe. These forms were subsequently transported to American territories during the migration waves of the 19th century, underscoring the significance of European origins in studies of musical bands, particularly in Germany.

TECHNICAL EVOLUTION

The tuba is classified among the metal aerophones, producing sound through lip vibration. Essentially, it is a tubular instrument sounded by the exhalation of the musician and the vibration of their lips against a circular mouthpiece (Sachs, 2012). The length of the coiled tube, lip tension, speed, and direction of airflow channeled through the instrument's valves determine its pitch. Thus, the acoustic properties of brass instruments hinge on the physical efforts of the musician, particularly involving their oral cavities and lips, to produce a column of air inside the instrument that interacts with the external ambient air. Consequently, sound is generated by stationary waves traveling from one end of the tube to the other, with longer tubes producing lower pitches naturally (Phillips & Winkle, 1992).

Before the 19th century, these instruments were crafted using artisanal techniques. Since then, however, they have evolved with advancements in engineering and acoustics. Brass wind instruments, particularly those used in wind bands, exemplify products of modernity. They apply principles of musical engineering through valve and piston systems, utilize interchangeable mass-produced parts, and achieve a standardized sound. According to Western conventions, tubas are typically designed with a nominal pitch of B \flat (B-flat), covering a range spanning one to four octaves (Myers, 2009; Sullivan, 2011).

According to Micah Everett (2013), a professor at the University of Mississippi, the invention of the valve had a profound musical impact. Patented by Heinrich Stölzel (1777-1844) and Friedrich Blühmel (1777-1845) in the mid-1810s, the valve enabled the development of the tuba.

The first tuba-bass (likely in F) was patented in 1835, credited to Prussian bandmaster Wilhelm Wieprecht (1802-1872) and instrument maker J.G. Moritz (1777-1840) for its invention.

According to Everett (2013), the initial invention of the valve led to the development of another type of rotary valve known as the *Berliner Pumpen*. Blühmel designed and manufactured the first rotary valve (in the form of keys) around 1820, which was quickly refined by manufacturers in Prague and Vienna. However, these models were soon replaced by Etienne Périnet's piston valves in 1838. This piston valve design remains predominant today. It operates similarly to the *bombardino*, named by its inventor Adolphe Sax (1814-1894), who also invented the saxhorn, an instrument equally important to the tuba in band music (Beauregard, 1970).

These details are significant as they offer insight into the types of instruments present during the waves of migration from Eastern Europe to America, particularly Texas and northern Mexico. Tubas (along with all other brass instruments) were already equipped with piston or rotary valves, similar to their modern counterparts. The tuba has been listed in various wind instrument catalogs in Europe and the United States since 1886 (Myers, 1998). In Mexico, from the late 19th century onwards, tubas and helicons were included in the instrument and accessories catalog of A. Wagner and Levien (Díaz Santana, 2016).

Now, regarding the invention of an instrument as large as the tuba, it is clear that it significantly enhanced harmonic capabilities in military bands and orchestras by producing deep sounds. Technical advancements of the time enabled sufficient volume production, achieving a balance between band and orchestral instruments—a challenge prior to the invention of the piston valve (Everett, 2013). By the mid-19th century, wind instruments had undergone refinements that allowed bands to perform symphonic music and opera overtures, shifting away from the dominance of reed instruments toward brass instruments with circular mouthpieces (Ruiz Torres, 2002).

Entering the 20th century, orchestras had functional brass instruments capable of projecting powerful sound outdoors, allowing them to be heard in marches, parades, and public military band performances (Francfort, 2005). More importantly, these instruments became integral to town bands, which have held significant political and ceremonial roles from the late 19th century to the present day (Thomson, 1994).

During the early 20th century, the mass production of brass instruments with circular mouthpieces lowered their prices, making them accessible to most military bands and gradually increasing the number of performers (Ruiz Torres, 2002). As orchestras and bands demanded more tubas, instruments like the helicon, serpent, and ophicleide were replaced by the tuba and sousaphone. Notably, these brass instruments quickly became standard in musical ensembles in American cities. Tubas played a vital role in the early development of New Orleans jazz and the Dixieland style (Megill & Demory, 2001), and they were especially significant in school bands.

SOUSA'S TUBA

The sousaphone has surpassed all other types of tubas in its widespread use. While it is clearly a member of the brass family, it is important to note that “brass instruments” no longer necessarily refer to the construction material, which can also be plastic or fiberglass. The valve and piston system characterizes modern brass instruments. In any case, the European tuba known as the helicon is considered the precursor to the sousaphone, while the serpent is regarded as the oldest direct functional ancestor of the tuba.

The sousaphone is named in honor of its inventor, the American John Philip Sousa, a military band director and composer who adapted the original tuba design. His design allows the instrument to rest on the musician's shoulder, with the bell positioned above the head and pointing forward (Phillips & Winkle, 1992). This instrument does not represent an evolution of the tuba in terms of sound, but rather in terms of adaptability; it emerged from the idea of a wearable tuba that a musician could play while marching. Although the length of the coiled tube can measure up to 36 feet (depending on the brand and the period of its construction), the fundamental difference lies in the bell: the sousaphone's bell faces forward, while the tuba's bell points upward.⁶

The sousaphone originated from a request made by Sousa to the manufacturer J.W. Pepper around 1893, as musicians in his band used instruments crafted by Pepper. Essentially, J.W. Pepper modified a BB-flat helicon tuba (natural B) by handcrafting it with a removable bell that points upward. Between 1918 and 1920, Sousa initially used regular tubas in his band before exclusively switching to sousaphones, fondly referring to the instrument as the “raincatcher” (Everett, 2013).

Most sousaphones are in the key of Bb(B-flat) and are equipped with three piston valves. This digital valve system is integrated into the body of the tube, which can be made of brass, fiberglass, or plastic. To reduce the weight of the naturally heavy brass body, fiberglass bells were introduced. These were patented in 1961 by C.G. Conn Ltd., an instrument manufacturer that had already developed its own version of the sousaphone by 1898 (Phillips & Winkle, 1992).

In this context, it is crucial to emphasize the 1920s and 1930s, when the sousaphone gained popularity among high school and college bands in the United States. This surge in popularity may have been influenced by the widespread appeal of John Philip Sousa's band, which was among the most popular in musical history before The Beatles, drawing large audiences to their tours and concerts (Brucher & Reily, 2013).

Certainly, while the historical importance of military bands is undeniable, equally significant has been the adoption of the tuba in popular and subaltern contexts. The use of Sousa's tuba outside of military settings became prevalent in urban environments through its inclusion in brass bands

⁶ The tuba, characterized by its upward-pointing bell, is also referred to as the Wagner tuba. During the late 19th century, as Romanticism waned and large orchestras became more prevalent, Wagner designed instruments with a modern and imposing aesthetic (Bierley, 2006). For images of the complete C.G. Conn bass line and distinctions among various descendants of the modern tuba, refer to the *Strictly Oompah* blog (Detwiler, 2024).

or street bands in jazz, and notably in the New Orleans style brass bands (predominantly composed of African American musicians).

As a result, the tuba began to appear in orchestras in various cities across the United States, particularly in the so-called Dixieland orchestras (predominantly composed of white musicians). However, it is important to note that the use of the sousaphone outside of military bands expanded to include small orchestras consisting of trumpet, trombone, tuba bass, saxophone, and percussion instruments. This led to the formation of ensembles featuring a frontline with trumpet, trombone, and clarinet, and a rhythmic backline consisting of the tuba or sousaphone along with percussion instruments (Pasetto, 1998). This development is noteworthy because this instrumental arrangement mirrors the typical formation of Sinaloan wind bands. One could argue that small wind orchestras for jazz evolved from military bands, and in turn, Sinaloan bands emerged from these developments.

It is noteworthy that until the 1920s and 1930s, wind band music was a major musical attraction for Americans across all classes and ethnic groups. The widespread presence and use of wind bands in the early 20th century should be emphasized, as nearly every community, neighborhood, or factory had one. According to Victor Greene (1992), wind bands were the popular music of an era characterized by conviviality and musical skill, predating the era of phonographic recordings and broadcasting. Small bands or orchestras were commonplace, allowing anyone, regardless of profession, to participate as a musician. Wind bands embodied the musical spirit of the pre-World War I era, before mass media music shaped communal musical tastes (Keil, 2013).

In studies of Mexican musical ensembles, there seems to be a tendency among scholars to overlook the connections between Mexican wind bands and American marching bands and circus bands. References to military bands are often closely linked to symphonic bands. It is important to recognize that the sousaphone and accordion are common instruments in the southern United States, particularly associated with polka (Russell, 2008), and that musical exchange has been occurring in the region since before the establishment of the border with Mexico.

Moreover, it is crucial to reassess the widespread use of the sousaphone, especially in jazz brass bands, as a key factor in its incorporation into Sinaloan banda music. The temporal alignment of instrumental adoption suggests that the sousaphone, like numerous other instruments, found its way into Sinaloa through transborder exchanges facilitated by the introduction of railway lines in the early twentieth century. The author's aim here is not to provide a comprehensive history of the instrument in Mexico but rather to prompt reflection on its societal roles and uses.

THE SINALOAN BAND AND THE TUBA

At this point, it is pertinent to pose the following question: How did the sousaphone come to be part of the tambora music of the state of Sinaloa? Providing a precise answer is impossible given the absence of clear historical sources that pinpoint the arrival of at least one sousaphone in Mexican musical contexts, particularly within the instrumental lineup of the Sinaloan tambora. Historians and scholars dedicated to bands have not specified the type of tuba used in relation to the origins of

Sinaloan tambora music. Sinaloan tambora originated in the 19th century with the arrival of German immigrants from the Bavarian region, coinciding with the establishment of a musical instrument shop in the port of Mazatlán (Simonett, 2004, 2013). Other less documented researchers or local chroniclers assert that the sound of the Sinaloan band is very similar to that of German and French wind bands, attributing its origins to these countries, especially considering Mazatlán's early 20th-century population predominantly comprised immigrants from such territories (García, 2007). It has also been suggested that the first Sinaloan bands were formed by deserters from military or municipal bands who founded bands in towns, particularly French musicians starting from 1863 (Flores Gastélum, 1988; Loza & Haro, 1994; Sinagawa Montoya, 2002).

Any of these interpretations could be valid and provide potential explanations for the early presence of the tuba in Sinaloan instrumentation, yet they do not specifically clarify the appearance and integration of the sousaphone in town bands.⁷ One hypothesis suggests that its presence may be linked to the spread of jazz bands, as discussed earlier, and the transborder interactions with the United States established in the northwest of Mexico. In this region, mobility was influenced by the geographical features of the Mexican states of Sonora and Sinaloa, situated between the Pacific Ocean and the Sierra Madre Occidental, which historically posed challenges for access to the rest of the territory before the development of modern transportation routes. This movement was facilitated by the introduction of railways connecting the port of Mazatlán, Sinaloa, with Tucson, Arizona, a railway section operational since 1906. Sources confirm the presence of musicians transported by rail from Sinaloa to the city of Nogales, Sonora (González Sánchez, 2010).

Another significant factor contributing to the consolidation of the pathways through which this cultural exchange operates is the MEX-15 highway, which connects Nogales, Sonora, with the rest of the country along the Pacific coast and has been established since 1942. The traffic along this route, the movement of musicians from town to town, and the exchanges among them could explain why the sousaphone is present in Sinaloan tambora music instead of other forms of tuba.

Now, to establish the sousaphone as the quintessential tuba in Sinaloan banda music, a standardized instrumental formation had to be adopted, a process facilitated by the advent of the first recordings. Initially, musical bands in the towns of Sinaloa, particularly those in mountainous regions, lacked strict instrumental uniformity. Research on the history of Sinaloan bands (Simonett, 2004) indicates they utilized euphoniums, and possibly multiple tubas tuned in C or Eb (C or E flat), alongside saxophones or string instruments like violins. It was not until the 1950s, when Banda el Recodo and Los Guamuchileños recorded in Mexico City and Los Angeles, that the current prototypical instrumentation of the banda became established (Simonett, 2004, 2013).

⁷ Unlike other regional ensembles from the northern region, such as the *tamborazo zacatecano*, where the tuba does not serve as the harmonic foundation. In this regional variant, the tambora (bass drum) establishes the rhythms and musical patterns.

However, beyond the instruments, the musical tradition of the banda has preserved in the collective musical memory a sense of harmony built around the tuba (which may have once been any type of bass instrument) and the saxhorn (Eb or E flat), commonly referred to as *armonía*, *charcheta*, or *cococha* by the *banderos* (banda members).

Although the term “saxhorns” is rarely used, with most people referring to them as *charcheta* or *armonía*, it is important to note that these terms not only denote the instrument but also embody a local concept of ostinato, a constant and permanent rhythmic base. This rhythmic base, created by the combination of several instruments, forms a harmonic accompaniment in wind orchestras (Contreras Arias, 1988). The tuba is never alone; its role in *norteña* music is inherently tied to its function within the band: it is always accompanied by the *armonías* (the saxhorns), which typically play offbeat, forming chords in the second or third voice.

Although the role of the *armonía* might seem modest, it is of great importance. The tuba and the saxhorns form a harmonic triad, known among musicians as the base or the cushion on which the performance of the other instruments rests. In banda music, the tuba player not only produces the harmonic bass but also bears rhythmic responsibilities, as the percussion section (tambora and snare drum) does not play continuously. The physical endurance of tuba and *armonía* players is admirable, as they are the only members of the band who never stop playing. Banda music demands virtuosity from the tuba player and stamina from the saxhorn player, especially since only during *cumbias* does the tuba play solo, allowing the saxhorn players to switch to minor percussion (congas and/or güiro).

ALTERED TUBAS

With the advent of new studio recording technologies, it appeared that the large instruments responsible for the harmonic foundation were becoming obsolete. Tubas and *tololoches* (Mexican variant of the European double bass) take up too much space, are very heavy, and are less practical compared to the versatility of an electric bass or a keyboard.

However, significant changes in the way the tuba is played and in the instrumentation of musical ensembles became noticeable and commonplace from the first decade of this century. This phenomenon is due to the emergence of groups known as *norteño-banda*, *bandeño*, *norteño con tuba*, *tuba norteña*, and *farabandas* on the radio and television. These groups and artists are accompanied by instrumental lineups that deviate from the traditional canon of banda or *conjunto* norteño. A precursor to the current visibility of norteño ensembles with tuba was the commercial emergence of the *conjunto sierrero*, which features *bajo quinto* (Mexican string instrument from the guitar family with 10 strings in five double courses), accordion, and tuba. This instrumentation has been used to accompany many singers, such as Tigrillo Palma. Other groups innovated in different directions—like Los Pikadientes de Caborca—forming a small wind band with clarinet and saxophones, accompanied by tuba and *bajo sexto*. When this lineup, which combines the tuba with either the accordion or the *bajo quinto* (or both), added a pedal drum kit, it practically established the instrumental base of the *norteño-banda*.

The genesis of the tuba revolution in Mexican popular music can be traced back to the moment when its representative artists began receiving awards from the music industry, such as the Grammys, Latin Grammys, Billboard Awards, and Premios Lo Nuestro, among others presented annually in the United States.

The emergence of the new instrumental lineup is accompanied by a fresh style of tuba playing characterized by a more fluid approach (*alterado*, *tumbado*, *arremangado*). This shift is driven by the intricate musical figures and the speed at which phrases are executed. Compared to bands of the late 20th century, this new configuration introduces a heightened level of performance complexity. You can *arremangar*, where musicians double or triple their phrasing on instruments like the tuba, accordion, *bajo quinto*, *tololoche*, or others. It deviates from the traditional norteño, signifying more than just a new musical genre—it represents a fusion of norteño (accordion) and banda (tuba) with innovative instrumentation.

Luis Díaz Santana (2016) refers to “a hybrid of norteño music and Sinaloan banda” (p. 184) that accompanies the *alterado* movement. It is important to clarify that this amalgamation of instruments is not a sudden change driven solely by media attention. Various groups, not exclusively affiliated with the *Movimiento Alterado*, also utilize this instrumental combination. Therefore, akin to the introduction of sousaphones in Sinaloa, the rise of the tuba discussed here is rooted in a broader sociocultural process with transnational and cross-border dimensions. This process integrates elements that represent the expressive culture of northern Mexico, where cultural traits from norteño ensembles and tambora musical traditions are reinterpreted upon crossing the border in both directions. These elements provide an identity marker for Mexicans residing in Mexico or the United States.

The style known as *arremangado* (*enfierrado* or *alterado*) corresponds to the playing style of the new generation of musicians associated with the media phenomenon known as the *Movimiento Alterado*. This manifestation is linked to the emergence of the *narcocorrido* music industry, which has connected the cities of Culiacán and Los Angeles since the early 2000s. However, this movement garners attention primarily due to the explicit content of its songs and *corridos* that address themes of drug trafficking and its associated lifestyles. These themes often face censorship from conventional media outlets or opposition from civil authorities and citizens (Morales, 2014). Therefore, the popularity of the *Movimiento Alterado* is not merely due to stylistic innovations or the reinvention of the *grupero* genre. Instead, it reflects the normalization of a culture of violence in music, emerging amidst ongoing social and cultural challenges in the country, including economic crises, migration issues, and the war against drug trafficking (Ramírez Paredes, 2012).

Among the essential elements of wind band music, harmony plays a crucial role, particularly in the interplay between the tuba and the *charcheta* as mentioned earlier. This harmonic counterpoint persisted through the evolution of music within the *onda grupera* genre, where technobandas emerged. By the 1990s, this counterpoint was synthesized as technobandas recreated ostinatos using keyboards and electric bass with similar sounds. In subsequent years, with the rise of the regional Mexican genre known as *pasito duranguense*, this approach evolved to using a pair of

electronic keyboards across the entire ensemble, with one dedicated to maintaining this harmonic foundation.

The *arremangado* tuba playing style (*tubeos arremangados*) involves intricate harmonic progressions featuring precise notes from various scales that evolve into riffs or phrases, resembling improvisations within harmonic lines. This approach highlights the virtuosity of the musician, utilizing syncopations, rapid scales, and increasingly common glissandos. These techniques are employed not only to replicate the resonant bellow of a bull, as seen in tracks like *El toro mambo*, but also to simulate sounds like helicopters or machine guns, achieved through exaggerated consecutive sixteenth notes (Salgado, 2012).

Perhaps these shifts in playing style originated with young tubists who dared to challenge the boundaries of regional musical traditions. The tuba player traditionally had a performatively limited role. In the once monotonous *chun-ta-ta, chun-ta-ta* of the banda, the tuba provided bass support for the entire ensemble, always positioned in the background behind clarinets, trumpets, trombones, and the singer. Consequently, from being practically invisible at the outset of the media boom of the *onda grupera* in the 1990s, the tuba suddenly gained prominence and allure, captivating audiences at urban and rural dances, in clubs, halls, and through internet video clips.

From this evolution, one can discern more intricate and complex bass lines, increased speed in harmonic articulation and fingering. However, a skilled tuba player should exercise caution not to deviate too far from the musical structure of the band, as this could risk straying into territory deemed “alien to the standardized originality” (González, 2014, p. 23) that defines the boundaries of the musical genre. In essence, a deep understanding of the musical language of the band and ensemble, still imparted in band schools across towns, remains the foundation for showcasing one’s skills.

PAYING THE PRICE OF THE TUBA

It may seem as if the tuba has suddenly gained serious recognition. Once an instrument that few children desired in band schools, today there is a shortage of tubas to meet the demand. This unprecedented surge in interest has created a new market, both formal and informal, especially for sousaphone tubas.

The theft of tubas from public schools in Southern California is an unusual yet somewhat predictable occurrence. Notably, five tubas were stolen from Southgate High School and three from Huntington Park, both located in the southern part of the Los Angeles metropolitan area, California. According to reports from journalists, surprisingly, the thieves did not take easily removable computers; their focus was solely on the tubas (National Public Radio [NPR], 2012). Police suspect the perpetrators, as often speculated, to be individuals of Mexican descent who may intend to sell the instruments to musicians in Mexican polka bands (Krissy, 2012; Memmott, 2011).

Between 2011 and 2012, a total of 23 tubas were stolen from schools located in less affluent educational zones of California, with a higher density of Mexican population (NPR, 2012). While unfortunate, reports of stolen tubas from American schools are not uncommon. It is reasonable to infer that these thefts likely supplied instruments to areas where norteño bands featuring tubas are prevalent, and where new bandas and *tamborazos* emerge regularly to meet the musical demands of communities across California and throughout the United States.

It is worth noting that a high-quality tuba typically costs between \$7 000 and \$8 000 USD. Examples include models like the Conn 20K and the Yamaha YSH-411, respectively. Even lower-quality or second-hand tubas can average around \$1 500 USD. While used instruments can be a viable option, they are not always readily available in pawn shops or second-hand stores, which can make tubas inaccessible for many individuals.

It is also important to consider that in Mexico, acquiring musical instruments, especially large ones like the tuba, is not easy due to their high costs. Many tubas available in stores are manufactured in China to meet the significant demand, despite being of lower quality. In ensemble settings, the focus is often on acquiring a tuba quickly rather than on its quality. This contrasts sharply with the approach of town bands, where each instrument has a history—either inherited from families or acquired collectively by the supportive community.

On the other hand, some musicians explore unconventional materials like plastic tubing and water jug cutouts for bells, as seen with bands like Los Increíbles from Puerto Peñasco (Alfaro, 2016). There is also experimentation with the tuba in electronic music contexts, such as Nortec Collective in Tijuana and more recently Band of Bitches from Monterrey. While these innovations are inventive and intriguing, they do not necessarily align with mainstream musical tastes or the pretentious luxury nightlife associated with the paraphernalia of the genre portrayed in their music videos, where the *buchona* or *manguera* aesthetic often accompany the rising visibility of tuba-led bands.

According to Jorge A. González (2014), the creation of ‘stars’ within the music industry necessitates a substantial and widely distributed critical mass of composers, musicians, and groups capable of performing at a professional level. He notes that they generate a plethora of compositions and stage productions that, once within the market’s logic, compel them to pursue a form of “standardized originality” — not too innovative yet not overly provincial— to meet demand (González, 2014, p. 307). This has led to the emergence of numerous groups featuring the lineup of tuba, accordion, and *bajo quinto* — more prevalent than the *bajo sexto* — as well as the transition of many existing northern bands and groups that replaced their bassists with tuba players to handle harmonic duties.

Not all new groups manage to transition from the local or provincial level to the industrial platform; indeed, very few do so due to “the uneven distribution of talent and essential elements such as repertoire, scores, costumes, choreographies, contacts, etc.” (González, 2014, p. 307). The majority remain professionals within small local circuits, congregating on streets or squares where they gather daily with other groups, hoping for gigs at parties or social events amid gossip and

disputes over clients. According to musicians in the *huipa*,⁸ clients prefer to hire groups with a tuba and flashy attire for their parties over simple and ordinary *taka-taka* groups (or *fara-fara* in the northeast). Another economic option to enliven gatherings involves technobandas;⁹ indeed, in Sonora, many advertise “with a tuba” for an extra fee, attempting to enhance the basic karaoke experience accompanied by a tambora and taroletas (timbales and snare drum). The scenario is similar in nightclubs and dance halls across the region where it is common to have a local norteño group as a base; some have incorporated a tuba as they cost less than a full band.

TUBISTS AND TUBA PLAYERS

Given the current surge in popularity of the instrument, there is a significant economic incentive to study and become a tubist. Increasingly, more young people are exploring and experimenting with the instrument in norteño and banda styles, aiming to reach a professional level. However, there has not been a comparable development in the academic study of the tuba as seen in popular banda music. Academic interest in wind banda music, particularly the tuba’s role in tambora, is evident in various publications dedicated to the subject. For example, Isaac D. Andrew (2011), a tubist at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), draws from his experience as a banda musician in discussing the pedagogical value of Sinaloan banda music for tuba training. His thesis emphasizes how this genre enhances improvisational skills through constructing bass lines and themes (Salas, 2011).

Another noteworthy example is Jesse Orth’s dissertation (2015), which explores the significance of the tuba as a symbol of Mexican-American musical culture within the 21st-century Southern California context. Orth discusses recent shifts in the tuba’s role in regional genres and its connection to Mexican musical traditions, highlighting its evolving cultural importance.

An intriguing contribution in this area comes from Jorge Daví Salas (2011), an artist and instructor of tuba and saxhorn at Austin State University. Salas has aimed to advance the technical development of the tuba within conservatory settings by conceptualizing its distinctive sound in banda music and exploring its musical elements. He has delved into various styles within the genre and elucidated performance techniques that highlight the unique characteristics of the Sinaloan tuba, including articulations, chord progressions, and diverse cadences employed by musicians in this musical tradition (Salas, 2011).

⁸ *Huipa* (“being on the *huipa*” or “going to *huipar*”) is the term used by musicians in norteño bands and ensembles to describe being out on the street, ready and waiting to be hired.

⁹ *Tecnobanda* or *electrobanda* refers to a musical service popular for covering social events with recorded music accompanied by timbales, tambora, and sometimes tuba. This ensemble is particularly common in Hermosillo and Ciudad Obregón, Sonora. It involves banda music programmed by a DJ, played via a computer connected to amplifiers and mixers driving large speakers. Alongside the recorded tracks, live instruments such as tambora (often with an attached cymbal), timbales featuring cowbells, a snare drum or tarola, and occasionally a pedal cymbal (hi-hat) are played.

In Mexico, Héctor Alejandro López y López, tubist of the Orquesta Filarmónica de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (OFUNAM) (Philharmonic Orchestra of the National Autonomous University of Mexico) acknowledges that “much of our traditional music is performed with wind bands where the sousaphone is particularly prevalent, especially in states like Oaxaca and Mexico where virtually every town has a band” (Ruano, 2014, para. 21). López y López asserts that “in the northern part of the country, there are genres like banda, particularly Sinaloan banda, as well as norteño groups where the tuba achieves great skill and virtuosity, often utilizing the sousaphone” (para. 21), and he adds, “I am confident that in a few years, there will be a tuba revolution because there is enormous potential” (Ruano, 2014, para. 16).

The revolution is well underway. Undoubtedly, media innovation within the music industry plays a decisive role in the instrumental and stylistic changes unfolding in urban contexts across many cities in northern Mexico and the southern United States. Today, fusions and sonic experimentation are emerging with support from computers and sophisticated equalization equipment. However, the current prominence of the tuba stems from a multiplicity of cultural influences that have persisted despite the dominance of *grupera* bands, commercial technobandas, and *pasito duranguense* groups.

The new generation of tubists continually pushes the boundaries of virtuosity by developing innovative techniques for playing the instrument. This competition among tubists translates into rhythmic and harmonic experimentation, as they strive to excel and establish distinctive styles. Nowadays, aspiring tubists no longer necessarily need formal conservatory training, as internet tutorials abound. Social networks also play a crucial role, fostering a community where learning the instrument becomes a shared and collective endeavor through these platforms.¹⁰ What many academics and traditional tubists may overlook is the sense of community fostered in the learning process and within the social spaces where new Mexican music groups emerge.

What is particularly revealing is that many music students, who train within state orchestras, municipal bands, or university music bands, often end up playing in Sinaloan-style bands, despite their training in diverse repertoires, even though these musicians have experience performing classical pieces, jazz standards, marches, pasodobles, and Latin music spanning from cha-cha-chá to mambo and danzón.

¹⁰ Users themselves rate and compare the technical level of tubists belonging to bands across the region. For example, you can review Eric Salgado’s YouTube channel (2012). Additionally, specialized groups have been established for musicians in the various sections that make up a band. An example of this is the Facebook groups like Armonilleros Exclusivo, a private group with over 17 000 members interested in saxhorns, or the group Tuberos de Tijuana.

BEYOND THE *CHUN-TA-TA* (BY WAY OF CONCLUSION)

The tuba and other brass instruments developed in the Old Continent at the dawn of modernity were swiftly integrated into the musical fabric of Mexican expressive culture. Their arrival often marked a renewal of instrumental music in towns, which previously relied on string ensembles and platforms for *zapateado*, embodying traditions such as the old mariachi, fandango, and *jolgorios* (Chamorro Escalante, 2006).

The music of wind bands, including Sinaloan tambora and ensemble music, does not stem from a distant Mexican past, nor is it endangered like many indigenous or traditional music forms. On the contrary, the overwhelming media presence and integration into the entertainment industry pose a potential threat to traditional music. This research concludes that the adoption of the tuba was facilitated by transborder exchanges long established in the region, further intensified since the early 20th century with the railroad facilitating the flow of musicians and instruments (Simonett, 2001).

The popular music industry caters to mass consumption, employing production systems and market strategies. Mexican regional music, consequently, adheres to commercial labels that follow musical trends akin to the *grupera* wave. A primary activity within this industry involves live performances at dances, where artists entertain their audiences. These dances and tours constitute a highly profitable music business, a transnational enterprise spanning multiple generations. It is supported by an infrastructure that facilitates the production, distribution, and promotion of artists across various levels, appealing to popular audiences in both Mexico and the United States.

If *altereda* music is the new trend, akin to previous trends like *tribal* (with pointed boots), *pasito duranguense*, and before that technobandas, it is understandable why the tuba garners more attention than other instruments in the band. Today, there are hundreds of bands featuring tuba in Mexico and the United States. This norteño style with tuba has deeply influenced and transformed musical practices, allowing for the simultaneous presence of traditional and commercial music styles. Musicians are gradually adopting the *arremangado* style and integrating *buchona* fashion into their attire, amidst a context marked by heightened violence stemming from the fight against drug trafficking and organized crime.

At the beginning of this text, the presence of tubas and brass winds in military music since ancient times was highlighted, linking these instruments with warfare. Today, the tuba has emerged as the pivotal instrument in a musical trend blending elements from norteño ensembles and Sinaloan bandas. It produces the profound harmonies heard by armies of young gunmen, hitmen, and drug lords, whether explicitly mentioned in *corridos* or not. Ensembles featuring tubas resonate amidst the violence and turmoil unleashed across Mexico.

The negative portrayals inherent in the music do little to highlight its positive aspects. Not all bands or ensembles perform *narcocorridos*, nor is this music exclusively for drug traffickers and hitmen. It is widely listened to and forms a part of everyday life for a majority of the population. The revitalization of the distinctive musical style of norteño ensembles with tuba stems from the cultivation of skills and abilities. Thanks to new information and communication technologies,

musicians from international stages, including those in the *grupera* scene, are directly or indirectly connected with musicians from bands and ensembles in remote rural areas as well as emerging neighborhoods in Mexico and the United States.

It is important to recognize that local, regional, and transnational interests converge and intertwine in the production and consumption of identity. Mexican regional music operates within a broad and regulated production circuit influenced not only by the music market, but also by the historical and structural social conditions that shape everyday rural life (González, 2014, p. 308).

The current tuba trend is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric, reminiscent of stories like the one where “Goyo” Trejo and his musicians had to repair a tuba that fell off their truck while traveling to perform in a remote town in the Sierra de Sonora.

Translation: Erika Morales.

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