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Pre-Hispanic Musical Instruments of Mineral de Pozos: An Artistic Overview

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Abstract
This research contributes to the preservation of the organological heritage of instruments made by a small group of artisan builders who draw inspiration from the pre-Hispanic past of the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. These artisans belong to the town of San Pedro de los Pozos - Mineral de Pozos- in the municipality of San Luis de la Paz, in the northeast of the state of Guanajuato, which again is part of the culturally rich South Central Mexican Mesoamerica. The overall objective of the study is to identify and categorise certain musical sound instruments from the inventory of their builders, to highlight their symbolic characteristics, which are, as it happens, linked to a worldview from ancient Mexico, and which reaffirm the cultural heritage projected by their current creators and performers.

Keywords*:* pre-Hispanic sound, artisan builders, symbolism, Mineral de Pozos.

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1. Contextual background

San Pedro de los Pozos is a town in the municipality of San Luis de la Paz, and is also known as Mineral de Pozos. It is located in the northeast of the Mexican state of Guanajuato (Arévalo Martínez & Armas Arévalo, 2022, p. 989). The city, as mentioned in the Ministry of Tourism. Government of Mexico, 2019 Mineral de Pozos was stated to have been: "[...] founded in the 18th century, the people were mainly engaged in agriculture, and even despite of the mining boom in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was abandoned in 1920; " currently, the downtown belongs to a preservation program of the Mexican federal government and is called a "Magical Town," which is now used to promote tourist activity. Furthermore, in the state of Guanajuato, there is evidence of settlements that led to the inclusion of the municipality of San Luis de la Paz as a territory recognized as Rancho *Úzua* (indigenous ranch) and also as part of a Misión Chichimeca recognized by the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples, 2020, a name given to commemorate and protect the memory of these indigenous locations and their groups during the period of Spanish Viceroyalty in Mexico. The Mexican government is consistently trying to preserve such heritage sites, whose tangible and intangible heritage commemorates religion, festivities, and music. Examples of such ancient tradition is the *éza'r* people who celebrated a wedding in which they had the custom of enlivening the atmosphere with traditional "golpe" music, whose only instruments are the *tambora* and the violin, and are played by elders from some families. Information on these instruments are mentioned by the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (2015, p. 41).

Regarding the music of ancient Mexico and its historical and temporal evidences today, some experts mention how certain inaccuracies really invade scholarship; however, valuable arguments for understanding the craft of musical instruments are also cited (Híjar 2009, p. 183). In the words of Salcedo Moncada & López Prado (2020):

> Among the written sources, the various codices stand out. Codices were created using pictographic writing and mnemonic content, produced in different historical periods, and they illustrate how certain instruments were played during social activities associated with music.

Archaeological findings are still preserved (as images, sculptures, drawings of Codices, mythical stories cited by some friars, etc. They reveal different musical practices of the native ancestors, which then survived in various regions of the country and have been used for certain festivities (Salcedo & López, 2020a); Of equal importance is the fact "that primitive man already used rattles, drums, and flutes long before the Ice Age" (Menuhin & Davis, 1979; Podestá Correa 2007, p. 41); Pre-Columbian instruments were "[...] the first ones and were made of clay, and by 1000 BC, there were figures of trumpets and dancers made of clay that have been recovered and evidenced from Teotihuacan (Escobar, 1985, p. 19)."

2. Conceptual framework

Understanding music relies on the representation of ordered sounds that, when combined, create a message that is both informative and harmonious, and while interacting with the air, propagates itself. A definition of music is provided in Art in Science: Physics in Music by G. Ambrosio (2013).

Similarly, instrumentation can be classified as Eastern and Western. André Shaeffner (1976), in a citation from (Tranchefort, 1996, p. 18) in the research of Podestá Correa (2007b, p. 39), defines three widely accepted groups: ideophones, where sound is produced from the material from which the instrument is constructed (Shaeffner, 1976); they sound when kicked, shaken, scraped or rubbed, or struck with or when they collide; rattles, bells, cymbals, castanets, gongs, and xylophones are the best known; membranophones, which emit sound from stretched membranes. The best known here are timpani and most drums (Tranchefort, 1996, p. 18). Chordophones are instruments in which the sound is produced from one or more strings stretched between two fixed points; they sound when one or more stretched strings are plucked, struck, or rubbed (Podestá Correa 2007b, p. 39). Some families include bows, lyres, harps, lutes, and zithers. Furthermore, regarding the pre-Hispanic musical genre, the following was retrieved from the publication in Arqueología Mexicana (2023):

> Both the sounds of the natural environment and instrumental and vocal music were closely linked to religious concepts. While the origin of musical instruments had mythological roots, the sound of the most sacred instruments was understood as the voice of the gods.

The musician-craftsman in the history of Mexico shares a reality similar to the historical progressions of society (Novelo, 2022):

> In matters of aesthetic appreciation, indigenous artistic productions have not been fully recognized as part of their own culture, as the product of special skills and talents, and much less as part of life as a whole. As these are cultural products that are foreign and distinct from the hegemonic Western mode, they are defined in discriminatory terms; due to the simplicity of their forms, they have been classified as "primitive art" or "naive art" [...]. (p. 175).

3. A problem of sound heritage

Builders and makers of instruments from Mineral de Pozos are self-inspired by their pre-Hispanic past. Their identity and art are associated with the Chichimeca region of the state of Guanajuato. The guild exhibits and sells pre-Hispanic instruments around the Zaragoza urban plaza, which houses workshops and a municipal building that has been converted into a museum for this purpose. However, in the context of global transculturalism and the heritage assets of today's societies, this low-density population centre, despite its designation as a "magical town," is experiencing tourism-driven change, which improves the ability of local people to meet their needs. As a result, builders of musical instruments inspired by the pre-Hispanic Chichimeca theme are experiencing a gradual decline of interest in local themes and are becoming diverted to external interests. Although musical instruments exist and are used in various forms of performance art, heritage must be strengthened to prevent the sociocultural extinction of identity. Therefore, new generations must be encouraged to participate in preservation, from joining artisan-builder groups to becoming advocates for immediate and relevant cultural models. The goal is to identify and categorise specific musical instruments from the inventory of their makers, to highlight the symbolism connected to pre-Hispanic Mexico, and to reaffirm the cultural importance of craftsmanship today.

4. The symbolism of the tangible and intangible in pre-Hispanic sound

From the interview with Don Pedro Ramírez Galván (2025), a local builder and performer of musical instruments, a brief inventory was recovered to refer to the symbolic historical significance in terms of acoustics and sound for three groups:

I. Idiophones

Ayoyote (Figure 1), is "used mainly as a percussion instrument. The pre-Hispanic peoples of central Mexico were particularly fond of using them. Whether as part of dancers' costumes or as a composite rattle, these implements were considered sacred." (*México desconocido*, 2025); a condition that also occurred in some Aztec dances, as in the following sentiment: "It is the seed that we carry in our feet and that accompanies us with the rhythm of our dances. The meaning of *ayoyote* is joy in the heart." (Ruiz, V.H., 2007, p. 200).

Figure 1: *Ayoyote*, an instrument made with dried fruits (ayoyotes). Source: own authorship (2025).

Omichicahuaztli (Figure 2) is another instrument to which Seler (1992) refers. Zalaquett Rock, et al., (2019) speak of this instrument as follows:

> that the bones used in the Mexican Central Highlands were used as musical instruments, which in Nahuatl are called *omichicahuaztli*, and that they were used in funeral rituals for warriors who died in battle.

Figure 2: *Omichicahuaztli*, currently constructed with an animal femur; the sound is activated by friction. Source: Author's own work (2025).

II. Membranophones

Teponaztli (Figure 3), is a percussion instrument (León-Portilla 1986; Pareyon 2007). The Nahuatl word *teponaztli,* which implies notions of "duality," "complement," and "accompaniment"; refers to a sound box. Durán recounts: "the *teponaztli* made of wood was worshipped as a god, probably largely because of the music produced by the way in which it was made, the material (wood), and the way in which it was actually played in ceremonies."

Figure 3: *Teponaztli*, an instrument that can be made of hardwood; note the essential "H" shaped grooves that enhance its sound. Source: Authors' own photography (2025).

III. Aerophones

Ocarina (Figure 4), a wind instrument, or ocarina, "dates back to pre-Hispanic America, where it has been archaeologically documented in several cultures, including the Mexica and Maya, where it was usually made of clay, and was hollow in the center and made to different sizes, not exceeding fifteen centimeters." A good source of information on this instrument may be found in the National Headquarters of the *Casa de las Culturas Benjamín Carrión* (2020).

Figure 4: Globular *ocarina* made of clay; the sound is produced by the vibration of air triggered by the player. Source: Author's own work (2025).

"Snail" (Figure 5), as a sonic instrument appears well in the legend of Quetzalcoatl. The snail trumpet appears in the creation of man. Cortes Soto (2020) emphasizes: "it is through its sound that contact is made with the forces of the world inhabited by supernatural beings. The sound obtains the bones with which life could be generated. All life leads to death, death generates life, all moving in a continuous and cyclical conception of the forces of the world".

Figure 5: Conch shell, a natural marine instrument, whose conical shape enhances its sound. Source: Author's own work (2025).

5. Conclusion

This study therefore involves a re-evaluation of the pre-Hispanic musical heritage, which responded to the primordial needs of ancient societies and conveyed their earthly deeds in reverence to the divine and the underworld, in a profound celebration of the interconnectedness of nature and religion. Today, recognising the craftsmanship of the instruments crafted by the builders and performers of Mineral de Pozos goes beyond merely documenting tangible aspects of design, aesthetics, and functionality, towards understanding the intangible nature of sound in its spiritual and rhythmic power. Although reconstructing the musical heritage of the pre-Hispanic world is complex, it remains possible to connect new generations with the heritage of the past.

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