

Title: The Specificity of Expertise and the “Language” of Salsa Music

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We asked what kind of training and how much of it are required for a person to acquire rhythmic expertise. Because there are many forms of rhythmic expertise, we chose a test case: a form of Afro/Latin American music called salsa. Salsa music offers a convenient way to operationalize rhythmic expertise: each salsa music style is associated with a characteristic clave pattern that constitutes an essential structure for performers.

In a series of studies, we asked what types of expertise are needed to detect the correct salsa–clave pairing. Using two clave patterns (the 3–2 and 2–3 *son* clave) and three manipulated alternatives, we asked listeners to choose the correct clave pattern for a variety of bomba, calypso, mambo, and merengue excerpts.

The results of Study 1 show that listeners unfamiliar with salsa were unable to detect the correct salsa–clave pairing. Listeners who had some music training or were familiar with salsa detected the need for syncopation but not the specific pairing. Only musicians well-acquainted with salsa correctly detected the salsa–clave pairing. In Study 2, we found that a one semester course in African and Latin rhythms was sufficient for participants to learn to detect the correct salsa–clave pairing.

Therefore, we concluded that the distinction between the 2–3 and 3–2 clave patterns is not inherent in the music itself, but rather is a convention to be learned through exposure *and* training. Currently, we are recruiting “native” salsa listeners: people who have no theoretical knowledge of salsa, but grew up in a salsa-rich environment. Their ability to detect the salsa–clave pairing will help us untangle the relative importance of informal exposure and formal music training. The results will be discussed using an analogy to language learning.