Claves: Get Clickin'

by Mark Shelton

Dynamite comes in a small package.

Within the percussion family you can find small instruments capable of holding their own alongside their bigger brothers and sisters. The jingle and pop from a headed tambourine can punch through a dense mixture of larger drums. A single triangle 'ding' has the power to sit atop the sound of an orchestra comprised of winds, strings, and a pile of percussion.

Among those petite powerhouses of percussion are the claves. Weighing less than a can of soda pop and just a bit longer than a pencil, the distinctive tone from a pair of hardwood pegs can be clearly heard within a salsa rhythm section crackling with congas, bongos, timbales, and cowbells.

The traditional Latin American claves are straightforward, equisized dowels. Differing slightly, African claves consist of a 'receiving stick' featuring a scooped middle area and a smaller striker peg. This article will focus on the traditional Latin American claves.

Although synthetic models are available, Latin American claves are customarily constructed of hardwoods such as grenadilla, rosewood, maple, or ebony. The dowels range in length from around 8 to 10 inches with a diameter of about an inch. The small dimensions combine with the resonant materials to produce a short, crisp, and high-pitched tone.

The Traditional Tone

The proper holding method is a crucial part of producing a traditional claves tone. One member of the pair will strike the receiving (stationary) clave. To hold the stationary clave, curl the fingers of your non-dominant hand in towards your palm with the thumb resting against the side of the index finger--resembling how it would look if you were going to knock on a door. This forms an echo chamber for the clave to resonate. Lay the clave over your echo chamber so that the stick rests on your knuckles and the fleshy area just below your thumb. Grip the striker clave in your dominant hand (similar to a loose matched grip). Try a few clicks.

Check out my short video tutorial on the Worship Training website.

Gripping either clave too tightly will choke vibrations. Your grips are correct when the claves sound with a clear, resonant tone.

Clave Rhythms

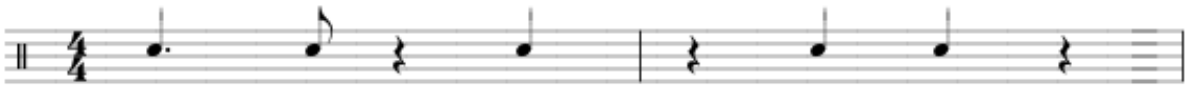
The claves are an instrument, but clave can refer to an ‘organizing rhythm’ in certain types of music. The word translates to ‘key’ or ‘code’ in English. Sometimes you play the clave with the claves. Don't be confused.

Within Latin American and African music, there are a variety of clave rhythms including rhumba, son, Afro-Cuban 6/8, and bossa nova patterns. (The Beatles’ recording of “And I Love Her” features the ‘Ringo clave!’)

Among the common clave patterns are the son clave rhythms. This five-note pattern can be played in two versions, 3-2 and 2-3. The number of notes in each measure determines whether the clave is 3-2 or 2-3. The son clave can be played with the notation below or in cut-time. The note values in 4/4 can also be halved so the pattern will fit into one measure. Listen to my demonstration of the son clave rhythms at https://youtu.be/Y1IiTFFebyU and https://youtu.be/jBJ6DzCHwls.

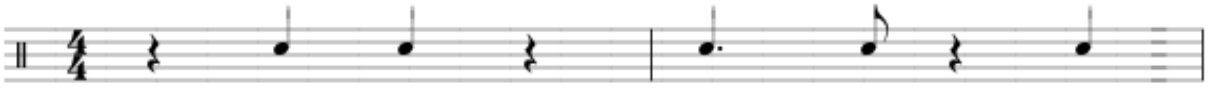
Study the recordings below (available on iTunes and Spotify) to hear the clave (and claves) played in context.

Son Clave 3-2
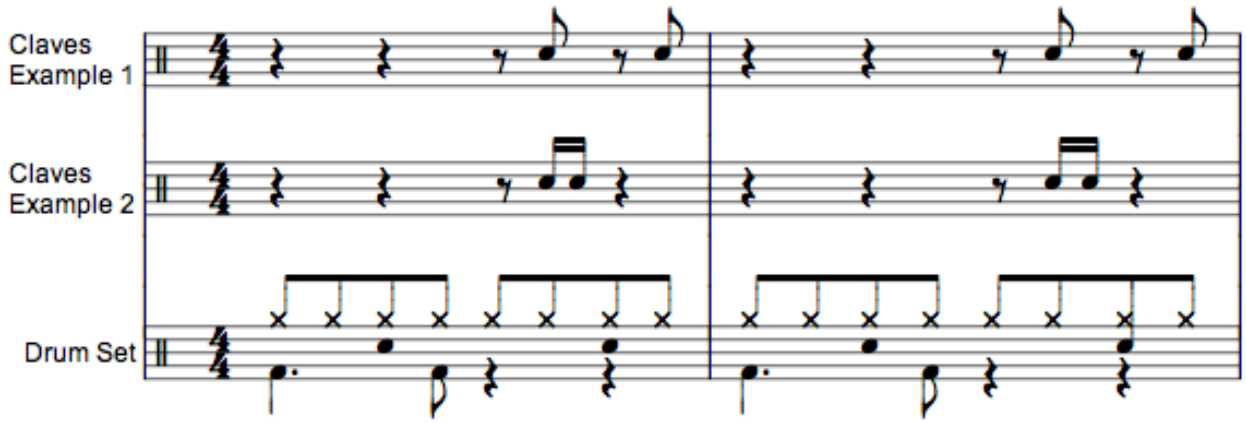


"Clave Mambo" recorded by Mita Y Su Monte Adentro from the album *Algo Sabroso* 3-2 Clave

Son Clave 2-3



“Volver A Cuba” recorded by Antonio Koudele from the album *Instrumental Y Cuba*
2-3 Clave

The high-pitched ‘woody’ tones of claves can fit into a variety of musical settings other than African and Latin American styles. Just a few well-placed clicks can spice up a groove. Check out the basic drum set groove below along with two possible clave rhythms:



When called upon to create an ambient or ethereal texture, the claves can add a nice sonic touch. A burst of clicks with rapid crescendo and decrescendo ending with a slight ritard is a favorite of mine for those "atmospheric" moments.

Getting set up with a pair of claves is not going to require a second mortgage. Expect to drop between ten to fifty bucks for a decent pair of pegs. With such a large selection available, it might be wise to audition several sets before making a purchasing decision. Claves will be a worthwhile addition to your toy chest. Get clickin'.

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