

# Tambuco launches North American tour in September

by Mike Telin  
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After 16 years of international concerts and recordings of original repertoire, Tambuco Percussion Ensemble ([www.tambuco.org](http://www.tambuco.org)) has established itself among the finest percussion quartets in the world.

Tambuco begins its first extended tour of North America on September 17, a tour that includes stops at the University of Texas at Brownsville (Brownsville, Texas), the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago Cultural Center (Chicago), Symphony Space (New York City), where they will be the opening concert on the Sonidos Festival, and The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Washington DC) where they will perform at Celebrate Mexico 2010, as well as a performance on the Sound Streams Canada Series in Toronto.

Founded in 1993 by four distinguished Mexican musicians who use all conceivable – and inconceivable – means to realize their musical ideas, Tambuco has concertized on a world-wide scale, received numerous awards, and been nominated three times for Grammy awards.

Collaborating is one of the group's important activities, and since their founding, they have performed and recorded with such musicians, ensembles and orchestras as Keiko Abe, Stewart Copeland, Eduardo Mata, The Kronos Quartet, The Michael Nyman Band, Orquesta Filarmonica de la Ciudad de Mexico and the Santa Barbara Chamber Orchestra to name a few.

Tambuco Percussion Ensemble has recorded eight compact discs, and their most recent recording featuring the complete chamber music of Carlos Chavez, received three Grammy nominations; Best Classical Album, Best Small Chamber Ensemble and Best Classical Latin Album. They have also recorded with the internationally renowned Kronos Quartet on their Grammy-nominated album *Nuevo*.

We spoke with Ricardo Gallardo, one of the group's founders, from his home in Mexico City where he was busily preparing travel and work documents for Tambuco's upcoming tour.

*Mike Telin: Tell me a little bit about Tambuco's early years.*

**Ricardo Gallardo:** In 1993 I had been living abroad, first in Canada and then in England where I was completing a master's degree. I knew the other members of Tambuco before we formed the group, because we were all percussion students at the University of Mexico. We played together as a percussion ensemble, so we had known each other for a long time. Then I went abroad, and although I kept playing, I wanted to do a project that would involve my friends who are great musicians. So the four of us decided to form Tambuco.

*MT: Did you have a specific mission in mind for the group?*

RG: Yes, we felt there was an opportunity to give audiences a different way of experiencing concert music, which I sometimes feel lacks the spontaneity and interaction that other music has, such as the freshness of traditional and popular music. When you are a performer, you also have to become an actor because you are on stage. And you deal with the musical elements just as an actor does, such as tension, distension, conflicts, as well as harmonies, both consonant and dissonant that can be translated as agreements or disagreements with the other players or characters. We believe we are on the right track, because the responses from people [have been great].

*MT: did you have to create your own repertoire in order to achieve these performance goals on stage?*

RG: Yes, I do believe that our success has come from the repertoire that has been written for us by composers who know how we approach music.

*MT: How many pieces have you commissioned over the seventeen years, and how many composers are represented?*

RG: We have about one hundred and fifty pieces that have been written especially for us, and I would say there are over one hundred composers coming from all nationalities. Most of the main composers in Mexico have written pieces for us.

*MT: I understand that you have developed an interesting recording project out of these commissions?*

RG: Yes, this gave us the idea of doing a series of recordings, so that the works are not performed just three or four times and then forgotten. All art will eventually become the artistic patrimony of a culture, and this is why we started a series of recordings called the Iberia-American Series. It features either the music that has been written for Tambuco or music that was previously written, but which we had an opportunity to work on with the composer. The first volume was dedicated to composers from Columbia, and the second was music of Spanish composers. Now we are working on music of composers from Argentina and Uruguay.

*MT: It sounds like a very interesting project and it will certainly keep you in business for a very long Time. Is there a story behind your name, Tambuco?*

RG: It goes back to the Mexican composer Carlos Chavez. In 1942, when music for percussion ensemble was in its early stages, he received a commission from his friend John Cage, who had an amateur ensemble, and the piece was called Toccata. Twenty years later Chavez wrote another percussion piece and he named it Tambuco. Chavez explained that he did not choose the name for any reason other than the word itself sounds percussive. Whether Chavez knew it or not, there is a place on the Pacific coast of Mexico near Acapulco called Tambuco Beach. There is also a story there, because we have discovered that there is an island



in the Philippine archipelago called Tambuco and this makes sense because, back when the Philippines was a colony of Spain, there was a trade route from the Philippines that went to Tambuco Beach. Although for us, we named the ensemble Tambuco to [pay homage to the important contributions] that Carlos Chavez made to the percussion chamber music repertoire. And luckily, it is a name that you can pronounce in all languages.

*MT: Interesting. I want to return to something you said earlier about forming Tambuco in order to give audiences a different way of experiencing concert music, can you expand on that thought a little bit?*

RG: When I was a kid I loved music, not only classical music, but all music. I especially loved the traditional music of the world, and the thing that I liked about it was that immediate connection to the identity to the culture. Mexico has a lot of traditional music, and I grew up in a time when Latin American folk music was very much in fashion. And I learned to play many of the folk instruments as well such as guitars and flutes. I would do this during my free time when I was in high school. I wanted to inject that same spontaneity into classical music. Classical musicians tend to drop a crystal curtain between themselves and the audience and sometimes we can become very stiff when we play, and I wanted to play as naturally as when I was playing traditional music. Fortunately, all of Tambuco's members have experience playing music of other genres, such as jazz and Latin jazz, and we all love to improvise. In fact we just came back from a fantastic recording session that was all improvising. We think that improvising gives you some strong creative elements, so that when you play something that is notated, you understand how it can be played more naturally.

*MT: What you said about understanding how to improvise giving you a stronger creativity: I have had many, especially younger, classical performers make the same comment many times during the past 12 months. You and I are the same age, we were born in 1961.*

RG: That was a great year wasn't it?

*MT: Yes it was, but what amazes me is how much the training of young classical players has changed since we were both at conservatories. For example, at most, and especially the better conservatories, students now have the opportunity to study improvisation.*

RG: That's right.

*MT: And the intent is not to make everyone a "jazz" musician but simply because studying improvisation makes one a better player.*

RG: Absolutely. I agree with you that during our time many people learned to play their instruments only through the score. From the very first lesson you would have a score in front of you. I always say that that method of learning was the equivalent of dating someone but with a chaperone. Then one day they take away the score, and then you don't know what to do. I am very happy that things are changing, because it is a way to remember how music was played many centuries ago. The great composers, from the early baroque and even beyond that, were great improvisers. What we know now as the great passaca-

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glias – variations etc. are no more than the result of written improvisations. I think that every instrumentalist should be exposed to improvisation all the time, because yes, it does make you a better performer.

*MT: What do you think it is about percussion music that seems to draw people in? I am thinking not only of your own successes but also of the rise of percussion shows such as Stomp and Blue Man Group?*

RG: In the case of Stomp and Blue Man Group, they have one [important] thing in common and that is the direct language of percussion, which is very primeval. I would say that we have inherited from centuries ago a chip in our body -- a chip that reacts to percussion in a very different way than the body reacts to melody. Half of the [physical reaction] that we have when we hear percussion comes from our guts and not from our ears. When you have very heavy and [loud] drumming you feel it in your stomach.

*MT: I would like to go back to your comment about the primeval natures of percussion, and I am speaking specifically about the popularity of drum circles, and how they are used as a mechanism for community building.*

RG: Yes!!! And, they are very healthy, and I can give you some reasons other than the beating and the rhythms. Societies have changed, and in doing so they became more modern and more individual and less community oriented, and there has been a price to pay for that. I like to think of a society as a whole living thing, just like a body, that has organs and systems that keep it alive. But, in modern societies. our social tissue has been damaged. We seem to care about ourselves first because we see the others as strangers. These drum circles are like the best cream lotion that you can put on the damaged social tissue. It does help to heal, and make people see that they do have things in common with your neighbor, simply by sharing a beat. It does not matter if you create a beautiful sound or not, you are simply sharing something very basic. And because it is a circle, it travels to your neighbor on the right and travels back to you on your left. I think finding that common factor in society is very important, especially now, and I like that percussion can be good in that way.