

# ***Fiesta Aquí, Fiesta Allá:*** **Exploring Music and Dance** **in Puerto Rico, its Diaspora,** **and the Caribbean**

*A Smithsonian Folkways Music Pathway for  
students in Grades 9–12*



## ***Teacher's Guide***

*Lesson Hub 4:*

*Plenazo: Music, Migration, and Puerto Rican Identity on  
the Move*

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### **Lesson Overview**

Puerto Rican *plena* (pron. “PLAY-nah”) developed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in working class Puerto Rican neighborhoods around the coast of the island. Like other dance genres of the region and period, plena synthesizes European, Indigenous, and West African elements that came into dialogue through the interactions between local actors and British Island *émigrés* (e.g., immigrants from Barbados, Virgin Islands, and St. Kitts). One distinction of historic significance that sets plena apart from other genres of Puerto Rican popular dance music is its claim as the first form of working-class music to become popular among all social classes, attract international attention, and become commercialized. Whether it be a street parade at the Fiesta de la Calle San Sebastian in San Juan, a Carnival celebration in Ponce, a political protest, or the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington, DC, plena mobilizes people and creates communal bonds.

*Plenazo: Music, Migration, and Puerto Rican Identity on the Move* explores the origins of plena music in Puerto Rico and the genre’s professionalization through its diasporic practice in New York, where it expanded its commercial identity into a living form of urban folk music. In Path 1, students will experience this percussion-driven tradition through attentive listening. Specifically, they will identify Indigenous, African, and European cultural elements, important instrumental sounds, and common musical characteristics. In Path 2, students will have an opportunity to write and perform their own plena choruses. Path 3 takes a deeper look at plena’s emergence as a symbol of national pride, both in Puerto Rico and its diaspora.

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## Lesson Paths and Student Objectives\*



### A. **What Is Plena?** (20+ minutes)

- Describe the history and development of plena in Puerto Rico.
- Identify the musical characteristics of plena.
- Identify the shared musical influences and characteristics of plena and other types of Caribbean music.



### 2. **People and Plena on the Move** (30+ minutes)



- Engage with the musical characteristics of plena through active participation with audio recordings.
- Describe the common lyrical themes and performance contexts of plena.
- Explain how plena relates to the Puerto Rican diaspora.
- Write and perform your own plena.









### 3. **Plena Culture, Identity, and Significance** (20+ minutes)

- Describe social tensions inherent in plena music.
- Explain why plena is sometimes called “the people’s newspaper.”
- Explain the significance of plena and plena *fiestas*/festivals to Puerto Rican identity and culture.

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\*Note: The learning icons used above signify the type of learning used in each Path. Keep in mind that these Paths are not intended to be sequential; rather, teachers or students may choose which Paths they’d like to use from each Lesson. The time estimate given for each path indicates "in class" time. The + indicates there are optional extension activities and/or a suggested homework assignment.

While all learning types ( History and Culture,  Music Listening,  Music Making and Creation, and  Creative Connections) fulfill 2014 National Music Standards, non-music teachers will be able to use  History and Culture and  Creative Connections Paths without specific musical knowledge.

## Teaching Plan



### 1. Path One: What Is Plena?

#### **To prepare:**

- Read through the path.
- Preview Path 1 of the **Lesson 4 Slideshow** (slides 4–24).
  - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson landing page. If you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow” link, which will not show the notes.

#### **Slides 1–3: Information for the Teacher**

Information from the Lesson Overview is included on slide 2. You may choose to read this to the class if you have not already read the Lesson 4 landing page.

#### **Slide 4: Path 1 Introduction Slide**

#### **Slide 5: What Is Plena?**

##### Attentive and Engaged Listening:

- Listen to “Ahora Sí” from the album *Viento de Agua Unplugged: Materia Prima*, and ask students to think about the questions shown on the slide (allow students to guess before giving them the answers). Consider starting this path with a movement activity/dance party (e.g., step to the beat, clap a rhythm, watch and copy, be creative!).
  - *What is this music used for? (plena music is for dancing, listening and conveying a message)*
  - *What musical instruments do you hear? (drum [pandero or pandereta], scraper [güiro], and voice. Will learn more about the instruments later).*
  - *What kinds of recording techniques/production values do you hear? (As the title of the album suggests, “Viento de Agua Unplugged” recreates the “unplugged” (or “live”) sound of plena: acoustic instruments, voices, not a lot of sound effects. Thomas Turino calls this “high fidelity” recordings with a “real” or “live” sound instead of “studio art” recordings, which have a highly processed sound [i.e., production, effects, autotune, etc. something that is hard to reproduce live])*
  - *How is this similar to or different from other types of music you know? (answers will vary)*

## Slide 6: The Essence of Plena

### Share Information:

- The track you just heard represents an effort to strip the genre of its modern influences--an attempt to return to the essence of plena.
  - **Tito Matos**, plena veteran and leader of a group called Viento de Agua, says his music emphasizes the “street–corner sound” of plena. His goal is to highlight “the sound of unbridled percussions” and lyrics that express “the lives of ordinary people” as essence of plena.
- **Our lesson follows the roots of plena music and the people and places associated with it.**

## Slide 7: Plena Is:

### Share Information:

- **Plena** is a percussion-driven musical tradition with West African, European and Indigenous roots, originally practiced by people from the island's working classes.
  - It is considered **folkloric** music: expressed through common everyday speech, urban folktales, and folksong lyrics and melodies.
    - **Folklore** is defined as a practice that: 1) connects the past (e.g., ancestors, cultural patterns, and traditions) to the present; and 2) preserves traditions (e.g., aspects of culture and society uncorrupted by modernity).

## Slide 8: Historical Context of Plena

### Share Information:

- During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, US companies such as the Fajardo Sugar Company and the South Puerto Rico Sugar Company (also known as Guanica Central) monopolized Puerto Rico’s sugarcane production.
  - Many people were forced into industrial life of sugar mill labor, earning miserable wages.
  - Large sugarcane production brought rapid industrialization to Puerto Rico (e.g., trains, railroads, machinery).

## Slide 9: Plena as the Voice of the Working Class

### Share Information:

- Plena emerged as the voice of the working-class people during the early 20th century.
- Many traditional plena songs talk about the struggles of common folks (e.g., abusive relationships “Cortaron a Elena” [Elena was cut], the island’s rapid industrialization “La máquina” [trains], and migration). Others offer critique to the new US ruling class, bureaucrats, professionals, and clergy.

### Slide 10: Attentive Listening: “Tintorera del Mar”

#### Watch Video:

- To illustrate the material discussed on the previous slides, watch and listen to Sindo Mangual perform “Tintorera del Mar” in the documentary, *La Plena* (1956). **It begins at 16:18** in the [embedded YouTube video](#).
  - “Tintorera del Mar” is a satirical plena about the US lawyer of the Guanica Central (an important sugarcane company), who was bitten by a shark (tintorera) while swimming in the ocean by San Juan.
  - Share the lyrics and translation of the chorus with students: “Tintorera del mar, tintorera del mar, tintorera del mar que se ha comido a un americano” (Female shark of the sea, female shark of the sea. Female shark of the sea has eaten an American).

### Slide 11: Historical Context of Plena

#### Share Information:

- Plena originated in Puerto Rico’s coastal working-class neighborhoods around 1898, after the Spanish American War, and the year the island became a colony of the US. It was a period of much political turmoil and social tension.
- Although plena would eventually become widely popular among different social classes, it was also critiqued and looked down upon by some.
  - Class and ethnic tensions are reflected in descriptions of plena by urban composers as “unrefined” and “uninteresting.” On the other hand, plena was at the very center of the community's livelihood and it quickly became just as interesting and important as the local newspapers!

### Slide 12: Plena as “Caribbean”

#### Share Information:

- Although plena is considered an Afro-Puerto Rican musical form, it is similar to other Caribbean music traditions, such as Trinidadian *calypso*, Cuban *conga* music, and Dominican *merengue*, in that it incorporates Indigenous, European, and African elements, and is tied to the Caribbean’s festival culture (e.g., Carnival, Patron Saint Feast Day celebrations, Christmas).
- It is also distinctly “Caribbean” because it includes contributions made by immigrants of varied backgrounds who moved to Puerto Rico looking for opportunities after the British abolition of slavery (1834). Often, these were people of African descent from English-speaking Caribbean islands such as Jamaica, St. Kitts, and Barbados.
  - These immigrants lived among locals, Puerto Ricans that resided in coastal areas, working on the sugar cane plantations.

### Slide 13: Plena and Musical Identity

#### Discuss:

- *If plena is also the product of several Caribbean immigrants (i.e., pan-Caribbean), can we say that it is “truly” Puerto Rican? Although there is no “right” answer to this discussion, here are some points to help guide the discussion:*
  - There are two contexts that can help understand this issue of musical identity: one is **colonialism (historical)** and the other is **diaspora (cultural)**.
    - On the one hand, it is important to acknowledge that the history of **colonization** by European powers involved the displacement and oppression of people from many different parts of the world (e.g., Indigenous, African, and Asian). In the context of Puerto Rico, it is important to acknowledge colonization as a historical factor in the process of cultural exchange that produced new forms of culture such as plena.
      - Food for thought: *Could plena link similar experiences of colonialism across the Caribbean? Could there also be something unique about Puerto Rico that makes plena different from other Caribbean music traditions, such as Trinidadian calypso, Cuban conga music, and Dominican merengue?*
    - The term **diaspora** refers to the dispersal of people from a singular location (homeland) to other parts of the world (voluntarily or forcibly). Today, almost 6 million people of Puerto Rican descent live in the rest of the United States. Many of these people are 2<sup>nd</sup>- and 3<sup>rd</sup>-generation migrants who are still passionate about what they view as their “Puerto Rican” culture (including musical traditions like plena).
      - Food for thought: *If these people play plena in New York or Chicago, does it become less Puerto Rican?*
- **Learn more about these issues on the next several slides.**

### Slide 14: What Is Pan-Caribbean?

#### Share Information:

- A pan-Caribbean identity acknowledges regional diversity but focuses on shared features.
- While there is enormous cultural diversity in the Caribbean, there are important shared historical, economic, and social features that connect its various nations under a pan-Caribbean identity.

### Slide 15: Plena as “Puerto Rican”

#### Share Information:

- However, it is important to acknowledge that the movement of people in this area has resulted in the emergence of many unique diasporic, social, and musical

identities that are neither uniquely African, European, or Indigenous. Instead, they are tied to a certain geographic space.

- For example, most people view plena as a uniquely Puerto Rican musical form.

### Slide 16: Listening for Instruments

#### A. Share Information:

- The early instrumentation of plena in its folkloric context (non-professional) was flexible, including: **pandero** (pron. “pahn-DAY-roh,”) a frame drum of Spanish and Arabic influence) and **güiro** (pron. “WEE-roh,” a gourd scraper of Taíno origin).
- Other instruments used include **guitar** (Spanish), **cuatro** (Puerto Rican stringed instrument), **accordion** (German), and **marímbula** (Congo).
  - **You will learn more about these instruments on the next slides.**

#### B. Attentive Listening:

- Listen to an excerpt from the embedded track (“Carmelina” by Los Pleneros de la 21”).
  - *Which instruments do you hear? (the stringed instrument is the cuatro, the drum is the pandero, and the “scraper” is the güiro)*

### Slide 17: About Panderos

#### Share Information:

- *Panderos*, are classified as frame drums, derived from Spanish and Arabic culture.
  - Players produce an open tone by hitting and bouncing off the thumb against the edge of the skin and a closed tone by slapping the hand on the center of the skin.
- Plena music uses an ensemble of three different-sized panderos: 1) *seguidor* (pron. “say-ghee-DOOR,” largest and lowest in sound); 2) *segundo* (pron. “say-GOON-doh”) or *punteador* (pron. “poon-tay-ah-DOOR,” middle size); and 3) *requinto* (pron. “ray-KEEN-toh,” smallest and highest in sound).
  - The seguidor provides the basic rhythmic pulse, the segundo plays a slightly more complicated rhythmic pattern, and the requinto plays syncopated rhythms and improvises.
  - While it is a current practice to use all three types of panderos simultaneously, at one time, it was common for plena to be performed with just the first two, or even only one!
  - Click to the next slide to learn more about these variations.

### Slide 18: The Role of the Pandero

#### Watch Video:

- Watch the embedded video excerpt, within which Tito Matos talks about the role of the pandero (approx. 1:30).
  - **Tito Matos** directed the group Viento de Agua and served as its lead vocalist, percussionist, and arranger. He is considered one of the best requinto (pandero) players in the world. He passed away in 2022 at the age of 53.
  - Read more about Tito [here](#).

### Slide 19: Other Instruments in the Ensemble

#### Share Information:

- The güiro is of Indigenous, Taíno origin.
  - It is often the first to enter, establishing and providing a subdivision of the basic pulse; the panderos follow.
- The marímbula is a lamellophone of Congolese origin (it has tuned metal tongues like a thumb piano/mbira).
- The cuatro is a stringed instrument with typically five courses of double strings.

### Slide 20: Listening for Musical Characteristics

#### A. Share Information:

- Plena music uses **simple harmonies**, is set to **binary** (verse/chorus) **form** (usually alternating couplets or quatrains\* with choruses), and **improvisation** is an indispensable element.
  - The lead singer improvises, echoed by a group of singers in call-and-response.
  - \*Note: A couplet is a pair of lines that rhyme and are of the same length. A quatrain is a rhyming verse that has four lines instead of two.

#### B. Attentive Listening:

- Listen again to an excerpt from the embedded track (“Carmelina” by Los Pleneros de la 21”).
  - *Do you hear these elements?*

### Slide 21: Plenazo: Plena and Community

#### A. Share Information:

- Although Path 1 has focused primarily on musical sounds, it is important to remember that community is also a very important part of the plena tradition.
- In 2004, *pleneros* (led by Tito Matos), began informal gatherings called *plenazos* for the sake of revitalizing the genre and making it part of the communal life of current generations.
  - The name “plenazo” refers to a community “jam,” a space where pleneros come to share music in an informal setting.



- La Junta de la Plena (2015), and its successor location, La Casa de la Plena (2021), on Calle Loíza in Santurce neighborhood in San Juan, have been hosts to many plenazos.
- According to Matos “It wasn’t a group or a rehearsal—they just wanted to play.” Over time, the events became more organized, incorporating photo exhibitions of past plena masters, food, and other art.
- Plenazo Callejero (*callejero* means “from the streets” in Spanish), as this project became known, began to tour the island—eventually going beyond the island and reaching as far as the Bronx in New York!
  - Plenazo Callejero became a movement that helped form a new generation of pleneros such as Emanuel Santana, who is featured in the embedded video with Los Pleneros de la 21 at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington DC.

#### B. Watch Video:

- Watch excerpts from the embedded video. This performance took place at the 2022 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington DC. Some highlights:
  - Hear personal anecdotes from Tito Matos’s son and his wife, Mariana Reyes, on how he built community at the Goyco School at Calle Loíza in Santurce with his project La Casa del Plena (08:16).
  - Watch Emanuel Santana (vocalist playing pandero) and Los Pleneros de la 21 perform “Ola de la mar” (“Wave of the Sea”) at 1:05:47.
  - See some dancing at 1:27:30.

### **Slide 22: Plena Today: You have to let the plena breathe”**

#### Share Information:

- Today, plena exists in folkloric and commercial forms, both in Puerto Rico and throughout its diaspora. This means that plena continues to be played in the streets, but it is also now recorded in professional studios and distributed across the world.
  - Note: Learn more about plena in the Puerto Rican diaspora in Path 2.
- Performing groups like Los Pleneros de la 21 (founded in the South Bronx, New York, in 1983) aim to innovate “from within the tradition, rather than superimposing innovations onto the tradition” (Quote from liner notes, by cultural critic, Juan Flores). As group leader Juango Gutiérrez says in the liner notes in their album *Para todos ustedes*, “You have to let the plena breathe.”

### **Slide 23: Lesson Path 1 - Learning Checkpoint**

- *What are some instruments used in plena?*
  - Common instruments include **pandero** (frame drums of Spanish and Arabic influence), **güiro** (Taíno gourd scraper), and **voice**. Other instruments used

include **guitar** (Spanish), **cuatro** (Puerto Rican stringed instrument), **button accordion** (German), and **marímbula** (Congo).

- *What are some musical characteristics of plena?*
  - Plena is a **percussion-driven** musical tradition. Plena music uses **simple harmonies**, is set to **binary** (verse/chorus) **form** (usually alternating couplets or quatrains with choruses), and **improvisation** is an indispensable element. **Community** is also an important part of the tradition.
- *What are some “Caribbean” elements in Puerto Rican plena?*
  - **Plena is uniquely “Puerto Rican”** in that it developed in a certain geographical place (Puerto Rico) from a unique blend of diasporic, social, and musical identities. However, it is also distinctly “**Caribbean**” in that **it incorporates Indigenous, European, and West African elements** (similar to Trinidadian *calypso*, Cuban *conga* music, and Dominican *merengue*).
  - Additionally, **it incorporates contributions made by immigrants of varied backgrounds** who moved to Puerto Rico looking for opportunities after the British abolition of slavery (1834). Often, these were people of African descent from English-speaking Caribbean islands such as Jamaica, St. Kitts, and Barbados.
- *Why is plena considered working-class music?*
  - Plena has historically been the **voice** of the working class. Its origins are tied to the sugar cane industry, migration, and the island’s rapid modernization during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
  - Traditional plena talks about **everyday life-events of the common folk and their struggles**.
- *How does plena help build community?*
  - In 2004, pleneros (led by Tito Matos) began organizing **informal gatherings called plenazos** for the sake of revitalizing the genre and making it part of the communal life of current generations.
  - Plenazo Callejero, as the project became known, **created a space where pleneros could come to share music in an informal setting**. Plenazo Callejero became a movement that helped form a new generation of pleneros.

**Slide 24: Lesson Navigation Slide**

## 2. Path Two: People and Plena on the Move



### To prepare:

- Read through the path.
- Preview the **Lesson 4, Path 2 Slideshow** (slides 25–39).
  - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson landing page, (If you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow” link, which will not show the notes).

### Slide 25: Path 2 Introduction Slide

### Slide 26: What is Plena?

#### A. Share Information:

Depending on whether students completed Path 1, share or review some general information about plena music:

- **Plena music:**
  - is a **percussion-driven** music tradition that developed in Puerto Rico around the turn of the twentieth century.
  - **began as a folkloric tradition** (non-professional, incorporated rural speech and folk melodies).
  - is performed in urban, **working-class** neighborhoods.
  - uses **simple harmonies**.
  - is usually set to **binary form** (verse/chorus).
  - utilizes **improvisation** is an indispensable element.
  - features **call-and-response** form.
  - incorporates instruments such as **panderos** (frame drums), the **güiro**, and the **cuatro**.
- Return to slides 17 and 19 (Path 1) to view pictures of these instruments. The cuatro is also pictured on slide 31.

#### B. Attentive and Engaged Listening:

- Listen for these musical characteristics in the embedded example (“Ahora Sí,” by Viento de Agua), which was also used extensively in Path 1 (percussion-driven, simple harmonies, binary form, improvisation, call and response).
- Encourage students to engage with the recording in different ways (e.g., clap/step/tap the steady beat, eighth note subdivisions, or another rhythmic pattern).

### Slide 27: Integrating Context: Plena in the Diaspora

#### Share Information:

- The development of plena’s character as a commercial form is, in part, a history of the Puerto Rican diaspora. Note: Learn more about the term “diaspora” in Lesson 1.
- In the 1920s, Puerto Ricans in New York, many of whom are featured on the pictured album *Lamento Borincano*, began making professional plena recordings, stylizing, and changing the sound by adding instruments, extending harmonies, and arranging music for dance.

### Slide 28: Integrating Context: “Plena is Work, Plena is Song”

#### A. Share Information:

- Puerto Rican plena artists in the diaspora, such as Manuel “El Canario” Jiménez (who moved to New York), played an important role in the professionalization, commercialization, and internationalization of the genre.
  - Manuel and his ensemble recorded a great number of existing, and original plenas, making them available across the world.

#### B. Watch Video:

- As students watch the short, embedded documentary *Plena is Work, Plena is Song* (approx. 4 minutes), have them write down answers for the questions listed below. After watching the video, lead a short discussion based on their answers.
  - *What instruments do you see? (guitar, drums/panderos, accordion, trumpet, guiro, piano, saxophones, other drums)*
  - *What are the lyrical themes? (nostalgia for Puerto Rico, everyday experiences)*

### Slide 29: Attentive and Engaged Listening with Los Pleneros de la 21

#### A. Share Information:

- One of the most important plena groups in the Puerto Rican diaspora is Los Pleneros de la 21, formed by Juan Gutiérrez Rodríguez in the Bronx, New York, in 1983.
- The group takes its name from bus route 21, a line that runs through Santurce, a predominantly Afro-Puerto Rican neighborhood, near San Juan.

#### B. Attentive Listening:

Listen to an excerpt from “Patria Borinqueña” (“Puerto Rican Homeland”), by Los Pleneros de la 21.

- *What is unique about this example?*
  - Students may not be able to identify these yet, but you can tell them: **This plena borrows elements from jíbaro music (aguinaldo) in the introduction.** (Learn more about aguinaldo in [Lesson 3](#)). **It adds**

- **additional instruments** that were not traditionally associated with plena, **such as piano and bass.**
  - Students might notice the **slow, carefully rehearsed introduction** before the more typical sound of plena begins, **it sounds polished**; there is a lot of **attention to detail.**
- *Where do you think it was recorded?*
  - **The idea here is for students to understand the aural effect of studio recordings regarding sound quality and the use of effects and other studio technologies.**
- Optional: Ask students to think about how studio and live performances differ.
  - **studio recordings are more polished - with more attention to detail, but sometimes lack the energy of a live performance; sound quality is usually not as good at outdoor live performances; studio recordings expand the reach of a music tradition like plena to new audiences.**

### C. Engaged Listening:

- Ideas for engagement:
  - Step the beat while moving around the classroom.
  - Add instruments (drums on the steady beat, shakers on steady eighth notes).
    - Note: You will have a chance to sing along with the chorus later in the lesson.

### **Slide 30: Integrating Context: Plena Is Versatile**

#### Share Information:

- The use of cuatro, piano, and bass on “Patria Borinqueña” is a sign of plena’s versatility.
  - The term “versatility” in this context means that plena can be performed as a percussion ensemble in outdoor performances (e.g., festivals and rallies), but it can also be performed indoors by dance orchestras with added instruments.

### **Slide 31: Attentive Listening: Structural Elements**

#### Attentive Listening:

- Listen to “Patria Borinqueña” once more (in its entirety) and identify the following elements (common in plena).
  - **Introduction:** non-metrical; slow and soulful; voices, piano, and cuatro (The cuatro is a stringed instrument with typically 5 courses of double strings.)
  - **Phrase structure (form):** 8-measure phrases repeated with variations; sung by lead and chorus
  - **Bridge:** instrumental with key change
  - **Ending:** call-and-response

- Optional engaged listening: Encourage students to engage with the recording by clapping/tapping the steady beat, moving around the classroom, playing instruments and/or playing along on instruments.

### Slide 32: Attentive Listening: Phrases

#### A. Share Information:

- In the documentary *Plena is Work, Plena is Song* (slide 28), it was said that plena musicians sing about **barrio** (neighborhood) anecdotes and use wordplay to talk about everyday life.
- These themes are set to rhymed phrases (choruses), which repeat throughout the song (as demonstrated in the listening example).

#### B. Attentive Listening:

- Listen to an excerpt from “Patria Borinqueña.”
  - *Note: The YouTube version of the recording is utilized here, so you can skip the introduction for this exercise (start at 0:52).*
- Identify the following two phrases in the response and count the number of beats:
  - “Patria borinqueña, jardines de rosas” --- “Land of Puerto Rico, garden of flowers” **(8 beats)**
  - “Déjame cantarte, borinquen hermosa” --- “Let me sing to you, beautiful Puerto Rico” **(8 beats)**
    - *Note: The second phrase alone is the chorus at 3:17*

### Slide 33: Engaged Listening: Sing the Response

#### Engaged Listening:

- Listen again (begin at 0:52).
  - This time, **sing** along with the response (lyrics displayed on the slide).
  - Challenge: Listen for and sing the harmony part on the second part of the response.

### Slide 34: Engaged Listening: Now Add a Rhythm

#### Engaged Listening:

- Listen again (begin at 0:52).
  - Add basic plena rhythms (pandero and güiro) to this experience (notation displayed on the slide).
    - Consider using frame drums and scrapers, but you may use any percussion instruments.
    - Divide the class into percussionists and singers; those who are able to, may do both.
    - **Sing** the "response" and **play** the rhythmic patterns.

### Slide 35: Enactive Listening: Put it All Together

#### Enactive Listening:

- Try to perform the refrain without the recording. Consider these ideas:
  - Play the steady beat on a drum.
  - Incorporate the rhythms shown on the slide (or make up your own).
  - The teacher sings a “call”, and the students sing the “response.”
  - Try to add the harmony on the “response.”
    - *Note: Consider using a large drum for the steady beat and the güiro/scrapper and pandero/frame drum for the rhythms, although you can choose any instruments. Bells, maracas or rhythm sticks may also be used to keep a steady beat.*

### Slide 36: Create: Write Your Own Phrases

#### Creative Activity:

- Write two phrases (chorus), based on a theme of your choice (your neighborhood, eating healthy, etc.). Try to make sure they are:
  - **Rhyming** and **eight beats** in length.
  - In English or Spanish.
  - Students can feel free to use the underlying structural scheme of “Patria Borinqueña” (melody/rhythm/chords) for this activity.
- Students should ask themselves: *Can I speak it in rhythm? Can I sing it in rhythm?*

### Slide 37: Create a Class Plena

#### Creative Activity:

- Consider these suggestions:
  - Students **share** the choruses they composed.
  - The class votes for the chorus they would like to use as the “response” in their class composition.
  - **Learn** and **refine** this chorus as a group (refine rhythm and melody).
  - Consider using the structural scheme of “Patria Borinqueña” (melody, rhythm of words).
  - **Practice** the composition in the lead-group fashion (students can volunteer to sing/recite the phrases they wrote as “calls”).
  - **Add instruments and perform!**
    - Consider using frame drums and güiro.
    - Students who play chordal instruments could accompany using the chordal structure from “Patria Borinqueña.”

**Slide 38: Lesson Path 2 - Learning Checkpoint**

- *Where and when did plena as a form of commercial music emerge?*
  - **In the 1920s, Puerto Ricans in New York began making professional plena recordings, stylizing, and changing the sound by adding instruments, extending harmonies, and arranging music for dance.**
- *What is a diaspora?*
  - **The term “diaspora” describes any social group that lives outside its claimed place of origin.**
- *Why is plena versatile?*
  - **Plena can be performed by a percussion ensemble in outdoor performances (e.g., festivals and rallies), but it can also be performed indoors by dance orchestras. It can incorporate a wide variety of instruments.**
- *What were the challenging and rewarding parts of writing and performing your own plena?*
  - **Answers will vary.**

**Slide 39: Lesson Navigation Slide**



### **3. Path 3: Plena: Culture, Identity, and Social Significance**

#### **To prepare:**

- Read through the path.
- Preview the **Lesson 4, Path 3 Slideshow** (slides 40–51).
  - Open the “Launch Slideshow” link on the righthand menu of the Lesson landing page, (If you are able to use a different screen than the students, have them open the “Student Slideshow” link, which will not show the notes).



#### **Slide 40: Path 3 Introduction Slide**

#### **Slide 41: Plena History: Mixed Reviews**

##### **A. Share Information, Review, and Listen:**

- Listen to the embedded example of plena music (“Ahora Sí” by Viento de Agua) while thinking about this information:
  - *Plena* (pron. “PLAY-nah”) is a percussion-driven musical tradition that developed in Puerto Rico around the turn of the twentieth century.
  - Originally, the popularity of plena was received with mixed feelings by Puerto Ricans of different social spheres.
    - While it was quickly embraced as an expression of Puerto Rican culture and identity, some may have viewed plena with contempt.
    - For example, Puerto Rican intellectuals wrote critical essays concerning Puerto Rican musical culture, discussing this ambivalence toward plena.

##### **B. Discuss:**

*Why do you think some intellectuals had mixed opinions of plena? (Prompt students to share their ideas before advancing to the next slide to learn more.)*

#### **Slide 42: Plena and Social Tensions**

##### **A. Share Information:**

- **Originally, plena was looked down upon by some cosmopolitan composers and intellectuals, who called it “unrefined” and “uninteresting.”**
- It is important to note that it originated coastal neighborhoods around Puerto Rico and was practiced primarily by people from lower socioeconomic classes—which might have affected how it was viewed in certain social circles.

##### **B. Optional: Additional Context and Discussion:**

- In 1935, Tomás Blanco, a Puerto Rican poet, wrote a work called *Elogio de la Plena* (Plena Elegy).

- Blanco wrote *Elogio* as a response to people who did not see plena as a genre worthy of praise and study.
- Reacting to what he viewed as racist remarks by contemporaries, Blanco condemned these attacks, and argued that plena was neither fully Black nor white. He argued that plena was as “mixed” as the Puerto Ricans living in the island.
- He described plena’s rhythms as: “resounding and exciting, syncopated, repeated, monotonous, elongated, elastic, fleeting and full of insinuation.”
- *How do you interpret Blanco’s commentary? (Answers will vary.)*

### Slide 43: Plena: The People’s Newspaper

#### A. Share Information:

- **Although it was subject to misconceptions at first, plena has gained great social significance over time.**
- For example, plena has often been called *El Periódico Cantado* (“the sung newspaper”) because it was the people’s means to communicate the news from one neighborhood to the next.
  - It is important to keep in mind that while plena may have indeed been used to communicate real news, it also expressed social commentary, critique and opinions. Not all the stories expressed in plena may have happened.

#### B. Watch Video:

- Watch the embedded excerpt from the documentary *Plena is Work, Plena is Song* to learn more (approx. 2 minutes).

### Slide 44: “Here I Am, Plena Like a Hurricane”

#### A. Share Information:

- The idea of “the people’s newspaper” has become a key path of plena discussions among musicians and Puerto Ricans in general.
- Recently, after the devastation caused by Hurricane María in 2017, plena musicians were heard singing through neighborhood streets: “Our plena, our song, our music, is stronger, our community is stronger than María.”

#### B. Watch Video (Optional):

- Click on the embedded link to watch Tito Matos sing plena in the aftermath of Hurricane María in 2017 (less than 2 minutes).
  - About the artist: **Tito Matos** directed the plena group Viento de Agua and served as its lead vocalist, percussionist, and arranger. He is considered one of the best *pandero* (frame drum like a tambourine) players in the world. He passed away in 2022 at the age of 53.

### Slide 45: Plena Aquí, Plena Allá: A Symbol of National Pride

#### Share Information:

- **Plena has become a symbol of national pride among Puerto Ricans on the island and in the diaspora.**
- Plena musicians (i.e., *pleneros*) gather in the streets for various types of celebrations and activities, for example in Old San Juan, the Puerto Rican capital during Christmas, or in New York for international music festivals.
- In January, pleneros celebrate Las Fiestas de la Calle San Sebastián, an event similar to Carnival.
  - Optional: Click on the [embedded link](#) to watch a scene from Fiesta de la Calle San Sebastian.
  - Plena is also very important within the context of Puerto Rican Carnival, which you can learn about in Lesson 8.

### Slide 46: Plena as Resistance

#### A. Share Information and Discussion:

- Plena has historically been a music of resistance.
- Plena is at the heart of any march, protest and rally in Puerto Rico and its diaspora. *Why?*
  - Panderos are **light, easy to carry around, and can be played very loudly**. This makes plena an ideal choice for protests, especially if there is going to be marching, or lots of movement involved.

#### B. Watch Video (Optional):

- To illustrate, click on the embedded video link, which shows plena musicians protesting Vice President Kamala Harris’s 2024 visit to the Goyco community workshop in San Juan.
  - Musicians played and sang verses referencing the island’s controversial political status as a non-incorporated territory of the United States.
  - In the video you can see Kamala clapping along to the music. Shortly after, a translator lets her know that the musicians are in fact protesting her visit.

### Slide 47: Plena in New York City

#### Share Information:

- NYC has a very large Puerto Rican diasporic community (with over 1.1 million Puerto Ricans living in the area).
- In 1976, José Manuel “Chema” Soto founded El Rincón Criollo (The Creole Corner), a cultural institution in the South Bronx.
  - El Rincón Criollo—also known as “La Casita de Chema “(Chema’s Little House)—has been central to the practice of plena in New York for over three decades.

- Many legendary teachers such as Marcial Reyes, “El Viejo” Tivo, and Benny Ayala had their beginnings at La Casita.
- Los Pleneros de la 21 was founded by Juan Gutiérrez at La Casita in 1983.
- Optional: To see “La Casita,” click on the embedded link to watch an excerpt from “Celebrating the Life & Legacy of Don Chema” at La Casita (less than 4 minutes).

### Slide 48: Sustaining Culture: Plena Festivals and Education

#### Share Information:

- In recent years, plena festivals have flourished in Puerto Rico and the US.
- Plena has also become part of educational efforts to learn about Puerto Rican culture and identity.
  - The group Los Pleneros de la 21 has become an institution in plena performance, preservation, and education.
  - Higher learning institutions such as Hostos Community College in the South Bronx contribute to these efforts by celebrating *Bomplenazos*, a biannual reunion of *bomba* and plena musicians from New York and Puerto Rico (see [Lessons 6](#) and [7](#) for more about bomba music).

### Slide 49: The Significance of Teaching Plena

#### Watch Video:

- Listen to the legendary Tito Matos discuss the importance of teaching music to younger generations in local communities (less than 1 minute).

### Slide 50: Learning Checkpoint

- *Why were initial reactions to plena music in Puerto Rico "mixed"?*
  - **Originally, plena was looked down upon by some cosmopolitan composers and intellectuals, who called it “unrefined” and “uninteresting.”** It originated in coastal neighborhoods around Puerto Rico, and in similar working-class communities throughout the island, and was practiced primarily by people from lower economic classes. Other intellectuals, such as Tomás Blanco, defended plena and argued that it should be studied and celebrated. **Despite social tensions, which had roots in class, racial, and gender differences, plena was eventually embraced as a symbol of national pride.**
- *Why is plena called “the people’s newspaper?”*
  - **The lyrics to plena songs were (and are) used to communicate “news” from one neighborhood to the next (often news that wouldn’t be reported in regular newspapers).**

- *Why does Tito Matos think it is important to teach plena to younger generations of Puerto Ricans on the island and the diaspora?*
  - **Matos highlights the idea that plena music is a community experience (not something kids hear on the radio). Teaching this music to young people in the community helps to keep the tradition alive.**

**Slide 51: Lesson Navigation Slide**

## **2014 National Music Standards Connections**

MU:Cr1.1.E.Ia Compose and improvise ideas for melodies, rhythmic passages, and arrangements for specific purposes that reflect characteristic(s) of music from a variety of historical periods studied in rehearsal.

- After studying the structural characteristics of plena, students will write their own plena chorus.
- Students will put their choruses together to collectively create their own plena.

MU:Cr3.2.E.Ia Share personally-developed melodies, rhythmic passages, and arrangements – individually or as an ensemble – that address identified purposes.

- Students will perform the plena they collectively created.

MU:Pr4.2.E.Ia Demonstrate, using music reading skills where appropriate, how compositional devices employed and theoretical and structural aspects of musical works impact and inform prepared or improvised performances.

- Students will read and perform rhythms associated with plena.
- Students will identify call and response form as they sing the “response” along with an audio recording of plena music.
- Students will identify the number of beats that typically comprise phrases in plena music.
- Students will identify the structural characteristics of a plena composition (introduction, phrases, bridge, ending).

MU:Re7.2.E.Ia Explain how the analysis of passages and understanding the way the elements of music are manipulated inform the response to music.

- Students will identify the common musical characteristics of plena music (harmony, form/structure, improvisation, phrases).
- Students will explain the role of common instruments used in plena performances (timbre).

MU:Re8.1.E.Ia Explain and support interpretations of the expressive intent and meaning of musical works, citing as evidence the treatment of the elements of music, contexts, (when appropriate) the setting of the text, and personal research.

- Students will explain differences in the contexts within which plena music is performed (folkloric and commercial).
- Students will identify common lyrical themes of plena songs.

MU:Cn10.o.H.Ia Demonstrate how interests, knowledge, and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing, and responding to music.

- Students will make personal choices as they create their own choruses and put them together to create a class plena.
- Students will explain how plena musicians' personal experiences affect song themes.
- Students will explain why Puerto Ricans living elsewhere (e.g., New York) still want to perform plena music.

MU:Cn11.o.T.Ia Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

- Students will identify which cultural elements of plena are Indigenous, West African, and European.
- Students will explain why plena can be considered both “Puerto Rican” and “Caribbean”.
- Students will explain the historical context of plena music.
- Students will define the term “diaspora”.
- Students will explain why it is important to introduce younger generations to plena music.
- Students will identify the locations and contexts within which plena music is performed today.

## **Additional Reading and Resources**

Flores, Juan. 2004. Liner Notes for *Viento de Agua Unplugged: Materia Prima*. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFW40513. Produced by Daniel E. Sheehy, edited by Jacob Love. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/SFW40513.pdf>.

Howard, Karen. 2019. "Puerto Rican *Plena*: The Power of a Song." *Journal of General Music Education* 32, no. 2: 36–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1048371318809971>.

Rivera, Raquel Z. 2005. "Introduction." Liner Notes for Los Pleneros de la 21. *Para Todos Ustedes*. Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFW40519. <https://folkways-media.si.edu/docs/folkways/artwork/SFW40519.pdf>.

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. n.d. "Tito Matos: Puerto Rican *Plena* Drummer." Artist Spotlight. Accessed January 21, 2023. <https://folkways.si.edu/tito-matos-puerto-rican-plena-drummer/latin-world/music/article/smithsonian>.