



DRUM MAGAZINES CRASH TEST 2000

by Russell Nieman

As we enter the next century, percussionists and composers alike are seeking different sounds to satisfy their creative palette. One instrument in particular stands out as perhaps the most prominent alternative choice that percussionists are often asked to play the cajón and it is increasingly played in many diverse musical situations.

The cajón which means "box" (pronounced ka•hone) is believed to be Afro-Peruvian in origin. It is typically a six-sided cube constructed of plywood. At the back of the box is a sound hole, and the drummer commonly sits on top of the cajón while playing the front of the box. There is also a widespread cajón design that is similar to a conga, with a body that tapers downward, the "head" at the top of the cajón and the sound hole at the bottom. This cajón is held between the player's legs and is common to the traditional drumming of Cuba.

With all cajones, the head uses a thinner plywood than the cajón body and is loosely secured, allowing a flappy sound to be produced. Cajón tones are played similarly to the conga. Bass tones are played with the palm near the center of the head, slaps are played at the upper edge and corners (toward the body while sitting on the cajón) and open tones are produced between the slap and bass tones—although in most traditional cajón music, the two tones primarily used are the bass and slap. The cajón was born out of the use of common household items as percussion instruments when traditional drums were either unavailable or banned, as during the time of African slavery in Cuba and Peru. Its design, although now well refined, still bears much resemblance to its original form. And now class, let's get to the test!

Founded on its excellent line of congas, the Southern California company Fat Congas® now offers eight models of cajones, in both traditional and innovative designs. For this Crash Test, Fat Congas® sent some of their more unique models: Their String Cajón™ and a set of Batajón® (pronounced ba•ta•hone) which are a cross between the cajón and the Cuban batá drum.

Construction. All of the cajón bodies are made of 9-ply Baltic Birch, however, the heads are made of what is called "aircraft" plywood, which the company describes as very durable with very thin plies. The heads are 5-ply and in the case of the String Cajón, are 3mm thick and in the Batajón®, 2.5 mm thick. All joints are glued and lock-mitered, making for very strong construction. The String Cajón™ follows a design like the traditional Peruvian cajón with some creative differences, the most obvious being the strings. There are four guitar strings stretched behind the head inside the drum. These produce a buzzing sound when you strike the head, which is secured with screws with a slight looseness. There are no screws at the upper corners of the String Cajón™, allowing for the flappy slap tone usually associated with the cajón. Conveniently, the String Cajón™ has a 1/4" foam rubber pad, similar to a computer mouse pad, glued to the top of the drum that provides a very comfortable seat. There are also feet on the bottom of the drum to keep the body raised slightly and to protect it from scratches.

Fat Conga's® Batajón® construction is even a farther stretch into ingenuity: pylon shaped with two heads, one larger than the other, like a batá without its traditional hourglass design. The heads are glued to the body more securely than the head of the String Cajón™, with sound holes near the smaller of the two heads. The Batajón® is held horizontally in the player's lap while playing, like a batá drum. Keeping this design in mind, each Batajón™ comes with an attached strap that wraps around the player's waist to keep the Batajón® from falling, just like a Cuban batá. Also like its Cuban predecessor, the Batajón® comes in three sizes: the Iyá (large), Itótele (medium) and Okónkolo (small).

All of the drums have a very attractive natural blonde finish and a Fat Congas® logo. From a construction standpoint, it was obvious to me from the start that a lot of care, attention and, dare I say, artistry went into the design and making of these drums. But what do they sound like? I'll start with the String Cajón™.

Sound. The first thing that struck me was the incredible definition between sounds like the slap and the bass tone. While being capable of strong resonant lows, the String Cajón™ has very responsive high-pitched slaps and everything in between. Whether playing fast or slow, this cajón very easily reproduces the sound you intend to hear from it. The buzzing of the strings helps to create a unique fullness that I haven't heard from any other cajón, and provides a very wide spectrum of sound variation. When playing Brazilian Carnival rhythms for example, I could mimic the sound of the batteria from the lows of the surdo

to the highs of the repenque. This cajón was quite addictive and given its easy playability and very sonorous tone, I found playing it to be almost effortless.

The Batajón® offers a truly original sound, which, not surprisingly is somewhere between a batá and a cajón. Between the two, it most closely resembles the sound of the batá, but in a very "woody" way. Since the heads of the Batajón® are secured more tightly than the String Cajón™, it emits a tight sound with definite pitches, which follows the tradition of the batá. The pitch of the drums naturally ascends from high to low depending on the size of the drum. The Iyá is capable of extremely resonant low bass tones while the Okónkolo produces a very distinguished high pitch. Although you could certainly play traditional music with these drums, there is a lot of room to experiment with the Batajón®. By its very nature, it is a departure from tradition and seems to invite the player to try different ideas. Like the String Cajón™, it is very easy to play and a lot of fun.

Verdict. From the living room to the studio, these drums are at home in any situation and are ideal for recording or live playing. They project sound very well, protecting your hands from overplaying. For live use, they are easily miked via the sound hole, but while using the Batajón® in the studio, I'd recommend placing microphones at either head, and using two mikes for the String Cajón™ at the sound hole and at the front head. Under the mikes, I was thoroughly impressed with their sonic flexibility and cooperation with other percussion instruments. Overall, these are very impressive drums, meeting the demands of contemporary and traditional percussionists.