



The Cuatro



What happens when you drive a four-wheeler into quicksand? The answer? Cuatro cinco. With that, let me introduce you to the cuatro, not a four-wheeler but rather a four-stringed instrument, easily the most popular musical instrument in Venezuela. The cuatro is shaped like a ukulele, differing in appearance by the dark hardwood scratch plate. If you listen to cuatro players and see their amazingly rapid, hard-hitting strum patterns, you'll understand why cuatros are constructed as they are. One plays the cuatro with the same chord patterns as a ukulele or guitar, having the same relative tuning, the only difference being the pitch. While the first four strings of a guitar are tuned DGBE and the ukulele GCEA, the cuatro is tuned higher at ADF#B (the B an octave lower) allowing the cuatro to be played so rapidly.

Our parish offers classes in several barrios teaching kids to play the cuatro. For years, those classes were lead by Marbella Salazar, a gifted, faith-filled musician and teacher active in our parish music and worship since her early teen years. It was a tremendous loss when she succumbed to a long bout with cancer on May 1st last year, but just a few hours before Marbella died, she grasped her mom's hand and, with a big smile, eyes glistening with joy, asked if she could hear the music, "the music of the angels singing, mamá. It's so beautiful!" Among the angels' harps accompanying that singing, I think there is now a cuatro section.

Javier Manzana, a blind musician and parishioner of whom I wrote in a previous article ("Blind and Blessed", Jan. 4, 2021), stepped in to carry on the tradition. I have attended a few concerts presented by his students. To see and hear fourteen kids 8 to 15 years of age with just a couple months' lessons strumming in perfect unison and singing out was quite impressive. Knowing from personal experience how challenging it can be to get even two or three guitars tuned together, hearing all those cuatros perfectly tuned in unison was also impressive and a real credit to Javier. The tradition lives on!

Cuatros abound in our parish. Many kids in our program have one, but not all. So that all could participate, we had twenty cuatros handcrafted by a luthier in our city. I visited him for a tour of his workshop, an open-air tin-roofed collection of old machines in the back of a rundown concrete-block house on a dusty dirt road. Did you ever hear the tale of the old beat-up violin being sold at auction (see the poem "The Old Violin" by Myra Brooks Welch)? Bidding had stopped at only \$3 when an elderly fellow came forward, picked up the violin, and began to play. When bidding resumed, the violin went for \$3,000. This luthier's shop was nothing to look at, but the luthier was something else. He was the master. Fortunately, his price was not reflective of his skill as with the violin player in the poem. Instruments of similar quality and beauty handcrafted in Minnesota would go for well over \$100, but we purchased those twenty for \$30 each (paid for, thanks, by some friends in New Prague).



The cuatros our kids bring from home are not of that same quality. Being for the most part old and beaten up, they are fragile instruments susceptible to significant cracks and breaks in the less-than-careful hands of kids. I am no luthier, but I do like working with wood and repairing things. With a bottle of wood glue, a few vises, a little ingenuity and patience, I have repaired many a broken cuatro and guitar here in my "home workshop". I recently received an old worn out cuatro with cracks on the top and sides, the bracing dried and unglued, tape and stickers holding the poor thing together. The angle of the neck was such that the strings were high off the frets, making it difficult to play. Over the next several days I repaired the cracks, adjusted the neck, cleaned and refinished the instrument to where it was now beautiful and easy to play. I was so pleased with how it turned out and reflected on how, in restoring the instrument, I had something in common with God...not a pride in my accomplishment, but the joy and satisfaction of having taken something broken and beaten and restoring it to a beautiful instrument once again. I could understand why there is so much joy in heaven over a repentant sinner and why the prodigal son's father received him with a big hug. What great delight God must take in repairing our cracks and brokenness and restoring us, the instruments of his pride and joy.

Points to ponder

Why do you think Javier teaches kids without pay? What do you do that brings you great joy and satisfaction?

These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.