

Incan Music Modern Style

- By Ramón Bannister



Figure 1: Inca Son near Quincy market. ©2010 Ramón Bannister

The next stop along my Boston street music route was [Quincy market](#), a tourist destination that's always teeming with activity in the summer. Also known as Faneuil Hall Marketplace, it is home to a huge selection of restaurants, gift shops and street performers of all types. On this particular day, I saw a yo-yo man. But I was particularly interested in the music group right at the entrance of the market coming

from the orange line State Street subway station. I have seen

them in years past performing on Harvard Sq., but I had not recognized them until they told me who they were: [Inca Son](#).

I received a band member's permission to post approximately one and-a-half minutes of audio that I recorded. His name was Santos. The guy was more than happy to allow me to help them market their Andean music.

It's time I tell my readers that I do not take this job lightly. I first gather an initial impression of the music before I decide to profile the musicians. Call it judging, call it what you will, but I do not wish to post music I deem to be of questionable quality. Little did the musicians know that I too am a performer of Andean music. I play the panpipes, *charango* (guitar-like with the back of an armadillo) and other instruments. So I have a type of expertise that most people don't have. I know good Andean musicians when I see them. I know what it means to get a good quality sound out of panpipes as compared to the sound an amateur or other tourist would produce.

This Andean group played beautiful music, as you can hear in the sample below. But something was missing, and I knew right away what it was. The *bombo*, a large drum with goat or cow skin drum heads, often supplies Westernized Andean music with the solid foundation necessary to make the music sound full and driving. In place of the drum, they used a MIDI soundtrack. It sounded like a common drum set.

Audio Sample #1 provided on website version

Generally speaking I criticize the use of any kind of recorded material such as MIDI soundtracks. In the past I would automatically reject an Andean music group that used this tactic. Sometimes it's very inconspicuous – very difficult to know they are using a soundtrack. But to the trained eye and ears, it becomes apparent. Often, recorded soundtracks are used for the *charango*.

I've seen it in other groups in the past. They would be playing the music; then, after a while of being impressed with the *charango* player's technique, I would sense that something was wrong. It would take a couple of songs for me to realize that the *charanguista*'s hand did not synchronize with the sound. I would hear a rapid strumming, but see the player's hand plucking the strings. Or, the strumming rhythm would be much more complex than the basic rhythm being played by the *charanguista*. Or, I would hear two distinct *charango* rhythms, but only see one on stage. In most of these occasions, I deduced that the background music was utilized to hide the lack of performance quality inherent in the musicians.

But this time was different; despite the MIDI soundtrack, Inca Son's sound was surprisingly enjoyable. I tried to shake that feeling out of me. They could have easily gotten some guy like me to play a *bombo*. Still, the sound captivated me. I began to change my mind about recorded soundtracks, and I know exactly why. The haunting melody grabbed me tightly, like jumping into ocean water that's cold. I was shocked, perplexed. Sure, the echo effect in the electronic PA system helped. But the panpipes' soothing sound was only possible from an expert musician. After all, no amount of echo can hide bad music from my ears.



Figure 2: Woman preparing to give a dollar bill to musicians. ©2010 Ramón Bannister



Figure 3: People relaxing while listening to the music. ©2010 Ramón Bannister

Turns out I wasn't the only one whose imagination soared through the trees. As you see in the photograph above, most people in the area were listening. Many were sitting on benches, relaxing. One man was standing near a tree under the shade. They were all staring at the musicians as they created art, a beauty that would never be re-created again. It's like the Buddhists that make complex art with sand and then destroy the creation as soon as it's finished. Never again will anyone hear that instrumental piece in the same way. Hearing it in the recording is not the same. Performing it again will not be the same. You have to be there in the moment to experience the moment. To give you a sense of how much people enjoyed the music, note the audio sample of people cheering.

Audio Sample #2 provided on website version



Figure 4: Woman gives change to musicians.
©2010 Ramón Bannister

I was so impressed with the music that I bought their latest CD, a live recording of a concert given at Harvard University. And in the recording they *do* use a *bombo*! The music on the CD is of high caliber. This group has [won numerous awards](#) and has been honored by many people, including the First Lady in Perú. If you see this group as a tourist or Boston resident, stop and watch the musicians for a few minutes. I also recommend you buy one of their CDs.

However, don't buy a CD just because you like the music. Sure, that should be the main reason. You don't want to buy music you'll never listen to. But the other reason is to help support local musicians and the local economy. When I asked Santos how much they make as street performers, he told me \$30 per musician, on average. And that's not hourly: that's *daily*. I assure you that they could make more than that at McDonald's.

The majority of their money comes from selling CDs, which they have priced at \$15, or about as much as a new CD at a music store. Which CD to buy is a good question, because I honestly don't know. They have produced more than 10 albums. So, I specifically asked for their newest one. And I'm glad I bought it.