What is a Rondalla?

A rondalla is an ensemble of plectrum instruments, stringed instruments played with a plectrum or pick. It originated in Spain, but became one of the traditional forms of Philippine folk music after its introduction to the islands in the 19th century. Philippine rondalla instruments are made of native Philippine wood and played with a tortoise-shell plectrum.

The word rondalla is from the Spanish ronda, meaning "serenade." The core instruments of a Spanish rondalla are the guitar, the mandolin, and the lute. The musicians are accompanied by at least one singer, and sometimes also by handheld percussion instruments. Though the ensemble of stringed instruments existed in some form in Spain since at least the 16th century, the rondalla dates from the early 19th century. It soon thereafter traveled to the Philippines, at the time a Spanish colony.

Early Philippine rondallas played Western European songs, mostly operatic arias and symphonic overtures. While such songs are still in the Philippine repertoire, the Philippine rondalla has become much more diverse over the years. It evolved into a socially important folk form, played at community events such as weddings and fiestas. Today, rondallas may play more contemporary music, such as show tunes and Latin American dance music, in addition to Philippine folk songs and European classical music.

The major Philippine rondalla instruments are the banduria, the guitar, the octavina, the laud, and the bass guitar or double bass. The banduria is the central instrument of the ensemble and, along with the octavina and laud, unique to the Philippines. The guitar and double bass each have six strings, while all other rondalla instruments have 14 strings grouped into six tuning units to produce a richer sound.

An eight-piece rondalla should have four bandurias and one of each of the guitar, octavina, laud, and double bass. Many rondallas are quite large, with 30 or 40 members, especially for important social events. A 30-piece rondalla has 16 bandurias, three piccolo bandurias, three guitars, three octavinas, three lauds, two double basses. The number and type of percussion instruments is optional for any size rondalla.

During the 1960s, the rondalla was extremely popular in the Philippines, and rondallas regularly competed with each other on television and radio programs. The bands received funding from schools, government officials, and business moguls who each tried to have the best rondalla. Today, the popularity of the Philippine rondalla has waned somewhat in its native country, but groups based in countries around the world, including the United States and Japan, keep the tradition alive.

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