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by Dan Rager

The History of the Marimba

The Marimba in its simplest form originated among primitive men long ago. It was one of the earliest melodic instruments made by man and references suggest it was widespread throughout Asia and Africa. Though many countries claim it to have originated in their country there is no evidence to prove the exact location of its first arrival.

The instrument is known by various names and has different physical characteristics depending upon the country or region it comes from. To better understand its development throughout history, we must look at the people and cultures that have made it part of their tradition.

The origin of the marimba is uncertain; some believe that it had originated in Southeast Asia in the 14th Century, and others that it came from Africa. The instrument was brought to South America in the early 16th Century by either African slaves or by pre-Columbian African contact.

The marimba is an idiophone that is sounded by striking wooden bars with a mallet. Its name is derived from Bantú, a language in which rimba suggests a "flattish object sticking out" such as a note or key, and *ma* is a cumulative prefix; thus, marimba is equivalent to many keys.⁵

In Guatemala, the word marimba means "the wood that sings".⁵ This too is a type of xylophone with resonators underneath the different-sized wooden keys which are struck with mallets.

According to Nadel³, the name marimba signifies the gourd xylophone of Africa. The gourd is used as a resonator creating longer tones. There are territories where unresonated xylophones are also called marimbas and the name "marimba" can be applied to instruments of the *sana* type (*mbira*).

The word is also related to a number of words in Bantu languages, all referring either to a xylophone or to some other musical instrument, such as one of the various types of *lamellophone*, or *mbira*. In the Bantu language, the words *marimba*, *mbira*, or even *likembe* are all considered variants of a common word root. Among the various names for xylophone in Bantu speaking African region one finds, besides the *marimba*, *silimba* or *sirimba*, *timbila*, *andamadimba*, or *madimba*.³

It is not possible to say precisely from which African xylophone type or from which region of Africa the Mexican/Central American marimba may have originated, the linguistic evidence suggests that the name marimba is of African, specifically Bantu, origin is conclusive. It should also be noted that names for the xylophone that sound like marimba are more common in Central, East, and South Africa than in West Africa.²

Since large numbers of Africans were brought as a labor force to Central America, parts of Mexico and the Pacific Coast. These slaves formed along with the Indians, the basic labor force of the coastal areas of Central America. It is possible and most likely that in some coastal area the idea, form, and structure of the African marimba was transmitted to the Indians of the region.⁴ It is clear that the instrument spread effectively among the Indians of the entire region of Central America to Guatemala and Chiapas, with its greatest development probably occurring in Guatemala. However, since it is impossible to know precisely from which region of Africa the marimba came to America, or precisely to which region of America it was first introduced, it is also impossible to have any idea of how the first marimba music of America might have been played and whether any African musical influences might have been transferred along with the instrument itself. Although there are a number of regions on the coast of Central America where the marimba might have been introduced from Africa, one possibility might have been Guanacaste, a long coastal area in the northwest region of Costa Rica that extends along the southwestern region of neighboring Nicaragua, the area around the city of Masaya.⁴

There is historical evidence of the existence of African slaves as part of the labor force in this region and perhaps more important, marimbas with calabash

resonators and the strip of wood used as a brace or handle are still to be found extensively throughout this region. Although the existence of this evidence for Masaya and Guanacaste does not rule out the possibility of the introduction of the marimba at some point of coastal Central America, the area of Nicaragua and Costa Rica does represent a distinct possibility. From such a potential point of contact the African marimba might have been passed along from one Indian group to another until it finally reached the highlands of Guatemala. What is important to note is the fact that the marimbas played in the highlands of Guatemala, as well as those found in southwestern Nicaragua and northwestern Costa Rica, "still have today the strongest structural similarities to the African xylophones".⁴

The original wooden instrument had a leg comprised of one, two or three rough slabs of wood, disconnected and of different pitch's.³ The wood was laid across the legs of a musician seated on the ground. The strip (leg) of wood often comes from a long straight branch of a tree and serves a number of functions. It can form a brace for the instrument, with the strip of wood placed on a stump of wood and the player sitting on both while hooking his legs inside the strip and thereby balancing and stabilizing the instrument as he plays.¹ The strip of wood can also be used to hold the instrument from the waist when it is played from a standing position or serve as a convenient handle when carrying the instrument.

The early marimbas were made of wooden bars or keys, with resonating gourds suspended below. Each gourd was individually tuned to the primary pitch of its corresponding key. The gourd was interiorly fitted with a mirliton or natural membrane (tripa de puerco) which created the buzzing or reverberating sound for which the marimba is known. These traditional marimbas are still made in rural villages, mainly in Africa, Guatemala and Mexico.

The sound of the early instrument varies depending upon where it was made as the materials that make the resonated sound are of different sizes and composition. The pitch of the wooden bars is governed by several factors. Firstly, the material (type of wood), its length, width and dept all determine the timbre of the instrument. For example, if a wooden bar is thinned (sanded down) in the center in the shape of an arch, the pitch will become lower. The more wood that is filed away from the middle of the bar, the lower the pitch will be. There are no

tuning systems across cultural borders. Each system is designed by its creator and most are determined by the region they come from but over all, the instrument design and keys are similar in many countries.

For a good example of what makes-up an instrument in materials, size, length as well as the participants needed to play the marimba, we look to the south-west Cameroon region of Africa. Here, a “log-xylophone” can be found to be two long banana-tree trunks that are laid on the ground and some fifteen wooden keys are placed on top of the tree trunks to support them. These long keyboards are usually played by two, three or more musicians.¹ The musicians sit on both sides of the instrument when playing it instead of everyone playing it from the same side. The job of one of these musicians is to supervise the instrument so the performance runs smoothly. He replaces or moves any wooden keys that are moved out of place while they are being hit with mallets. The keys are not fixed or mounted to the banana tree trunks; they simply sit on top and move freely when struck.

In comparison to the marimbas made in other cultures, the keys to the modern orchestral marimba are usually constructed of rosewood, and the resonators made of brass or aluminum. The resonators (pipes) are graduated in length (as are the keys) and closed on one end (the end facing the floor). The marimba has a two-level keyboard, similar to a piano’s division of black and white keys, allowing the full chromatic range to be represented. The most common orchestral marimba is four octaves, and the solo marimba is between four-and-a-third and five octaves. Larger instruments up to six-and-a-half octaves are found in the villages of Guatemala and México, where they may be played by two or three persons simultaneously, and each using two to four mallets. The modern orchestral marimba is mounted on a standing frame and played from a standing position.

The initial sound produced by the mallet striking the bar is the fundamental, and the tones created by the vibrating bar are the overtones. As the bar is free on both ends, both odd- and even-numbered overtones are produced. While the primary overtone of a xylophone is one octave and a fifth above the fundamental, the primary overtone of a marimba is precisely two octaves above the fundamental.

Each resonator is tuned to the pitch of its bar's fundamental tone, and helps in producing a stronger sounding of the fundamental and the odd-numbered overtones. A common misconception is that the resonator prolongs the key's sound, when in reality the opposite is true. When a resonator is used, two sources (the resonator and the key) vibrate instead of one. The close proximity of two vibrating elements causes a more rapid decay of the sound. However, when using a resonator, the initial sound is louder and therefore remains within the normal range of hearing for longer than a note struck without the use of a resonator; thus accounting for the illusion of a prolonged pitch.

The modern marimba can be played by one, two or more people depending upon its size and the music requirement and each can use two or four mallets in their hand to play the instrument. The mallets are commonly made of birch or rattan, topped with heads of rubber, plastic, or wood, and usually wrapped in yarn or cord. A heavy mallet or one made from softer material results in longer contact or compression with the bar, producing a louder sound which is quickly dampened. A light mallet or one made of rigid material rebounds quickly, producing a softer, yet fuller, longer tone.

There are two methods taught when learning to play the marimba. The first method comes from the *ngoma* style and is the most common in Africa, Guatemala, Mexico and cultures that use oral-kinaesthetic ways of teaching. Sound, touch and action (not words) are the "direct sensory media through which music and dance are learnt in oral societies".⁶ This means that teaching and learning orally and kinaesthetically rely heavily upon imitation of perceived sounds, expressions, gestures and movements. It is through frequent repetitions at regular intervals that learners gradually build up their skills which allow them to "perform without any concentration on details, freeing the mind to concentrate on the quality of performance".⁶ In these oral societies, the adult community provides models for performance on which the child may model his/her own performance through imitation. In a school setting, it is the teacher, member of the community or a peer that act as models who perform the music that the student imitates. We call this "call and response".

“Classroom experiences provide students with adequate and varied sensory input of experiences in terms of musical sound.”⁴ This implies ample opportunities for listening to the use of voice tones, rhythms, instrumental combinations, tonal systems, and observing dancing in different styles, of different qualities, and for different events.

Today, the use of multimedia is used as a way of teaching many forms of music including *ngoma*. Teachers use audio and video recordings as an introduction or as a more advanced model for imitation.⁴ The use of modern technology is not in contradiction with *ngoma* as long as sound, touch and action are applied to the process.

Ngoma instruments such as the marimba are learnt for different reasons than in the West. Unlike the modern orchestral marimba, this instrument has a function and is part of a societal role in people’s lives. In addition to making music for dance and entertainment, the marimba is played for the rituals of the community. One can hear it performed at a birthing ceremony, wedding, funeral, spiritual blessing, healing, work related (Songs for cultivating, harvesting, planting, etc.) games and religious events. The instrument is part of the culture and to learn it is to participate in life’s events.

The second method used in teaching marimba is the modern approach using musical notation. Students learn music notation at a young age in a school classroom setting or by taking private lessons on an instrument. Most students who play the marimba in high school have studied music for several years and probably play another instrument other than the marimba. The instrument can be performed solo, with an ensemble, band or orchestra. People play it in all genres of music including classical, jazz and rock n roll. I should mention that a person does not have to read or study music to play the marimba. Some people play by ear or rote as those who learn the *ngoma* instrument. However, this limits ones ability to perform in some groups and genres of western music.

Gender and culture play an important part of the marimba. In James Blades book “Percussion Instruments and their History, he mentions that the “primitive xylophones (marimba)” of the Pacific and Far East were most often played by women.² He noted that in the African culture, the instrument seems to be

dominated by men changing the gender role of the instrument. The gender roles or barriers are still present in many regions of Africa, Guatemala and Mexico but says that Guatemala and Mexico now have more women playing the instrument than past generations.

There are musical similarities and differences used in both methodologies mentioned above. The order of these methods is not important but the ideas used to create music are. These elements are performed differently depending upon the culture. It is easier to explain in terms of eastern and western cultures. These are a few examples found today.

1) The first element is musical *form*: “*Free form*” music is taught throughout most cultures. It is used differently in the Western world. Although there are folk songs in this style, 20th century music contains much written music in this form. The music or songs in the *ngoma* style played by non-modern orchestral instruments such as the marimba meander in *ngoma* without much structure. The existing structure (form) was handed down from generation to generation and not written as notation.

2) Binary songs: In the classical era composers wrote in two part form and repeated the two sections to create a composition. This is taught in *ngoma* tradition as well where a performer repeats the same two sections over and over.

3) Repetition and variation: This commonly major structural technique is found in both western and eastern music.

4) Melodic patterns and techniques: Generally short repeated melodic patterns, in some northern regions descending patterns are common (Vakwangali, Valozi). Tonal languages affect melodic contour meaning the voice inflection gives the meaning to words leading to parallelism (Damara, Ju/'hoan).⁴ Western notational music is written, it does not change with the contour of the voice.

5) Pulses: Quite fast in central north, moderate in most other parts of Juxtaposition of 2s, 3s and 4s create rhythmic complexity, especially in north-east Caprivi. Western music has very fast pulses written in notation.

6) Tempo variations: In the *ngoma* tradition, music is meant to be danced to therefore variations in tempo during a performance are not common. This is not

true in the western or modern world where tempos can change at any time during the music.

It would seem that the marimba has had a long journey around the world that has helped contribute to its development. The musical styles and genres used to play the instrument have also contributed to its success. The marimba will continue its popularity among eastern and western cultures because it has become rooted into each culture. This will guarantee its future around the world for generations to come.

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