

Marimba

Bare Bones Productions

*In the Bantu languages of Central Africa, Marimba means “wood that sings”
The name Marimba is said by some to derive from a Zulu (South African) myth in which a Goddess made an instrument by hanging gourds underneath wooden bars, the goddess’s name was “Marimba”.*

History of the Marimba

Mallet instruments were probably the first pitched instruments made by people. The oldest such musical instruments discovered were found in 1949 near a village in Vietnam. This instrument is the first type of xylophone and is a stone marimba or lithophone. Different versions of these primitive xylophones are found among African and Asian cultures.

The “Marimba Sencilla”, is a descendent of the African Xylophone.

This Marimba has about 45 wooden keys, each with a gourd attached underneath it to resonate the sound. This large version of the marimba was played by 3-5 players while a smaller version is the Balaphone.



African Balaphone

During the 16th century the marimba was brought by slaves to South America. The instrument migrated north to Central America and in the late 19th century, a Guatemalan, Sebastian Hurtado, removed the gourds from the Marimba and replaced them with wooden boxes. This new design was the basis of today’s marimbas. This design is referred to as a six and a half octave Marimba and is still the national instrument of Guatemala.



Guatemalan Marimba Ensemble

Marimbas can be Chromatic, like a piano with all the black and white keys, or Diatonic, having just the notes of a piano’s white keys.

In 1908 Marimbas were formally introduced to North America when the Hurtado Family Marimba Band began performing here. Their tour lasted 3 years, inspiring many other Guatemalan groups to begin performing in the United States and created a huge trend in the entertainment industry.

Around 1910 marimbas began being made in the United States. The design changed again when the Deagan company of Chicago removed the wooden box pipes replacing them with round, metal ones. The marimba has further evolved as the keys have been rearranged so that the notes are chromatic, like a piano.

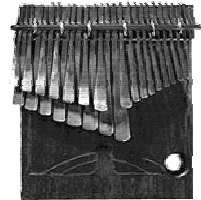


Modern Concert Marimba

The African roots of the marimba were revived in the United States in the 1980’s when Dr. Dumi Sani Marire came to the Pacific Northwest. A teacher in Zimbabwe who used the Marimba as a tool to demonstrate how Mbira (a type of thumb piano *fig. 3*) patterns work with each other. Since Dr. Marire brought the Zimbabwean style of marimba music here, Zimbabwean style Marimba Bands have spread throughout the US and Canada and number in the hundreds.

JAKA

As with most African musical instruments, Zimbabwean style Marimbas have buzzers on them. At the end of the marimba's resonator tubes, a piece of cellophane is placed to cover the hole. When the keys of the Marimba are struck with a mallet the sound vibrates down the tube and when that cellophane begins to vibrate it creates a buzz. This buzz is termed JAKA by the Shona people. The Shona are a tribe of people in Zimbabwe that have played traditional "Mbira" music for thousands of years. Those who have been on stage with a band of Marimbas or Mbiras have reported that when many instruments are played together, this buzz transforms to "voice like" sounds. One marimba player recalls "It is like the marimbas are singing to each other." The Shona know those sounds well and believe that JAKA is the voices of their ancestors rejoicing in the music.



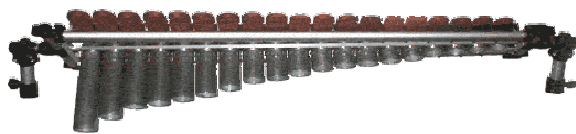
Mbira

Making a Marimba

Acoustic marimbas are made by cutting the marimba keys to the approximate size and shape with a saw or chisel. Most modern marimbas are made from Rosewood, but Cherry, Mahogany or African Padouk are often used depending on the instrument to be made. More experimental materials have also been employed such as plexi-glass, ceramic, bamboo and even glass.



The keys are then tuned by removing wood from the center and/or the outside of the key until the fundamental note and overtones are correctly pitched. The tubes underneath the keys are made from metal, wood or PVC and tuned by placing stoppers into the bottom at a specific



lengths. Small holes can be drilled in the stoppers and covered with cellophane if a Buzz effect is desired. When a mallet strikes a key, air pressure is sent down the tube causing the cellophane membrane to 'buzz'.

A frame must then be made to attach the keys and resonators to. Frames are made of either metal or wood with legs for support or sometimes a neck strap is used.

Bones used aluminum tubing with adjustable hardware so that his Marimba would be very adjustable. The mallets used to play the marimbas are usually made from dowels of various diameters and wood types with extruded rubber or yarn heads attached after being drilled hollow. The length and weight vary depending on an individual player's preference.



Types of Mallet Instruments

There are many types of Mallet Instruments including the Steel Drum, Dulcimer, Balaphone, African Tongue Drum (*fig. 7*), Slit Gongs and the many different types of Marimbas. Marimbas themselves come in many different forms. There are Chromatic, Diatonic, and Semi-Chromatic marimbas as well as different ranges such as Alto, Tenor, Baritone and Bass. Some Bass Marimbas are so large that the player must stand on a bench or even wear stilts to reach the keys.



fig. 7

With the dawn of MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interphase) electronic mallet instruments were created. These instruments allow a musician to play any "sampled" sound available from the MIDI sound generator. Bones uses an Electronic Marimba with a Sound Generator that allows him to play virtually any instrument imaginable with his mallets!

