

African music

The roots of African music



Drummers use their hands or beat the skin of the drum with sticks to produce a sound

Percussive instruments are a part of life in some African societies. Traditionally they have been used for:

- ceremonies of all occasions, from celebrating birth to respecting the dead
- calling to arms in wars
- religious rites and rituals
- communicating across distances

Music and dance are an integral part of the African culture. They used to and still provide a valuable way to communicate with workers in the fields or pass messages to other villages. The music can vary hugely throughout Africa but has similar purposes, eg for storytelling, welcoming heroes, and religious ceremonies. Music is seen to illustrate the importance of human life, to connect people and to support the sense of community. Music and dance are mainly performed by large groups in villages.

The music played by drum ensembles is very complex in rhythm and texture. The rhythms are not normally written down and are instead passed between people through aural tradition. The master drummer has the most elaborate part, leading the drum ensemble and playing solos. The leader directs the drummers with musical cues in the form of rhythm patterns. The leader will also give cues to dancers to signal changes of tempo or dance moves. As well as percussion-based music, there is a lot of singing, including shouts, yodelling and other types of sound.

The instruments and rhythms of Africa

The instruments of Africa

African drums are usually made from wood, metal or clay and come in different sizes. If the drum has a large body, it will produce a lower pitch and if the drum head has a tight tension, a high pitch will be produced. The player will strike the drum with their hands, sticks or both. Drums are highly decorated with carvings or beadwork because they are treasured assets within African communities. Added beads or rattles can change the timbre of the drum.

A percussionist explains the playing techniques of some of the traditional instruments of Africa

Djembe



Djembe drums

One of the best-known African drums is the West African djembe. It is shaped like a large goblet and played with bare hands. The body is carved from a hollowed trunk and is covered in goat skin.

Talking drum



A player will manipulate the pitch of the drum by stretching or squeezing the strings of the drum

The talking drum is a West African instrument that has drum skins on both the top and bottom of its body. It is played with a beater and the performer is able to squeeze the drum's tension chords, which changes the pitch of the drum, imitating a human voice.

Dundun



Dundun drums are played whilst placed on the floor

Often played in groups, a dundun is made of cow skin and is played on the floor and with a beater-stick. It is often played as the bass drum in the ensemble. Dunduns are double-headed and belong to the family of hourglass-shaped pressure drums. The pitch of the note is changed by squeezing or releasing the drum's strings with the arm.

Timelines

In this extract, a timeline is being played on a single bell. This short repeating rhythm - or ostinato - acts as the pulse and holds the piece together. The talking drum heard in the extract is playing the other rhythm. During the extract, the placing of this rhythm changes to conflict with the timeline rhythm, creating a cross-rhythm.

The elements of music in African drumming

Melody

Although a melody is not always heard in traditional African music, some ensembles do include some melodic devices and instruments. For example:

- sometimes a melody often with a narrow range is added, played on a balafon or kalimba
- simple vocal melodies can be included

Rhythm and metre

Many of the rhythms can be complex, but remember the following points if asked to discuss traditional African rhythms:

- there is a strong sense of pulse throughout supported by the timeline or played on the dundun
- the played rhythms are repetitive
- polyrhythms are frequently played in African drumming - the figure is an example of a polyrhythm

The image shows two musical staves, Rhythm 1 and Rhythm 2, both in 4/4 time. Rhythm 1 is a simple pattern of four quarter notes. Rhythm 2 is a polyrhythmic pattern consisting of two groups of three eighth notes, each group bracketed with a '3' above it. The two rhythms are played simultaneously over the same 4-beat period.

Although the two rhythms divide the bar of music into different segments they both are to be played over the same period of time

- the rhythms can be displaced creating a cross-rhythm

Structure

Traditional music is sometimes not written down, this includes many examples of African percussion music. The structure of performances possess the following features:

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- there is no set structure because the master drummer signals the changes of sections
- there are frequent, short improvised solo sections, indicated by the ensemble leader

Instrumentation and timbre

The percussion instruments that are most associated with traditional African music are:

- a variety of drums including the djembe, talking drum and dundun - some of the drums can change in pitch
- beads and rattles that produce an alternative timbre to a drum

Texture and dynamics

Features of these elements include:

- polyrhythms are created by layering different rhythms together
- dynamics are changed depending on the force with which the drum is hit
- dynamics are not written down on a score - the leader signals changes in dynamics during the performance

Tonality and harmony

Consider the following points:

- tuned instruments can be added to the group of core instruments, which adds melodic or harmonic elements to the music
- drums can also create their own harmony as some drums are able to change pitch depending on how tightly they are squeezed
- simple diatonic or pentatonic harmonies can sometimes be heard when vocal melodies or balafons are added to the texture
 - **Performing and composing ideas**
 - African drumming employs the following techniques and devices. Each one can be transferred to other genres of music and should be recalled if asked to perform or compose a piece of music.

	In performance	In composing
Polyrhythms	Using percussion instruments, each player should perform a short rhythm and proceed to layer each new rhythm on top.	Compose a number of two-bar rhythms in 4/4 and hand out a percussion part to each player. The ensemble leader then directs the group.
Ensemble skills	For a rehearsal, the group should choose a leader who is permitted to use only rhythmic signals to inform all of the players how to play with dynamics and articulate.	Take time to understand the purpose of each instrument in a composition and question if the instrument is needed.
Rhythm	If a rhythm is considered difficult, it is sometimes useful to clap the rhythm with a metronome. Once the performer feels confident clapping the rhythm, then proceed to try on the instrument.	Compose a piece for two instruments. This part could start off simply and become increasingly complicated. Use some of the rhythmic ideas found in African music such as cross-rhythms, interlocking rhythms and polyrhythms.

The impact of African rhythms

The influence of African music on popular music is still heard today. It was transported to America along with the thousands of slaves from Africa during the slave trade. It was combined with the folk music of the European settlers to produce new styles of music such as blues, jazz and rock 'n' roll. Many genres of music from pop songs to modern classical music are linked to music from Africa.

Famous artists include Jalihunda African Drums, Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Soweto Gospel Choir.

Film music

Films such as *The Lion King* and *Blood Diamond* are set in Africa, using elements of African music to help set the scene.

Classical music

Stravinsky used polyrhythmic texture in *The Rite of Spring*.

African music

Samba and salsa rhythmic influences

Blues

Elements of rhythm and traditional song.

Jazz, soul and gospel

Rock 'n' roll

Rock

Pop music