

World Music

Music of Africa: drumming and instrumental music



African drumming

- # The drum is an important musical instrument in African culture.
- # Drums have been used as a means of communication for hundreds of years, and there are many different varieties found throughout the different regions: for example, the *tama* talking drums, *bougarabou* and *djembe* in West Africa.
- # The *djembe* is a single-headed drum which comes in a range of sizes in order to produce different pitch ranges.



African drumming

- # Drum music may be performed by a solo instrument or in ensembles.
- # Like vocal music, drum and instrumental music is not notated, so in a drum ensemble the performance is directed by a **master drummer**, who stands in the middle of a circle of drummers.
- # The master drummer often starts a piece by *vocalising* – making sounds with the voice – and then plays a short rhythmic solo to set the **tempo** and mood.
- # This is a cue to the other performers, who respond by copying the rhythm or by answering it with a different rhythm.
- # This is another example of the call and response form. The drummers then add improvised rhythms to a rhythmic cycle.



Activity

- # With a group of friends or in class, form a circle.
- # If you have a selection of drums, use them, otherwise other percussion instruments will do.
- # Choose one person to be the master drummer. The chosen person stands in the middle.
- # The master drummer shouts an opening cue, then plays this cycle:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
X		X	X	X		X	X



Activity

- # The other drummers then answer by repeating the cycle continuously.
- # From time to time the master drummer calls out to a member of the group to improvise.
- # More members of the group are asked to improvise at the same time.
- # The master drummer then signals the end of the performance.
- # Take turns to be the master drummer. Try to create cross rhythms and a polyrhythmic texture. Try adding syncopation or accents, or playing the cycle backwards, or starting on a different number of the cycle (*phasing*).



Listening Activity

- # Listen to track 28.
- # What features can you hear in the music which have been mentioned?
- # Name two rhythmic features you can hear in the music.



African instruments

- # There is a wide variety of African instruments, which are chosen for a particular song or instrumental performance depending on the suitability of their **timbre**.
- # There are many kinds of percussion, wind and string instruments, including different kinds of harp which often have complicated tuning systems.
- # As in African drumming, instrumental music makes use of repetition and ostinato, cyclic structures, improvisation, polyrhythmic and polyphonic/contrapuntal textures.



Xylophone

- # The xylophone is used in almost all of Africa, but there are different types, depending upon the area.
- # The wooden bars are set on a frame that has gourds (hollow dried shells of fruit) underneath them to help amplify the sound.



Kosika

- # The *kosika* is a percussion instrument which consists of two small gourds or seed pods filled with beans and connected by a string.
- # One gourd is held in the hand and the other is swung from side to side as you shake your hand.
- # The *kosika* has two sounds: a 'shake' created by the beans, and a 'clack' when the two gourds or seed pods hit each other.



Kora

- # A *kora* is built from a large calabash gourd cut in half and covered with cow skin to make a resonator.
- # It has a notched bridge like a lute or guitar.
- # The sound of a kora resembles a harp.
- # The player uses the thumb and index fingers of both hands to pluck the strings, which the remaining fingers hold the instrument.



Kora

- # Traditional koras have 21 strings: 11 played by the left hand and 10 by the right.
- # Modern koras often have additional bass strings.
- # Strings were traditionally made from thin strips of hide, but now most strings are made from harp strings or nylon fishing line.
- # A kora player can retune the instrument into one of four seven-note scales by moving leather tuning rings up and down the neck.



Key words

- # **Rhythmic cycle** – a rhythm that is continuously repeated.
- # The repeats may be varied in some way.

