Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

Musical Instruments from Around the World — G150/A

Pungi



This instrument is from India and is called a pungi. It is famous as the instrument used by snake charmers. It consists of two reeds or bamboo tubes, one of which is for the melody and the other creates a drone - a continuous humming noise. These two tubes are attached to a cavity which is usually made of gourd or coconut, inside which there should be two reeds. The double pipes are secured with wax. It is the vibration of these reeds that creates the sound, although in this case the reeds are no longer functioning. Players often use the circular breathing technique to maintain a continuous drone.

Daf



The usual name for this instrument in Europe is tambourine, but in India, where this example comes from, it is called a daf, also a duf, a daphu, a daffali … and other related names. Usually it lacks jingles. In south India there is an instrument called a kanjira, which is a small tambourine made by stretching a lizard skin over a wooden frame, which has a single jingle. All of these instruments are used to accompany dancing. This example with several jingles, from Bombay, may well have been influenced by the style of European tambourines.

Ocarina



Ocarina-type instuments have been around for thousands of years and can be found all over the world. The ocarina is a vessel flute. Unlike the perforated wind instruments, such as the orchestral flute and the recorder, the sound is created by resonance of the entire cavity. Ocarinas are usually made of earthenware or ceramic, but many other materials have been used, including plastic. They are often shaped like animals or birds. The name Ocarina means little goose in Italian. This rather battered example comes from South America.

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Wooden Bones



Second to that of the human voice, 'bones' are the oldest instruments known to humankind. Often they were literally made from the ribs of a goat or sheep, but wood and stone would do equally well - anything that could be banged together! To hold and play the instrument the two bones are placed parallel to each other between the fingers of the hand, extending downward. In performance the bones move so rapidly that it is impossible with the naked eye to see that only one bone actually moves. The moving bone is held between the third and fourth fingers. The key to playing the bones lies in the movements of the wrist, arm and shoulder. The fingers, in fact, do not move at all. A skilled player whirls their arms to produce a variety of rhythms. Shakespeare mentions the bones in Act IV, Scene I of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Bottom the weaver says, 'I have a reasonable good ear in music. Let's have the tongs and bones.' By the seventeenth century the bones were often called 'knicky-knackers' in England. This set is made from a dark hardwood, possibly ebony.

Drum

A drum is the next step on from simply banging together two hard objects, such as the bones. Their basic design has been virtually unchanged for hundreds of years - a hard tube, with its open ends covered by a skin.

This small African drum belongs to the Djembe (pronounced JEM-bay) family of drums - skin covered drums shaped like a large goblet that are intended to be played with bare hands. This example is made from cow hide. The skin at either end is held in place by cords made of twisted hide, which have been laced through slits running around the edge of the skin. The cow hair has been left on these cords, which adds colour to the drum. Four lengths of cord seems to have been used, with colours ranging from light yellow to dark brown.



A wide range of tones can be produced by the djembe. Striking the skin near the center produces a bass note; striking the skin near the rim can produce either a tone or slap note, depending on the technique used. The slap has a higher pitch than the tone. This example is too small to give an accurate indication of the range of sounds which it is possible to make.

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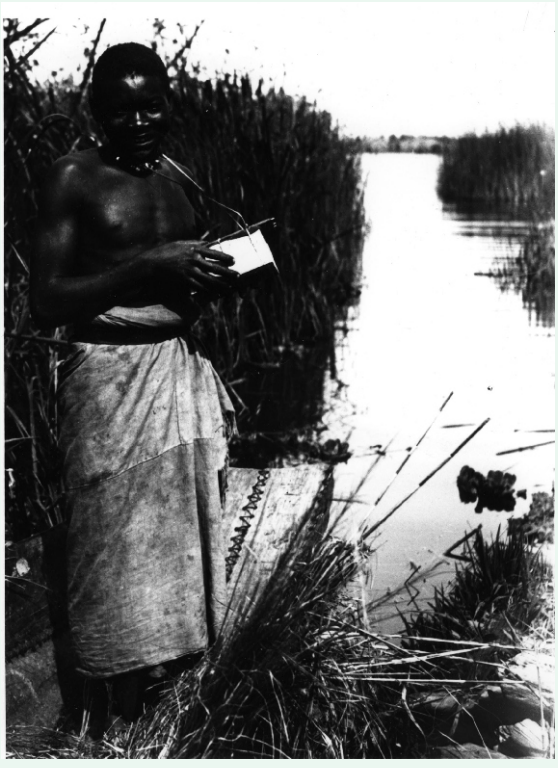
Thumb Piano

This musical instrument, consisting of a wooden board to which staggered metal keys have been attached, has a number of different names. In Europe it is also known as a lamellaphone, but as it comes from Africa one of its many African names seems most appropriate. Some of the most well-known names are sansa, mbira and kalimba.

The main problem with this instrument is that it is very quiet. To give the sound a boost the makers created designs that incorporated a sound box - a hollow chamber in which the sound can resonate. The Shona people of Zimbabwe, for example, often place their mbira inside a deze, a large resonator made from a calabash, to amplify its sound. In this case the wood has been crudely hacked out to make a sound box. The Museum of Reading has several examples of this instrument which have been made using empty Huntley & Palmers biscuit tins in order to amplify the sound!

This example has been roughly decorated with hot metal and two holes have been burned into the sound box, perhaps to attach a cord to for carrying purposes. A pencil note on the base reads 'Ykembe or Ndongo'. The tribal name Ykembe has not been traced, but the Ndongo people inhabit northern Angola. In the seventeenth century the queen of the Ndongo, Ngola Ann Nzinga Mbande, led a brilliant and successful campaign against the Portuguese invaders. After her death the Portuguese took over and the title for the Ndongo king - *ngola* - is the origin of the name Angola, which the Portuguese gave to their colony.



Late nineteenth century photograph of a thumb piano made using a Huntley and Palmers biscuit tin.