



Mbira

The *mbira* has played a part in African culture for over 800 years and has been an important instrument in sub-Saharan Africa for all this time. Although it can be played as a solo instrument, it is more commonly used as an accompaniment to singers, other musicians and dancers.

Many versions of the mbira exist with tribes creating their own distinctive performance styles and names for the instrument. The mbira vary widely in appearance, size, materials. The smallest 6-note models are made by the *Kalahari Bushmen*. Then there is the sophisticated 33-note mbira found in *Zimbabwe*.

The name mbira is known throughout much of Africa, but the name is more commonly used in Zimbabwe. The name *Kalimba* is used in Kenya, the name *ikembe* is used in Rhuanda, and the name *likembe* is used in the Congo. The more generic names given to the mbira are the finger harp, gourd piano.

The mbira is also known as the thumb piano, because one's thumbs are used to pluck (or more accurately depress and release) the metal strips which make the sound. The metal strips are called *tongues* or *lamellas*. It is common for two mbiras to be played together. One player covers the melodic accompaniment of the singer while the other plays the bass line (or *bourdon*).

P.T.O

As already explained, some mbiras have few tongues and others have many. Some of the more sophisticated instruments have two sets of tongues so the performer can play both the melody and the harmony, or the melody and bass line on the same instrument.

An mbira's sound is somewhat soft and needs amplification to be heard in most settings. To make the instrument sound louder, the mbira can be wedged into a hollowed-out gourd or calabash (called a *deze*), which resonates and enriches the mbira's sound. The calabash is usually boiled in salted water to harden it, making it stronger and less likely to crack.

The *deze* is usually strung with bottle caps or shells that add to the instruments sound.

Today, versions of this African instrument can be found in most parts of the world, with a wide use in parts of Asia, the Middle East, North and South America. Much of this popularity is due to the simplicity of the instrument's design and construction and the relative ease by which one can learn to play.

