

THE HISTORY OF ZIMBABWEAN MARIMBAS

Background

Most African instruments have existed for so long that it is impossible to trace their history all the way back to their origins. However, the Zimbabwean marimba is an exception. This instrument has only existed for about forty years, and during this time its popularity has grown tremendously. Today, Zimbabwe-style marimba bands can be heard not only in Zimbabwe and its neighboring countries, such as Botswana and South Africa, but also in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Australia, Canada and the United States. For an instrument with such a short history, it has certainly traveled far. This is the story of how it all began.

Zimbabwe in the 'sixties

Zimbabwe in the early 1960's was called Southern Rhodesia, and was a British colony. This changed in 1965 when Ian Smith and his all-white government declared independence from Britain, and the country became Rhodesia. In Rhodesia, all schools, colleges, public transportation, shopping centers and even residential areas were segregated by skin color into "white", "colored" and "black". Most black people, who formed the majority of the population, did not have the right to vote, and the growing discontent over the whole situation eventually led to a civil war which lasted from the early 1970's to 1980. In 1980, majority rule was finally achieved and the country became Zimbabwe. However, back in the 1960's the war had not yet escalated. People went about their daily lives as usual. They shopped for food, visited with neighbors, went to school or work, and sang songs while they worked.

Kwanongoma College of Music: Birthplace of Zimbabwean marimbas

The city of Bulawayo is the second largest city in Zimbabwe. Harare is the largest, and is also the capital. Bulawayo lies in the province of Matabeleland, home to many of the Ndebele people of Zimbabwe. The Ndebeles are the second largest ethnic group in the country, after the Shonas who form the majority.

In 1961, Bulawayo was home to the Rhodesian Academy of Music, and its incumbent director was a retired city electrical engineer and classical flautist named Robert Sibson. As a musician, Sibson appreciated the sweet, rich musical traditions of both the Shona and Ndebele people, which were woven into the very fabric of rural society. However, he was concerned about the potential loss of these musical traditions as people moved from rural to urban areas in search of work. Moreover, none of this music was being taught in schools. Sibson's solution to this problem was to establish a college dedicated to the study of African music, with the goal of training primary school music teachers who would then be able to teach African music in the schools. This college was founded in 1961 as a branch of the Academy of Music, and was named Kwanongoma, "the place where drums are played", or "the place of singing".

Having established Kwanongoma as an African music college, Robert Sibson proposed that some type of African musical instrument should be used for instruction. To find a suitable instrument, Sibson consulted a number of people who were leaders in their fields. These people included Hugh Fenn, who was Director of the Rhodesian Academy of Music before Sibson; South African ethnomusicologist Andrew Tracey, who was the son of renowned ethnomusicologist Dr. Hugh Tracey; Dr. James McHarg, vice-chancellor of the University of Rhodesia; Trevor Lea-Cox, who was General Manager of the Rhodesia Railways; and Nelson Jones, the city electrical engineer. After much discussion, the instrument chosen for Kwanongoma was the marimba. This instrument was uniquely African, but was not indigenous to Zimbabwe itself. Nevertheless, marimba instruments could be found in neighboring countries, such as Zambia and Mozambique. The Chopi people of Mozambique had the most highly developed marimba tradition, with large ensembles consisting of various instruments ranging in pitch from double bass to soprano. The idea for Kwanongoma was to create not just a marimba, but an entire marimba band, similar to the ensembles found in Mozambique.



Since the purpose of Kwanongoma was to train music teachers, students at the College were instructed not only in marimba, but also in voice, performance, theory, piano, guitar, drums and mbira. The mbira is a traditional Shona instrument played with the thumbs and index fingers. It has a fascinating history of its own, which is beyond the scope of this book.



Olof Axelsson

The first Director of Kwanongoma College was Leslie Williamson. He was succeeded by Olof Axelsson in 1972. When Axelsson left in 1981, long-time marimba instructor Alport Mhlanga became Director of Kwanongoma until his move to Botswana in 1987.

In 1971, Kwanongoma was moved from its previous site on Khami Road to a new site on the Old Victoria Falls Road. At that time, it became the music department of the United College of Education.

Marimba builders at Kwanongoma

Kwanongoma's first three marimbas were built by Nelson Jones around 1962, using imported California redwood for the keys and cardboard tubes for the resonators. They were chromatic, and did not last very well as the wood was apparently too soft.

With the arrival in 1963 of Josiah Siyembe Mathe, an accomplished musician of Lozi descent from southwestern Zambia who knew how to teach and build the *selimba* (Lozi marimba), the development of marimbas at Kwanongoma got on the right track. Using his original 11-note *selimba* with its gourd resonators as a model, Mathe created a 13-note soprano marimba, a tenor and a bass. As a skilled instrument-builder who also knew how to make drums and other musical instruments, he willingly shared his knowledge with the students at Kwanongoma.

The wood used for the keys on the new Kwanongoma marimbas was the locally available mukwa wood (*Pterocarpus angolensis*). After a brief experiment with bamboo tubes for resonators, PVC tubing of different lengths and diameters eventually replaced the brittle gourds of the traditional selimba.

Michael Bhule succeeded Mathe, and built the first complete set of four instruments which became the model for Kwanongoma marimbas, based on suggestions made by marimba instructor Alport Mhlanga. This set was built in 1966 and consisted of a soprano and tenor in a diatonic C-scale with added F#'s, a 9-note baritone and an 8-note bass. The inclusions of the F#'s meant that tunes could be played in either the key of C or of G which made the instruments more versatile, especially as accompaniment for singing.



Elliot Ndlovu

Bhule trained James Jubane, also known as James Jack, who in turn trained Elliot Ndlovu in 1968. When Olof Axelsson became Director of Kwanongoma in 1972, he and Ndlovu worked extensively on new marimba designs for the College. Ndlovu remained as workshop manager until 1997. After retiring from Kwanongoma, he and his sons continued to make marimbas from his home in Luveve, Bulawayo until his death in 2006.

Marimba teachers at Kwanongoma

The first marimba instructor at Kwanongoma College was Josiah Siyembe Mathe in 1963. One of the students he taught was Alport Mhlanga, who attended the College in 1963 and 1964. In 1966, Mhlanga joined the College as a lecturer. Six months later, Mathe moved to Botswana, and Mhlanga became the new marimba instructor at Kwanongoma.

Mhlanga was faced with an immediate challenge: to increase the musical repertoire of the Kwanongoma Marimba Band. The creation of a new musical instrument with no inherent musical tradition is very exciting in principle, but without suitable music, that instrument is nothing but an interesting piece of furniture. Mhlanga stepped up to the challenge. He composed new music for the marimba, including *Ranchera*, *Maimbo*, *Rugare 1*, *Rugare 2*, *Amaxoxo*, *eKwanongoma* and many more. Some of his students also composed music, and the songs were often named after the composer, such as *Chiradza 1* and *Chiradza 2*. Marimba arrangements of traditional songs were also made. In addition, Mhlanga and his students would pick out popular tunes by local and international artists from the radio, and arrange them for marimba. Thus the Kwanongoma repertoire expanded from the Lozi sounds of *Siyamboka* and *Singonki* and traditional Shona favorites like *Chamutengure*, to the driving beat of “township jive” in *Skokiaan* and *Take it Easy*, all the way to American Big Band tunes like *A Swinging Safari* and *In the Mood*.



Alport Mhlanga

After teaching and directing music at Kwanongoma for 22 years, Mhlanga moved to Botswana in 1987. With his departure the sounds of marimba music began to fade from Kwanongoma College. Mhlanga became music director of the Maru a Pula Secondary School in Gaborone, as well as Director of Marimba and Musical Outreach. He continues there to this day.



Northlea Marimba Band

Beyond Kwanongoma: the spread of marimba bands

Kwanongoma flourished under the leadership of Leslie Williamson, Olof Axelsson and Alport Mhlanga from the 1960's to the 1980's. During this time, many sets of marimbas were built, initially for primary schools such as Mzilikazi, Losikeyi and Msitheli, and later for community centers and high schools. In 1973, Northlea became the first high school in Bulawayo to have a marimba band, followed by Founders, Milton, St.

Columbus and many more. The first Northlea school group was taught by Mhlanga in 1973, and then by Kwanongoma students until 1974. This was quite a radical move during a time when the country was still segregated, since the Kwanongoma students were black and the Northlea students white. However, the arrangement worked very well, proving that the marimba was indeed a suitable musical instrument for students of any ethnicity in Zimbabwe, and by extension, for students anywhere in the world.

Music education formed only part of the training of Kwanongoma students. In addition to learning how to play marimbas and mbiras, the students were also taught how to build these instruments. With this training, any graduate of Kwanongoma could potentially go anywhere in the world and create a marimba band, as long as suitable wood, tools and supplies were available. In fact, that is exactly how Zimbabwe-style marimbas were introduced to the United States. In 1968, Kwanongoma graduate Abraham Dumisani Maraire came to the University of Washington, bringing all his musical knowledge with him. As a result of his influence, marimba bands began to spring up all over the Pacific Northwest, eventually spreading to other parts of the U.S. and Canada.

Zimbabwean marimba styles

Three distinct styles of Zimbabwean marimbas evolved between the 1960's and the 1980's. The first of these was developed at Kwanongoma in the 1960's and was introduced into the U.S. in 1968 by the late Abraham "Dumi" Maraire. At that time, Kwanongoma marimbas still had wooden rather than metal frames, and there was no reason to change this in the U.S., where



"Old" Kwanongoma-Style Marimbas, in U.S.



“New” Kwanongoma-Style Marimbas, in Zimbabwe

Mhlanga and Elliot Ndlovu in the 1970’s. Axelsson wanted the instruments to have a more traditional sound quality and appearance. To accomplish this without losing durability, he replaced the PVC pipes on the bass and baritone marimbas with gourd-shaped resonators made out of fiberglass. For the smaller marimbas, he heat-treated the PVC tube resonators by applying an expander to the inside of the tube and a blowtorch to the outside. This achieved the desired effect of rounding the inside slightly, while also creating an attractive bark-like texture on the outside. The resonators had short buzzer tubes to allow for adjustment of the buzzer membranes. The keys were decorated by burning zigzag patterns into the surface, rather than by adding a smooth finish. The wooden frames were eventually replaced by collapsible frames made of square steel tubing. This change was suggested by Mhlanga in 1978 after the Kwanongoma students had returned from a tour of Sweden and Finland which had sorely tested the durability of the instruments.

A third marimba design was developed by Axelsson in Zimbabwe in the 1980’s, after he left Kwanongoma in 1981. It was quite different from either the older or the newer Kwanongoma styles, as it was based on the traditional timbila design of the Chopi people of Mozambique. The instruments were lightweight and low to the ground, were not collapsible, and had round aluminum resonators with buzzers. The keys were suspended over the resonators by cords rather than resting on the frame, creating a springy, dynamic keyboard similar to that of the timbila. These instruments employed the same diatonic tuning (including F#’s) as the Kwanongoma-style marimbas, but were smaller and not as loud.



Chopi-Style Marimbas, in U.S.

Axelsson died in 1993 while working at the University of Lund in Sweden to complete his doctoral thesis. His wife and one of his daughters have continued building his Chopi-style marimbas in the U.S. and in Sweden.

Epilogue

Today, with its dynamic leadership gone, Kwanongoma College is no longer a significant force in the world of Zimbabwean marimba music. Like a dying tree which scatters its seeds, vibrant with life, to be lifted by the wind and take root in distant places, its legacy still lives on. The Kwanongoma marimba legacy lives on through its former teachers, students, and their students in turn. In its lifespan of just over forty years, the Zimbabwean marimba has come far indeed. Perhaps its journey is just beginning.

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