

# Musical Instruments of South Africa

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**T**he greatest of all musical instruments on the African continent is the voice. This is especially true in South Africa, which has strong choral traditions but, compared with most African countries, relatively few indigenous instruments. We have many kinds of musical bows, several drums, some reedpipes, and one xylophone. How is this selection to be explained?

The answer can be found in cultural history and ecology. The majority of South Africans are descendants of cattle-keeping Nguni and Sotho peoples. These semi-nomadic pastoralists traditionally lived on open, grassy plains and organized themselves in large-scale societies with powerful chiefs. Their principal forms of public musical performance were singing and dancing in large groups. In other parts of Africa also, cattle keepers prefer singing to instrument-playing.

African farmers, on the other hand, play more instruments. In South Africa these farmers are the northern peoples, the Venda, the Tsonga, and the Pedi.

The kinds of plants that grow in a particular ecology also determine the instruments that are played, because people usually make instruments out of local materials. People who live in or near forests use large trees to make drums and xylophones; people who live in *bushveld*, the grassy plains in most of South Africa, make smaller instruments that use sticks, reeds, and gourds.

To grasp the variety of musical instruments, scholars classify them into four families, according to how they vibrate



A musician plays the pan flute at a flea market in Johannesburg. Photo courtesy SATOUR

to produce their sound. All four are represented in South Africa: chordophones (in which strings vibrate), membranophones (in which a skin or other membrane vibrates), aerophones (in which a column of air vibrates), and idiophones (in which the body of the instrument itself vibrates).

Although musical bows (chordophones) are played by few people these days, they once had a big part in music here; the scales used in most traditional South African songs come from bow-playing. Historians believe that many of our musi-

cal bows came from the Khoi people, the original inhabitants of South Africa.

A musical bow is a string instrument made of a long wooden stick, with one string, usually of metal, stretched from end to end. To play some bows, a player strikes the string with a piece of grass or a small stick. In other traditions, the player rubs or “bows” it with a straight stick or with another small bow made of hair from a cow or horse tail. In still other places, one plays with one’s fingers, or with a small pick made of a thorn or a piece of wood. Sometimes one makes the instrument sound by scraping the notches cut in the bow with a rattle-stick. One bow is even blown with the mouth — the *lesiba*, an original Khoi instrument that is still played among the Sotho people.

Although there are differences between the many kinds of bows, all have a resonator and at least two fundamental notes. The resonator is a hollow gourd or tin that amplifies the sound of the bow’s vibrating string. If the player holds the bow against his or her mouth, the mouth itself becomes the resonator. Fundamental notes are the deepest notes which the string gives, as against the higher notes, the harmonics, which you can hear coming from the resonator. There are at least two fundamental notes, although some bows give three or more. The Zulu *umakhweyana* and the Tsonga *xitende* give three. The Venda *tshihwana* gives four.

One note comes from the string when it is open — that is, when the player



does not finger it or shorten it. Xhosa call this note *VU*, from the word *vuliwe* (open). The other, higher note comes from the string when a player fingers or shortens it in some way. Xhosa call this *BA*, from *banjiwe* (held). The interval between *VU* and *BA* is often a whole tone, but in Zulu tradition it is a semi-tone and in Tsonga, a minor third.

Drums (membranophones) are important instruments among the northern peoples of South Africa. Venda call them *murumba* and *ngoma*; among Tsonga they are *ngoma*; and among Pedi, they are *meropa*. Drums are royal instruments among Venda; they are symbols of royal authority. Traditional drums are made of wood with a skin on one or both ends. Each drummer in a group plays a different but related rhythm to create polyrhythmic music.

Zulus and Swazis also play many drums these days. They first borrowed their design in the late 1800s from the drums of British army bands. These modern instruments, as well as those used by Zionist Christian churches, are usually made of metal oil drums with a skin laced on at both ends. Even when there are many, they are all played together in the same powerful unison rhythm.

Reedpipes (aerophones) are often played by large groups of people on important social occasions. Each reedpipe is a simple instrument made of a single river reed cut to the right length to sound a particular note on the scale. But reedpipes are played together cooperatively in a very complex way. Each man inserts his one note into the music at exactly the right time, while dancing simultaneously to rhythms provided by a women's drum ensemble that performs at the center of a circle of dancing men. Best known are the reedpipes of the northern peoples, the Venda *tshikona* (which is also the Venda national dance) and the Pedi *dinaka*, as well as the Tswana/Bamalete *letlhaka* in Botswana.

Once boys who herded livestock played reed flutes, but only rarely now. These instruments have finger holes like a penny whistle, but are blown on the side, not at the end. The Zulu *umtshingo* — like the Xhosa *ixilongo* and the Sotho *lekolilo* — is made of reed or pawpaw leaf and is blown at the end. The bottom end is the only finger hole, and it creates harmonics, like the musical bows. During dances, northern peoples sometimes blow on single kudu (sable antelope) horns — called *phalaphala* in Venda, *phalafala* in Pedi, and *xipalapala* in Tsonga.

The northern peoples are traditionally the only ones in South Africa who play the *mbira* or thumb piano (an idiophone), a small instrument with a wooden body and 10 to 22 or more tuned iron keys fixed to it. A player plucks the keys with the thumbs or fingers. These *mbiras* are played unaccompanied for the player's enjoyment or to accompany topical and personal songs.

There was only one traditional xylophone in South Africa, the Venda *mbila mutondo*, a beautiful, large instrument with carved wooden keys and gourd resonators underneath, played with rubber-tipped sticks. Unfortunately, it is no longer played. The modern Afro-marimba from Zimbabwe, made in four different sizes and played in groups, has become very popular in the cities since 1980, especially among Xhosa speakers.

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## Suggested Reading

- Blacking, John. 1965. *Venda Children's Songs*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Coplan, David. 1985. *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre*. Johannesburg: Longman.
- Dargie, David. 1988. *Xhosa Music: Its Techniques and Instruments, with a Collection of Songs*. Cape Town: David Philip Publishers.
- Kirby, P.R. 1968. *The Musical Instruments of the Native Races of South Africa*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Malan, J.P., ed. 1982. "Indigenous music." In *South African Music Encyclopedia*. Vol. 2, pp. 265–508. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.
- Rycroft, David. 1981. "The Musical Bow in Southern Africa." *2nd Symposium on Ethnomusicology*, pp. 70–76.
- Wells, Robin. 1994. *An Introduction to the Music of the Basotho*. Morija, Lesotho: Morija Museum and Archives.

## Suggested Listening

- African Music Society Awards 2. Music of Africa 15.*
- African Music Society Awards 3. Music of Africa 16.*
- Dances of the Witwatersrand Gold Mines. Music of Africa 12, 13.*
- Songs from the Roadside — South Africa. Music of Africa 18.*
- Songs from the Roadside — Zimbabwe. Music of Africa 19.*
- The Zulu Songs of Princess Magogo. Music of Africa 37.*