

Instruments, Timbres and Sonorities

African instruments are often made from plants and animal products such as hide and bone. African musicians are very fond of **PERCUSSION** instruments and use a wide variety of drums (called **MEMBRANOPHONES**) Drums are traditionally used as an accompaniment to singing, dancing, working and communicating between villages. Drummers are typically the most respected members of their community.

The most famous is the **TALKING DRUM**, called so because the **PITCH** can be altered by tightening or loosening a cord around the body of the drum and the changes have been likened to the sound of the human voice. Talking Drums are usually played with sticks.





The **DJEMBE** is a skin-covered hand drum shaped like a large goblet made out of single tree trunk hollowed out. The skin is made from goatskin and rope is used to tighten the skin to tune the drum to the appropriate **PITCH**. The **DJEMBE** is played with the hands and can produce three different **TONES** – the **BASS TONE** (hitting the centre of the main drum skin with a flat hand), the **SLAP TONE** (hitting the edge of the drum with fingers slightly open) and the **TONE** (hitting the edge of the drum with fingers held together). Drummers often **DAMPEN** the sound by resting one hand or stick on the skin while playing with the other. Sometimes they strike the wooden part of the drum to create a different sound or change the pitch by tightening or loosening the skin.

The **DUNDUN** (also known as the **DONNO**) is a rope-tuned cylindrical drum with a rawhide skin at both ends, most commonly cow or goat. The **DUNDUN** is played with a stick and played horizontally often worn with a shoulder strap.



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Different types of drums mean different things and are often used as a form of communication. A **MASTER DRUMMER** often leads giving signals to the rest of the group to change rhythms or sections of the piece and can also control the **TEMPO**. He often **IMPROVISES** highly complicated rhythms and can indicate the ending of a piece of music.

Other percussion instruments such as clappers, maracas, scrapers, gongs, and xylophones (called **BALAFONS**) produce their sound by vibration and are known as **IDIOPHONES**.

Stringed instruments (**CHORDOPHONES**) such as bows, lyres, zithers, harps, and the **KORA** are popular as well as some woodwind instruments **(AEROPHONES)** such as whistles, flutes, reed pipes, trumpets and horns.



Many Africans believe that music serves as a link to the spirit world; therefore, singing is a vital part of everyday life and heard at religious ceremonies, rituals and celebrations. The basic form of African Vocal Music is **CHORAL SINGING** known as **CALL AND RESPONSE** where one singer (**SOLOIST**) or small group of singers sings a line and the whole group (**CHORUS**) makes a reply (often a fixed **REFRAIN**) – like a "musical conversation" – in alternation with the "lead singer". The soloist often **IMPROVISES**. African singers often "shout words" (**VOCABLES)** and male and female singers enjoy using their highest **VOCAL REGISTER** known as **FALSETTO**. African singing can be accompanied by instruments but can also be unaccompanied (**A CAPPELLA**).

The best-known examples of African Choral Singing come from the group **LADYSMITH BLACK MAMBAZO** *(shown right)*



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PIT STOP

For each of the drums used in **African Drumming** shown below, identify (name) the instrument, say **HOW** it is played.

		

What is the main family of instruments usually used in African Drumming?

Describe the 3 types of sound produced from a Djembe.

What is the main feature of a Talking Drum?

Name the leader of an African Drumming Ensemble.

Apart from drums, name and describe 3 other Percussion instruments used in African Music?

How is singing used in African Music?

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