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## 2.

# *African Mbira and the Music of the Shona*



### *An Introduction to African Mbira*

At a lecture demonstration I once attended in Seattle, Washington, Dumisani Maraire, a visiting artist from Zimbabwe, walked onto the stage carrying a round-box resonator with a fifteen-key instrument inside. He turned toward the audience and raised the round-box over his head. "What is this?" he called out.

There was no response.

"All right," he said, "it is an mbira; M-B-I-R-A.<sup>a</sup> Now what did I say it was?"

A few people replied, "Mbira; it is an mbira." Most of the audience sat still in puzzlement.

"What is it?" Maraire repeated, as if slightly annoyed.

More people called out, "Mbira."

"Again," Maraire insisted.

"Mbira!" returned the audience.

"Again!" he shouted. When the auditorium echoed with "Mbira," Maraire laughed out loud. "All right," he said with good-natured sarcasm, "that is the way the Christian missionaries taught me to say 'piano.'"<sup>1</sup>

Dumisani Maraire was reacting to the fact that people from the same culture that supports missionary education in Africa continually referred to his instrument in ethnocentric terms as

8      <sup>a</sup> Pronounced: mm-bée-ra (r is rolled).

"finger piano," "thumb piano," or "hand piano," and showed little interest in learning its African name.

Throughout black Africa, however, where the mbira is one of the most popular traditional instruments, it has many regional names. Among the most common are *sanzhi*, *likembe*, *kalimba*, and mbira.<sup>2</sup> These and similar names often have interesting linguistic associations.<sup>b</sup> For example, it has been suggested that the literal meaning of *mbila* is "the aggregate of wooden slabs (or of metal tongues), and perhaps even the succession of sounds constituting the scale or mode to which the instrument is tuned."<sup>3</sup> It has likewise been conjectured that another name, *nsansi*, comes from the verb *-sansa*, to wipe with a quick movement, apparently referring to the playing technique of the instrument.<sup>4</sup>

The myriad forms in which mbira are found in Africa extend south to South Africa, north to Ethiopia and Niger, east to Mozambique, and west to The Gambia. Areas of concentration in-

<sup>b</sup> The word *sansa* also appears frequently in the literature on mbira music. Although *sansa* is still commonly used by some ethnomusicologists (as well as museum curators and others) to refer to the mbira, it apparently is not used by Africans themselves. Hugh Tracey ("A Case for the Name, Mbira," p. 17) suggests that the word *sansa* is an error dating back to an early publication by Charles and David Livingstone who, in their travels through Africa, originally misheard the word *sansi*. While Gerhard Kubik ("Generic Names," pp. 25-32) reports that several names for the instrument belong to a "*sanzhi*" stem group (for example, *isanzu*, *lisanzo*, *sanzu*, and *thandi*), there appears to be no reference in the literature on the subject to the existence of the specific term *sansa*, either as the name of a particular African instrument or as a generic African term.

In the earliest written account of the mbira, in 1586, missionary Father Dos Santos refers more accurately to the "ambira" of the present country of Mozambique (Theal, *Records*, p. 203). This name, actually spelled mbira, is still used today in southeastern Africa. Tracey ("A Case for the Name, Mbira," p. 21) argues that the term mbira should replace that of *sansa* as the generic name for the instrument because of the extent of its usage in Africa and because he believes that the greatest technological and musical development of the instrument has been attained under the name mbira.

In the Shona language, the word mbira is both singular and plural, and can be used to denote either one or more individual mbira keys, the instrument itself (that is, an aggregate of keys), or several instruments. In keeping with the Shona language the word mbira is used as the generic name for the instrument in both its singular and plural forms in this book.

clude Zaire, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and parts of Angola.

In spite of the great variety of instruments, all mbira have four elements in common: a soundboard, a method of amplifying the sound, usually some device for producing the buzzing quality that characterizes mbira music, and, of course, a set of keys.

Many mbira have soundboards, carefully shaped by their makers, which can be used to distinguish one type from another. For example, mbira in southeastern Africa have been classified in terms of "board-shaped," "fan-shaped," "box-shaped," and "bell-shaped" soundboards.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, mbira usually have a way of amplifying their sound. In some types of mbira the soundboard is hollowed out, providing a hardwood soundbox resonator. Mbira of the soundbox variety sometimes utilize other materials as well. For example, the soundboards of some instruments are mounted on large gasoline tins for additional resonance. In a similar fashion, mbira makers in certain parts of Africa attach a tortoise shell, a skull, or a bark trough beneath the soundboards of their instruments as resonating chambers.<sup>6</sup> Mbira with soundbox resonators range in size from small, high-pitched Ghanaian instruments built on sardine tins (6½" x 3" x 1½") to large, deep-voiced Gambian instruments built on wooden boxes (22" x 14" x 6").

Other types of mbira, particularly those with more than one manual of keys, use a bowl-shaped calabash resonator.<sup>7</sup> Mbira of this type with small soundboards are played over the mouth of a small, hollowed gourd four to five inches in diameter. Larger instruments are performed inside the half-shell of a gourd twelve to eighteen inches in diameter (Plate 1). In Zaire, certain mbira are attached to small gourd resonators in an unusual manner: a stick protruding at an angle from the end of the soundboard is attached to the top of a gourd, the opening of which is pressed against the stomach of the mbira player during the performance.<sup>7</sup>

There is great diversity in the overall design and ornamentation of African mbira (Plates 2-13).<sup>d</sup> Some soundboards and resonators of mbira are highly decorated and others not decorat-

<sup>c</sup> The term manual refers to a single row of keys mounted on the mbira's soundboard.

<sup>d</sup> Pictures of several of the mbira shown in Plates 3-13 appeared in a 1972 article by Söderberg in which he discusses the ornamentation of the mbira and its significance.

ed at all. Resonators may have decorations carved into them. In one example, the contrasting black and white designs were made by charring or rubbing chalk into lines engraved on the outside of the gourd. In addition, colored beads and shells were stitched around the rim (Plate 2). In some parts of Africa, musicians carve inscriptions onto their instruments. I knew performers in Zimbabwe, for example, who engraved their names on the backs of their gourd resonators so that viewers could read them. In other countries, mbira decorated with both painted designs and inscribed proverbs or slogans have been reported.<sup>e</sup> Finally, some mbira are works of graphic art as well as musical instruments. Two from Zaire, for example, consist of sculpted human figures, the chest cavities of which serve as resonating chambers (Plates 12 and 13).

There is usually some device on the mbira for producing the buzzing, vibrating quality considered to be an integral part of the music. This quality is appreciated by African musicians in the same way that Westerners appreciate the sound of the snares on a snare drum or the fuzz-tone on an electric guitar. It may be seen as analogous to the mist that partly obscures the mountains and small figures of certain Chinese silk-screen paintings: the mist is an integral part of such paintings, establishing mood and feeling, and the figures are not supposed to be seen more clearly. The same is true for the buzzing that accompanies the pure sound of the mbira. Once he or she has become accustomed to this quality, the listener or performer would miss it if it were absent; the music would seem naked without it. Thus it is rare to find an mbira which does not have some means of creating this effect. Metal beads placed around the instrument's keys, pebbles placed inside a soundbox resonator, or a membrane stretched over the surface of a hole drilled in the soundboard each produces an appropriate buzz.<sup>f</sup> The devices vibrate with the stroke of each key, producing a continuous, drone-like buzzing. Shona

<sup>e</sup> Kubik ("Generic Names," p. 34) has published the photograph of a large mbira from Nigeria with the inscription, "Pride is the forerunner of destruction." I have in my possession a morphologically similar instrument from The Gambia with the more contemporary slogan, "Faisons l'amour et non pas la guerre" (make love, not war) painted on it.

<sup>f</sup> Jones ("Kalimba of the Lala," p. 324) reports one such device consisting of a piece of the white opaque covering of the eggs of certain spiders stretched under a hole drilled into the soundboard. The membrane acts like tissue paper on a comb and buzzes whenever a key sets the soundboard vibrating.

hard drawn wire, nails, or umbrella staves are used. In constructing keys the mbira maker is concerned with three factors that affect their pitch: length, weight, and flexibility. Because he must preserve a particular geometric pattern in the layout of the keys, he cannot rely solely on changing the length of the keys over the bridge for tuning. If tuning were accomplished solely by this method, the result would be a jagged line of keys, both esthetically unacceptable and difficult to play.<sup>9</sup> Typically, an mbira maker concentrates first on weight and flexibility, pounding the metal wide and thin for low pitches, narrow and thick for high pitches. Then he trims the tip of the key to raise the pitch or pounds the key flatter to lower it. For the fine tuning adjustments, the mbira maker moves the keys backward and forward over the bridge of the instrument until he arrives at the precise pitch for each one.

An alternate method of tuning is used in Angola and the Camerouns. In these countries the mbira maker constructs all of the keys with identical shape, length, and weight. By adding variable amounts of wax or solder to the underside of each key, he is able to create the variety of pitches that comprise the sounds of each instrument.<sup>10</sup>

The many mbira tunings throughout Africa are frequently based on melody and chord patterns prevalent within each culture.<sup>1</sup> For the most part they are comprised of five, six, or seven different pitches, contained within one octave on small instruments and sometimes duplicated in as many as three octaves on larger instruments. In some areas a single tuning is recognized as the correct one and has prevailed unchanged over many years.<sup>11</sup> This is not always the case, however. Today in central Zimbabwe, for example, a number of tunings have been adopted by different players of the same type of mbira.<sup>1</sup>

The mbira is performed in a variety of musical contexts. It is often played as a solo instrument accompanied by the voice of the musician. In certain parts of Africa the mbira is played in combination with other instruments. In the Central African

<sup>1</sup> There are many exceptions to this. For example, Blacking (*How Musical Is Man?*, p. 12) has reported that the tunes of the *kalimba* of the Nsenga people of Zambia do not sound like other Nsenga music.

<sup>1</sup> An early European missionary, MacDonald (*Africana*, p. 272), also reported a diversity of tunings in Mozambique in the late nineteenth century: "The [African] musical scale is not the same as ours," he says, "and although there is a certain method about the instruments, it is rare to find two of them tuned exactly the same way."

Republic, for example, the mbira can be played together with the marimba.<sup>k</sup> In northern Mozambique, while one mbira player performs his instrument a second musician accompanies him by drumming with two sticks on the calabash resonator of the mbira.<sup>12</sup> Sketches by Thomas Baines, who travelled with David Livingstone in Mozambique in 1859, show the mbira played in consort with a marimba, rattles, and panpipes.<sup>13</sup> While ensembles of this precise combination of instruments are not reported in southern Africa today, others are common. One frequently finds groups consisting of like melodic instruments (mbira, marimba, or panpipes) accompanied by rattles and sometimes by drums. The organization of mbira ensembles varies from one part of Africa to the next. Among the Soga people of Uganda different types of mbira with different ranges ("bass," "tenor," and "soprano," for example) are played in the same ensemble.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Shona mbira ensembles in Zimbabwe are comprised of several mbira of the same type; at special religious events, Shona ensembles sometimes include fifteen or more mbira players.

Mbira throughout Africa are diverse in type, in function, and in musical style. There are toy mbira for children, simple mbira on which beginners can learn, and more complex ones for advanced players. In some cultures mbira are used exclusively for entertainment; in others they are used also for religious ceremonies. Even within a single culture, different mbira types with individualized functions frequently coexist. Certain instruments are performed by professionals at formal social events. Simpler instruments function less formally, as, for example, the instrument played by a watchman accompanying himself on guard duty through an evening.

While some types of mbira are regarded solely for their value in music-making and can be played by anyone with an interest in them, others have a broader significance and may symbolize the owner's position within the culture. The right to possess such mbira can be exclusively reserved for chiefs, diviners, or doctors. Furthermore, the right to play the instruments may be restricted to special occasions.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>k</sup> Side 1, band 1 of *Musique Centrafricaine*, Ocora Records 43, illustrates an mbira and marimba duet.

<sup>1</sup> For an illustration of a Ugandan ensemble of six mbira, refer to Hugh Tracey's *The Music of Africa Series; Musical Instruments 2. Reeds (Mbira)*, Kaleidophone Records KM2, side 1, band 5.



Mbira also sometimes differ in musical style within a culture.<sup>m</sup> Among the Nsenga of Zambia, for example, the *kalimba* is frequently played by young people for their pleasure when they are on a journey, and its music is based on "harmonic figurations and rhythmic variation." In contrast, the *ndimba* is played by semi-professionals for public performances and its music is characterized by the "melodic basis of its tunes."<sup>15</sup>

In some parts of Africa where small mbira are used primarily to accompany the voice of the singer, the instrument often repeats a basic ostinato figure throughout the performance of a piece. In other parts of Africa larger mbira are appreciated as solo and as accompanying instruments. In such places, mbira music consists of a complex of different melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic parts interacting with each other throughout a performance.

As an important complementary aspect of musical style, tone color can also be a distinguishing factor among various kinds of mbira. Although the tones of mbira are generally full-bodied in resonance and rich in sonority, the overall timbres differ considerably because of the materials used in their construction.<sup>n</sup>

The mbira, an ancient instrument in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, appears to have been of more recent origin in other countries such as Uganda.<sup>10</sup> Its origin in some parts of Africa is grounded in mythology. In accounts given by musicians among the Dan, the instrument is associated with themes of magic and the spirit world, the power of the mbira to improve a person's fortune in life, and the ability of the mbira to comfort one's loneliness. Frequently, spirits or gods appear in these stories and teach an unhappy or unfortunate man to build an mbira.

<sup>m</sup> For reference to a variety of styles of mbira music on commercial recordings, see Merriam, *African Music on LP*, p. 163, and Hugh Tracey, *The Sound of Africa Series, Vol. 1*, pp. 80-83.

<sup>n</sup> The tone color of some mbira can be compared to the tone color of various other African instruments such as the marimba. A similarity between the mbira and other African instruments in certain parts of Africa has been noted in nomenclature as well. For example, Kubik ("Generic Names," pp. 30, 33) has reported a similarity between the names of mbira and harps and lyres in certain African cultures, and other ethnomusicologists have discussed the relationship between mbira and marimba (for example, Kirby, "Note on Hornbostel," p. 109; H. Tracey, "Case for the Name," p. 24; Jones, *Africa and Indonesia*, p. 53). In fact, Jones has gone so far as to consider the mbira to be essentially a "miniature" (*ibid.*, p. 111), and "portable xylophone" (*ibid.*, p. 153).

Thereafter the lonely man finds himself in the company of many people and his life becomes filled with good fortune.<sup>17</sup> These stories share certain similarities with those told by the Shona people of Zimbabwe. In the Shona stories the mbira is a highly personal instrument having the power to comfort and to protect its players, with deep associations with ancestral spirits.

Thus while different types of mbira in Africa have elements of sound production in common, their history and social function, as well as morphological and musical style, can be very dissimilar. These differences are great enough that a musician who has mastered one type of mbira is not likely to be able to play another type, even one from within his own culture, unless he has been schooled in the performance of the second instrument as well.<sup>o</sup>

Outside of Africa, the mbira has enjoyed periods of popularity in several parts of the world where it was introduced by African slaves: for example, in the French Antilles, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the United States. In a description of the early musical practices of Afro-Americans in Congo Square, New Orleans, novelist George Cable described a popular instrument called the *marimba brett*:

A single strand of wire ran lengthwise of a bit of wooden board, sometimes a shallow box of thin wood, some eight inches long by four or five in width, across which, under the wire, were several joints of reed about a quarter of an inch in diameter and of graduated lengths. The performer, sitting cross-legged, held the board in both hands and plucked the ends of the reeds with his thumbnails.<sup>18</sup>

The *marimba brett* appeared at large, colorful nineteenth century festivals featuring a multitude of musical instruments, dance, and song.

Although mbira died out in the United States and Brazil in the nineteenth century, they are still played in parts of the Car-

<sup>o</sup> Although women who play the mbira are reported in certain parts of Africa, such as Zaire (Laurenty, *Les Sanzu du Congo*, p. 218), and Ethiopia (Astair Gebremariam, personal communication, 1977), I chose to use the masculine pronoun throughout this work because in my research on Shona mbira music I have found that the players, with few exceptions, are men. One noted exception to this rule is a popular recording artist, Antonia Diogo (Bula). She is the featured singer and one of several mbira players with her ensemble, *Mhuri yekwa Antonia Diogo*.

ibbean (Cuba and the Dominican Republic, for example), where they are commonly known as *marimbas*.<sup>19</sup> They are usually deep-voiced mbira with wide metal keys attached to a large wooden box resonator, "two feet or more high [or long]." Smaller versions have also been reported (Plate 5 illustrates the African prototype of these instruments).<sup>20</sup> Such instruments, as vestiges of an African heritage, together with the great variety of mbira found throughout black Africa, represent a unique contribution to the world's music.<sup>p</sup>

### *The Shona People and Their Music*

The name "Shona" refers to a group of Bantu-speaking peoples who live between the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers in Zimbabwe and in parts of Mozambique and Zambia (Figure 4). Their population is over four million, and their basic dialects include Karanga, Zezuru, Korekore, Manyika, Ndau, and Kallanga. As a people the Shona are culturally and linguistically distinct from their fellow Bantu-speaking neighbors both north of the Zambezi and south of the Limpopo.

It is thought that the Shona settled in the south of Zimbabwe by the tenth century and in the north by the twelfth century. It was one of the southern groups that a few centuries after arrival developed the awesome Zimbabwe state south of the present-day city of Fort Victoria. By the sixteenth century, however, this area had ceased to be a major site. Today, ruins of a great complex of stone walls, towers, and rounded gateways stand as monuments to the early Zimbabwe state.

This Zimbabwe state had two immediate successors: the Khami state in the west and the Mutapa state in the north. At the end of the seventeenth century the Rozvi gained control as the dominant Shona rulers of the Khami state and established two capitals, Manyanga and Dhlo Dhlo. During the following

<sup>p</sup> Kirby ("Musicologist") and Jones ("Indonesia" and *Africa and Indonesia*) have pointed out similarities among various aspects of Indonesian and African music and culture and have speculated upon a possible Indonesian influence on the development of the African marimba, and, by extension, the mbira. This is conjectural, however; similarities between two different musics do not in themselves indicate that one music developed from another, and possible historical influence resulting from early contact between Africans and Indonesians can be argued both ways, as Jeffreys ("Negro Influences") points out.

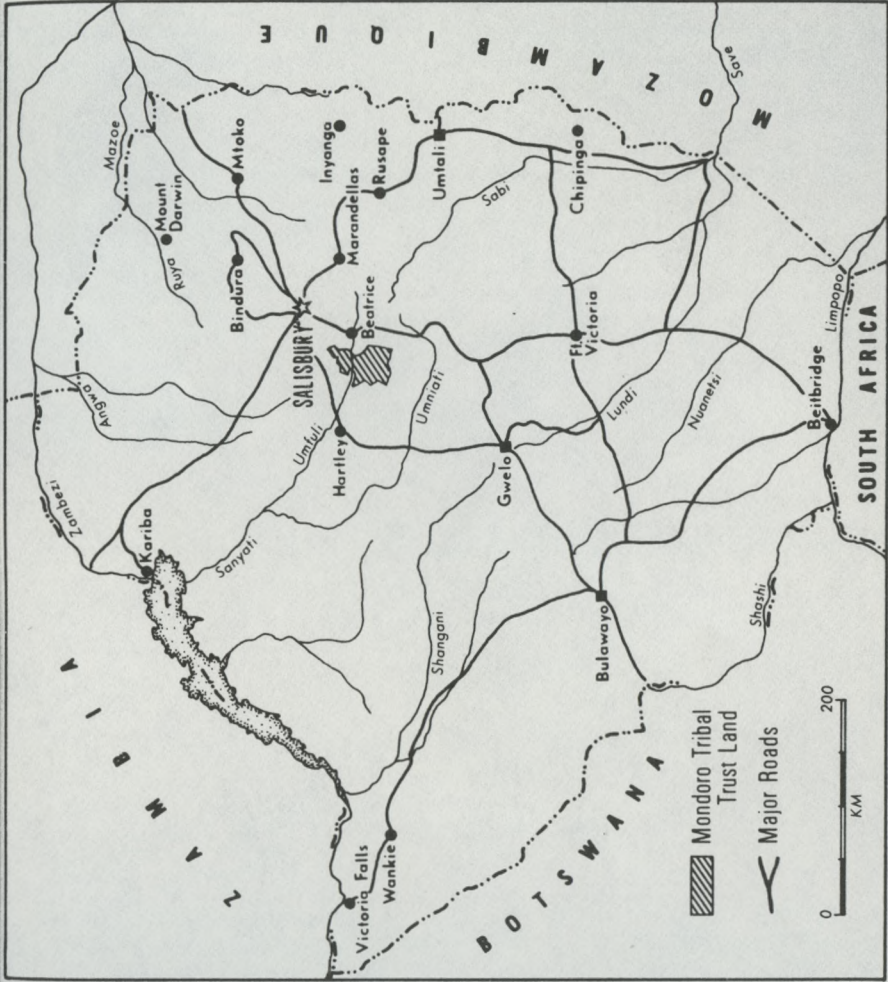


Figure 4. Zimbabwe

### 3.

## *An Overview of Shona Mbira*



### *The Instruments*

Archeological and historical evidence points to the fact that the mbira was an ancient instrument among the Shona people. Archeologists have discovered several examples of mbira parts at the ruins of Inyanga and the nearby Niekerk ruins in north-eastern Zimbabwe (see Figure 4). An estimate of the date of such finds is 1500–1800 A.D.<sup>1</sup> I have also seen mbira that were found at the old Karanga sites close to the better known Zimbabwe Ruins near Fort Victoria in the southern part of the country. For several reasons, however, a comprehensive history of the mbira cannot be based on archeological evidence alone. First, before archeologists reached some of the sites described above, adventurers had looted them in search of gold artifacts.<sup>2</sup> Second, Africans with a knowledge of iron smithing may also have utilized iron implements found earlier at these sites for their own purposes.<sup>3</sup> Third, it is difficult to ascertain the identity of badly corroded iron objects such as mbira keys.<sup>4</sup> For these reasons, substantiation of the mbira's antiquity must be supplemented by historical evidence, which in some cases even predates the available archeological evidence.

In 1589 Father Dos Santos, a missionary in what is now Mozambique, made the first written reference to the mbira:

[Africans] have another musical instrument, also called an *ambira*, very similar to that just described [the resonated xylophone], but it was all made of iron instead of gourds, being composed of narrow flat rods of iron about a palm in length, tempered in the fire so that each has a different sound. There

are only nine of these rods, placed in a row close together, with the ends nailed to a piece of wood like the bridge of a violin, from which they hang over a hollow in the wood, which is shaped like a bowl, about which the other ends of the rods are suspended in the air.<sup>5</sup>

In 1865 Charles and David Livingstone published the first drawing of an mbira.<sup>6</sup> The artist, Thomas Baines, who accompanied David Livingstone through Africa, portrayed both a large twenty-two key mbira propped inside a beautifully decorated gourd resonator and a smaller nine key mbira; the large mbira (Plate 2), drawn by Baines in Tete, Mozambique, is very similar to the *matepe* (Plate 15), a type of Shona mbira which musicians report was originally imported into Zimbabwe from northern countries such as Mozambique. Like those on related Shona mbira, the keys of the instruments depicted were made of metal. Long before steel and scrap metal came to be commonly used as the raw material for making mbira keys, expert Shona blacksmiths used iron smelted from mined ore. Regarding the skill of Shona blacksmiths, in 1887 the explorer Wood commented that in the experience of his European guide "a Mashona knife for general use was superior to his own [European] knife. . . . The tempering was better and it would always keep an edge." Wood went on to say that "this was confirmed by another hunter. The Mashona are undoubtedly clever mechanics . . . although they are without files or tools of any kind except of their own manufacture; as a rule the only hammer used is a piece of granite and the anvil a granite rock. They smelt their own iron. . . ." <sup>7</sup>

The diaries of the first European missionaries and adventurers in southern Africa clearly indicate that the Shona were highly skilled blacksmiths and that the mbira was a well-established musical instrument among the Shona at least by the sixteenth century. Moreover, it is most likely that the mbira was an important instrument among the Shona long before its first printed documentation. The Shona are believed to have settled in Zimbabwe as early as the tenth century, and the Early Iron Age itself dates back to the third century in Zimbabwe.<sup>8</sup>

The Shona people play a variety of different types of mbira that reflect the great wealth of mbira found throughout black Africa. There are five common types of Shona mbira: the *matepe* (varieties of which in northern Zimbabwe include the *hera* and *munyonga*), the *karimba*, the *mbira dzavadzimu*, the *njari*, and

full name of the instrument is actually *mbira huru dzavadzimu*, "the great mbira of the ancestors," thus combining all of the names given above.

The *mbira dzavadzimu* has a unique standing among Shona mbira because it is regarded by musicians as the only Shona mbira to have originated in Zimbabwe itself.<sup>8</sup> Musicians indicate that the other Shona mbira were originally imported from Mozambique or from other countries to the north of Zimbabwe, such as Zambia. Because of its seemingly unique position among Shona mbira, the *mbira dzavadzimu* has been chosen as the central focus of this study.

Today the *mbira dzavadzimu* usually consists of twenty-two spatulate keys, wider and thicker than the keys of other Shona mbira. The keys are mounted on three manuals, two on the left and one on the right, on a tray-shaped soundboard with a finger hole in the lower right corner. The little finger of the right hand is inserted into the hole from the front of the mbira and helps to support the instrument while playing. In general, each of the mbira's three manuals encompasses a different range of pitches. The left bottom manual is the lowest register, the left upper manual contains pitches of a middle range, and the highest are played on the right manual. The lower pitches of each manual are in the center of the keyboard and there is typically only one pair of identical pitches on the instrument; it is not uncommon, however, for advanced players to add an extra key to the outer end of the upper left manual of their instruments, increasing the number of pairs of identical pitches to two. The playing technique of modern *mbira dzavadzimu* differs from the other large Shona mbira in that only three fingers are used;

<sup>8</sup> In fact, the *mbira dzavadzimu* has had a strong impact on the musical practices of groups outside of Zimbabwe. For example, the *mbila dzamadeza* played by the Venda and the Lemba in Zoutpansberg, South Africa, is morphologically identical to the Shona *mbira dzavadzimu* and is acknowledged by the Venda to have come from Zimbabwe. Moreover, the Lemba use the *mbila dzamadeza*, just as the Shona do, for ancestor worship and for performing some of the same traditional compositions (John Blacking, personal communication, 1975).

It is possible that the Shona people themselves introduced the *mbira dzavadzimu* to the Transvaal. Historical evidence indicates that Shona-speaking people immigrated to Venda-speaking areas as early as the seventeenth century, and later the Rozvi, in particular, exerted considerable influence over the Venda as their rulers (David Beach, personal communication, 1976).

the left thumb plays both manuals of keys on the left side of the mbira, while the right thumb plays the first inside three keys and the right index finger plays the outer six on the right manual (Plate 14). In a fashion characteristic of Shona mbira playing technique, the thumbs pluck downward from above and the index finger plucks upward from underneath the keys.

There is some evidence that the morphology and playing technique of the *mbira dzavadzimu* have undergone several changes over the past hundred years. For example, observations and drawings made by early Europeans in Zimbabwe in the mid to late nineteenth century indicate that the traditional versions of the *mbira dzavadzimu* had a greater number of keys, sometimes as many as "twenty-nine" (Plate 20) or "thirty or more."<sup>14</sup> These keys, thinner and less spatulate than those of the modern version, were more like those of other Shona mbira. The soundboards of *mbira dzavadzimu* have also changed. While soundboards of the modern instruments are unornamented and flat, there are older instruments in existence that have smaller soundboards with gracefully curved backs and chevron designs carved on them.

The mechanisms for holding the keys of the *mbira dzavadzimu* to the soundboard and for producing the buzzing quality that accompanies the music have also been modified over the years. On antique instruments as well as some contemporary ones, the crossbar that holds the mbira keys in place over the instrument's bridge is bound to the soundboard with wire. Today eyebolts are often used for this (compare Plates 17 and 21). This recent innovation facilitates the tuning of mbira keys, for one can now tighten a small section of the keyboard with a ratchet where previously one might have had to rebind the entire keyboard with wire. In the old days, the buzzing mechanism on the instrument consisted of thin strips of metal wound loosely like beads around a raised wire bar that extended across the lower face of the soundboard. In more recent times this mechanism has been replaced by shells or bottle tops attached loosely to a tin plate fastened to the soundboard.

While the general layout of the keys on the *mbira dzavadzimu* has remained the same,<sup>h</sup> the playing technique of the more modern instruments has been modified, apparently in connec-

<sup>h</sup> For a detailed description of making mbira dzavadzimu see Berliner 1980. With respect to the general layout of keys, the only exception to this that I have discovered occurs on particular antique mbira played by