MBIRA MUSIC OF JEGE A. TAPERA

by

ANDREW TRACEY

Jege A. Tapera, when I knew him in 1961, was a clothing factory worker in Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia, but, first and foremost, he held himself to be a murideji wem­bira, an mbira player. The African inhabitants of the Bulawayo area belong mostly to the Ndebele tribe who do not possess the mbira, but there is also a considerable number of Shona-speaking people resident in Bulawayo itself. Among these, only a very few players of the mbira are to be found, perhaps because Bulawayo is well outside Mashona­land; only two were well-known—Matheu Zvimba, a Zezuru njari player from the Zvimba reserve near Salisbury, and Tapera, who is of the Nohwe clan of the Zezuru tribe of the Shona peoples. He was born in about 1905 in the Mangwendi reserve, fifty miles east of Salisbury in the Mrewa district of Southern Rhodesia, of a Rozvi father and a Zezuru mother.

When he was a young man of about twenty-five he made a journey from his home in Mangwendi some 200 miles down to the town of Tete on the Zambezi river in Por­tuguese East Africa, and there he heard being played the type of mbira known by the local Sena/Nyungwe people as chisansi or kasansi (i.e. the diminutive form of the word sansi. The sansi is one of the larger forms of traditional mbiras that are played by the Sena/Nyungwe). From the evidence of the basic layout of its keyboard, this chisansi is in fact fundamentally the same instrument as that known throughout a large part of the Zambezi area of Northern Rhodesia and in Nyasaland as kalimba. It is also found in the north eastern districts of Southern Rhodesia among those peoples who are adjacent to the Sena, the Korekore, Budjga and Zezuru, and there it is known as mbira, and sometimes by the Northern Rhodesian name of kalimba or the Sena name of chisansi or kasansi. Hugh Tracey recorded several examples of it in this area in 1932-33.

\[ \text{Not to scale.} \]

A — 8-key Nyasaland kalimba; B — Tapera’s 13-key “kalimba” mbira; C — 25-key Sena-Nyungwe kalimba. The keys are numbered in the order of their musical pitch from the bottom.

It is reasonably certain that the chisansi is an importation into Southern Rhodesia of relatively recent occurrence, from the evidence of the variety of names, the distribution of the instrument, and that which we have by comparison with other Shona-speaking
groups and from the Zezuru of north eastern Southern Rhodesia themselves, that the
mbira dzamidzimu and madebe dzamhondoro are their only original mbiras. The chisansi
has not yet spread among the whole Zezuru tribe, being generally confined to the north
eastern side of Salisbury. However, its popularity is still growing: Hugh Tracey has
recently (1958) recorded it being played by a Karanga man and boy in Fort Victoria.
These were samples that could be seen from their manner of construction to have come
down from Northern Rhodesia or Nyasaland, and in this case were brought down by
migrant Nyasa workers. However, it is evident from transcriptions that the music played
on them, and their tuning, was distinctly Shona and not Northern Rhodesian. Unfortu­
nately there is no space in the present article for an analysis of these transcriptions.

The chisansi is certainly not the only mbira to have been introduced into Southern
Rhodesia from the Zambezi valley. Hugh Tracey has discovered that the njari, now
widely established among all the Shona peoples (with the exception of the Ndu), and
generally considered to be the traditional mbira of the people, was in fact brought into
the Buhera district of Southern Rhodesia in about the middle of the eighteenth century
by the Njana sub-tribe of the Shona. The two men responsible were Masama and Gotori,
sons of Muroro Gambiza, a half-caste Portuguese trader who had visited and settled in
the area. His two sons went down into the Zambezi valley, to the Nyungwe district of
Tete, and there they found, and learnt the art of, the njari, whose keyboard offered
certain distinct advantages over that of the original Shona mbira dzamidzimu. They
returned with it to Buhera. It is said that the clan name ‘Njana’ is a nickname indicating
the peculiar sound of the njari. Thus the instrument is often known as the ‘njari dzu-
Manjanja.’

By 1900, the instrument had spread outwards about a hundred miles in all directions
from Buhera, having reached Mrewa, Rusapi, Bikita, Victoria, Chibi, Chilimanzi and
Salisbury. It did not, however, reach Mtoko in the north east until about 1935, and has
not yet arrived in other Shona areas such as the Darwin area further north, the country
east of the Sabi river, or the country south of the Lundi river and the line 20 degrees
south latitude.

Tapera, like others before him, bought his new instrument at Tete, and brought it
back to the Rhodesian highlands. This type of mbira was probably not completely
unknown to him, from the evidence of the several recorded examples of the Kalimba
in the north eastern quarter of Southern Rhodesia, but it was then, and still remains a
young man’s instrument, the njari and madebe dzamhondoro being the ancient and estab­
lished instruments in his home district.

Before leaving Tete, Tapera was given the correct medicinal charms for successful
mbira playing, and he also learned two local tunes for the instrument (“Chikunda” Nos.
1 and 2). He did not learn the Sena names of these tunes, and their lyrics, being in a
foreign language, he still does not know.

Eventually he went to work in Salisbury for a number of years, subsequently going
to Bulawayo on the death of his wife in 1949. He has recently returned to live in Salisbury.
Thus most of his musical inspiration has been drawn from his home area of Mrewa,
tempered perhaps by other mbira players he has heard, and whom he frequently mimicks
humorously. The Valley Tonga of the Zambezi valley above Kariba, the Nsenga of
Petauke, Northern Rhodesia, and the Shona/Karanga of Fort Victoria, Southern
Rhodesia are his favourite victims for musical parody.

Tapera’s instrument. (See illustration).

The primary keys of a kalimba-type mbira are those numbered one to eight in the
illustration, i.e. three consecutive high notes and a low note in each hand. Instruments
in this form are found in Nyasaland and several parts of Northern Rhodesia, and are
usually small, with fan-shaped bodies, and are played over a small gourd. Instruments
of varying degree of complexity are found in the lower Zambezi valley from the borders
of Northern Rhodesia and throughout the north eastern corner of Southern Rhodesia, the additional notes being in most cases an upward continuation of the scale, the keys being shorter and placed in an upper rank or manual. From one to six keys may be added, where the principal eight keys of the lower rank have not been increased. Many Sena/Nyungwe examples of the instrument, however, use more than double the number of keys in both ranks, the result being as illustrated in Fig. 1, one of the more complex examples recorded by Hugh Tracey in 1932/33.

The construction of Tapera’s mbira follows the usual pattern of the Sena/Shona board-resonated type of mbira, and not the Northern Rhodesian type, i.e. rectangular in shape, a separate piece of wood being used for the backrest, and a thick soundboard with straight sidewalls. The keys are large and rather more roughly made than the Northern Rhodesian kalimba. A thin metal plate is secured between the keys and the soundboard to which rattles are attached, in this case metal bottle tops, which vibrate in sympathy with the keys. The whole instrument is resonated inside a large mpudzi calabash, and is propped in by means of a short stick between the straining bar and the inside of the calabash.

There seem to be certain well-understood principles behind the layout of the keys of Sena and Shona mbiras of all types. 1. Most notable is that of duplicated notes on either side of the centre of the fingerboard. 2. Related to this is the practice of duplicating the few top notes of one section of the layout with the bottom notes of the next higher section. The two advantages of this principle are firstly that it allows a rhythmic rippling or tremolo device, which is a notable feature of Sena/Shona mbira playing, and secondly that it permits the duplicated notes to be played in harmony with any other note on the fingerboard, left or right. 3. There are at least eight distinct types of mbira in use among the Sena and Shona, the mbira dzamidzimu, madebe dzamhondoro, njari, njari burnu, nyonganyonga, nsansi, mbira dzawaNdau and kalimba (chisansi), and on all of these but the nsansi and its related mbira dzawaNdau, the bass notes are central and all scales ascend in an outward direction from the centre of the fingerboard. On those two the bass notes are on the left, and the scale always ascends towards the right.
4. Adjacent keys in each section of the layout almost invariably produce adjacent notes of the scale. This may seem obvious, but the principle does not hold true of African mbiras from many other areas. 5. Notes in one rank are frequently arranged directly above their octave in a lower rank. The two keys may be played together to reinforce the sound of the particular note, either with thumb and first finger together, or with a sweep of the thumb from the upper onto the lower key. 6. The few outside keys on both left and right sides of the layout are usually set so that they can be played upwards with the tips of the index fingers. Alternatively, part of the upper right manual of some instruments such as some kalimbas and mbira dzawanda may be arranged for the right index to pluck downwards. A reason for this Sena/Shona insistence on more than the two thumbs alone to pluck the keys may perhaps be found in the great predominance of triple times in their music. The fact that man has two hands, and that much African music is in three time, undoubtedly accounts for much of the hemiola in African music and mbira playing, but if one has three or more separate means of plucking the keys one can more easily produce unreservedly triple music, as well as many more intricate counterplays of rhythm and harmony.

Tapera's mbira has five extra keys in the upper rank, and of these two pairs are duplicated, in typical Sena/Shona fashion. When he discovered that I too was capable of making mbira keys, he asked me to make him an extra key (G'), the upper octave of his keynote (G' Key 6). This I did for him, and it appears in the illustration as the fourth key from the left in the upper rank. I also made, with his approval, a duplicate key for his right outside key in the upper rank (F##), which appears as the left outside key of the instrument. He said that other players whom he knew used this top G' key, but that, not being a maker, he had never been able to make one for himself. He began to work out ways of using the new key as soon as it was made, but unfortunately most of the transcriptions were done before the key was in operation.

The tuning of Tapera's mbira.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key No.</th>
<th>Note transcribed as</th>
<th>v.p.s.</th>
<th>Progressive intervals (cents)</th>
<th>Major tempered scale for comparison (cents)</th>
<th>Intervals (cents)</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>(G')</td>
<td>(592)</td>
<td>(1200)</td>
<td>(1200)</td>
<td>(147)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>F '#'</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>1053</td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
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<td>894</td>
<td>900</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>D'</td>
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<td>686</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>B'</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>A'</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>1200</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1100</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
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<td>900</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>700</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>400</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>G,</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
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1. Cf. the Ntenga kalimba described by Blacking on p.00, where the six extra keys of the upper rank each sound different notes of the scale.
It will be noticed that there is no equivalent of 'fa' in the scale, that is, the pitch that would be represented by C. This omission is found in several Sena/Shona kalimbas of the smaller type, and I suggest that this is not because the players are hexatonically unaware of the existence of the note (as can be shown in the case of the mbira dzawaindau for the note is used regularly when singing (e.g., in “Kana ndoda”, Fig. 4). What is more likely is that this note has no place in the harmonic sequences used on the instrument, and as the kalimba is rarely used melodically but rather as a rhythmic and harmonic background to the voice, the player has no need for it. Other types of mbira, such as the njari and madebe dzamhondoro, from the same areas in which the kalimba is found, show a complete heptatonic scale in all octaves. This would suggest a different harmonic system for both the kalimba and the njari, and from listening to many njari tunes, I would suggest this to be so. Njari tunes are generally longer, with a much wider choice of harmonic progression. Some, however, show unmistakably the ‘kalimba’ type of harmonic progression, as for instance, one that has been transcribed by Nettl: “Shona Karanga music for sansa orchestra and voices”, published in Nettl’s *Music in Primitive Culture* (Harvard 1956). It is probable that there are several types of harmonic progression on the njari and related mbiras, and that the one most suited to the kalimba layout has been appropriated. This however, needs extensive research into njari technique, which must remain for the future.

The tuning of Tapera’s notes sounds, on a casual hearing, much like a European major scale, but the above measurements show that this is not so. Tapera’s scale has two notes (Keys 4 and 5, and their octaves) that are invariably tuned slightly sharp of the average Shona mbira tuning, i.e. towards European temperament, which probably accounted for the relative ease with which I could accept his scale when learning to play his instrument. These two degrees, the sixth and seventh of the scale, sound severely flattened on most Shona mbiras.

The table below shows an average Sena/Shona mbira tuning over one octave. This scale cannot immediately be taken as ‘the Sena/Shona scale’, because many individual musicians display certain constant tendencies to tune some notes differently, and the various types of mbiras sometimes employ different tunings. Hugh Tracey first calculated from measurement of a large number of Sena/Shona mbiras the average tuning of each type of mbira, and from this calculation he obtained the average tuning for all types. This overall average differs from any one of the instrumental averages by not more than ten cents in nearly all cases, with a maximum, in one case, of twenty seven cents, or one quarter of a tempered semitone. When one bears in mind that the individual variations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Sena/Shona mbira tuning (cents)</th>
<th>Tapera’s scale (cents)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1200</td>
<td>1200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>170</td>
<td>147</td>
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<td>162</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>162</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This tune, although not named, I can almost certainly identify as “Ndinosara nani”, composed by the minstrel Wuzwa Chipirina from the Gutu district of Fort Victoria, in January, 1933.
usually concern only one or two notes in the scale, and that the remainder conform 
substantially with the average scale given here, this is indeed a remarkable degree of 
unanimity in the concept of a ‘right’ scale. One hopes that this average may have some 
validity, and that it may serve in future as the basis for a standardised Shona mbira scale.

Although Tapera’s overall tuning varied from time to time within the range of 
about one semitone, the relative pitches of his scale remained constant, as I ascertained 
from exact measurement on four separate occasions. He is always conscientious about 
tuning his mbira before performing, and the accuracy of his ear is reflected in the accuracy 
of his octaves and unisons.

A NOTE ON THE TRANSCRIPTIONS.

I have chosen to transcribe kalimba music as if in the key of G, with one sharp, 
but two things must be remembered while playing or reading from the transcriptions. 
One is that the actual pitch of Key 6 of Tapera’s mbira is very near to D (293 v.p.s. new 
philharmonic pitch), so the music is written approximately a fourth higher than it 
sounds. This was done because the key of G seemed the most suitable key in order to 
fit the range of the kalimba into a treble stave. For future studies on any kalimba-type of 
mbira, it would undoubtedly be useful to consider it as a ‘transposing instrument’, 
for the sake of uniformity of fingering and ease of sightreading from written music. 
Thus the G below two ledger lines would always be recognisable as the central bass 
note of the instrument; a middle line B would always be the outside left key of the lower 
rank, and so on. What this method might lose in technical accuracy would be more than 
adequately made up in clarity of reading, comprehension and comparison with other 
mbiras of the same type. Others may prefer to use the keys of D, C or B for the same 
purpose, but I have found G to be the most suitable.

Secondly, the notes, written as they are on our stave, do not represent European 
tempered intervals as would be produced by a piano playing this music, but represent the 
exact notes given above in the table of Tapera’s tuning.

Key 6 is taken as being the ‘keynote’ for various good reasons:
1. Tapera affirms that this is the “great note” (ingwi buru) and that the chord 6-3 (G-D) 
is the best-sounding chord on the instrument.
2. The note is played at the start of most tunes, and at the end of all.
3. It holds a central position in the harmonic progression, being always returned to 
from the other two main chords.
4. Lastly, to my European ear, it sounds plainly like the keynote, although, of course, 
it would not be wise to apply this criterion to all mbiras.

It will be seen that in most cases it is not indicated which hand plays which note. 
This is because there are only two notes, E in the top space and the D below it, which 
can be played by either hand. Where either of these occurs together with its lower octave, 
it can be taken as being played by the right index. Where the note occurs alone, the hand 
which plays it is indicated by an L or an R. Where it is necessary to make clear the 
contrasting rhythms of the two hands, the one is marked by up-tails, and the other by 
down tails, L or R being marked at the beginning of the stave.

All these tunes were taught me personally by Tapera, so I can confidently vouch for 
the accuracy of the mbira parts, having played them all under his critical eye many times. 
The voice parts are transcribed from tape recordings, and represent a condensation of 
what Tapera would sing with each tune. Falsetto yodelling notes are shown by a crossed 
note.

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3 The method used was comparison of each mbira note with a set of tuning forks calibrated every four vibrations per second between 
212 v.p.s. and 424 v.p.s.
The music.

The single unifying factor behind Tapera's music, and behind the majority of tunes I have heard played on this Sena/Shona type of mbira, is the harmonic progression used. This is something more than a simple root-progression around a tonal centre, as for instance that described by Blacking in discussing Venda ocarina music (African Music, Vol. II, No. 2), and it is strong enough to support a seemingly infinite variety of tunes. It consists basically of three main 'chords' (1, 2 and 3) and a passing 'chord' 4.

By a 'chord' here is not meant a triad, but a chord of two notes only. That is to say that when two keys are played in unison, the two always represent, with few exceptions, one of these chords, or their inversions in different octaves. However, when we consider the notes that regularly precede or follow each of these chords, while the harmony still remains on the chord in question, we can add extra notes to three of the chords, which will make them into 'understood' triads. It must be remembered that at no time is a full triad played on the instrument, although the two mbira notes, together with that of the voice, may sometimes make one up, particularly when yodelling on the tonic chord (Chord 1) takes place. Here are the basic chords with the extra notes that are allowed near each of them printed in black. 5 and 6, parts of tonic chord 1, are the only other simultaneous chords that are regularly played. Chords 1 to 4 are also played in all the inversions possible on the instrument.

These chords may now be described as that of the tonic, the submediant minor (relative minor), the dominant (without its third degree) and the mediant minor. The order in which they occur is fixed, namely 1-2-1-3. The passing chord 4 may occur in any, or all, or none of the spaces between the main chords, but more particularly after each chord 1, i.e. 1-4-2-1-4-3. Some of the vocal parts, such as "Kana ndoda" and "Amai achauya", start on chord 2, or on an upbeat before it. This might perhaps demand a rearranging of the barline for the vocal part. However the mbira generally has the chords in this order, and starting in this place. The first chord of the above sequence is also the one used to end a tune, i.e. after the dominant chord 3. So the sequence dominant—tonic can be said to have cadential function. The voice part usually drops a whole tone onto the tonic at the cadence, sometimes a third from the mediant.

Tapera's voice is, by his own recognition, not as flexible as it once was, and he is no longer capable of the extended vigorous yodelling that would otherwise form an important part of most of these tunes. This Sena/Shona technique of yodelling is, I believe, unique among Bantu-speaking peoples, having been only recorded elsewhere in Africa among the Congo pygmies and the Khoisan peoples of the south. From what I can hear of Tapera's performance, from that of the two Fort Victoria performers on the kalimba-type mbira, and from that of several njari players, the yodelling reinforces the suggestion that the background of this music is chordal. The notes used in yodelling are those of the chord being played on the mbira, together with the 'understood' notes mentioned above which go with those chords. The characteristic yodelling words are "Wo-ye i-ye i-ye" etc., where the 'i' represents the high falsetto tone. It usually starts on a high pitch and descends stepwise, one up, one down, following the chords as they change throughout the length of the yodelling phrase.
The existence of music based on a fixed sequence of chords may be of great interest when comparing traditional Shona music with that of the towns. If we were to replace the relative minor chord with the subdominant major chord, we would have a progression whose similarity with that of everyday African town jazz could not be overlooked.

In order to find out how these chords are put into effect we can follow the instruction that Tapera gave me for what he considers to be his best tune, "Chemutengure", one of those numerous Shona mbira tunes for which every player has his own variation of the standard. "Mbiriwiri", "Magonde" and "Neura" are the names of other traditional tunes that many Shona njari players know. This tune seems to be of more recent origin, and used mainly by players of the kalimba-type mbira. The first lesson was to learn the basic chords in a simple rhythm. Tapera would always play with me, to keep the time. The mbira I used was one that I had made myself, in order to be able to learn, and it had been tuned by Tapera.

The last bar here is the first concession to cross rhythm between the hands. Here, and often later on, I discovered for myself what Kubik has observed recently, that there is a great difference between the player's and hearer's image of the music being performed. Tapera was always able to play the individual part of either hand by itself, thus indicating that he was conscious of each part as a tune in its own right. But in many of his accompaniments the tunes of the two hands overlap in pitch, and so the listener, naturally associating together notes of similar pitch, or of a regular rhythm, constructs for himself a rhythmic and melodic framework of which the player need not necessarily be aware. A good example of this is "Chikunda" No. 2.

A simple matter of technique that had to be overcome from the start was learning to pluck the right upper rank downwards with the right index, while at the same time playing the lower octave with the right thumb. Another problem for a non-player of the mbira was to move the thumbs sideways along the ranks of keys fast enough. Learning this caused me several weeks of stiff hands.

The first lesson learnt, and the chords roughly mastered, most of my time was spent in learning the great variety of rhythmic play to which the notes of the chords can be put. Here are some of the rhythmic patterns for "Chemutengure" that can develop from the chord sequence in Fig. 6 Pattern 2 is the first extension of Pattern 1.

The left hand plays a similar pattern to that of Pattern 1, in a regular 6/8, while the right hand alternates from 6/8 to 3/4. The bass note, G\textsubscript{r}, is used here, as it can be in many tunes, regardless of its pitch, as a regular rhythmic thump on the third and sixth beats of a 6/8 bar, which are the same beats that a single drum would emphasise if accompanying this music. There are many possible hand claps, but if it were to be a single clap falling every three beats, it would also fall on the third and sixth beats. A deep note, usually Gr on the kalimba, very often falls on the quaver immediately
preceding the on-beat in a number of Shona mbira tunes that I have heard, and it can be a useful sign for orienting oneself to the rhythm. The “on-beat” I have assumed to be the strong beat of the first basic accompaniment for any tune taught me by Tapera, such as Pattern 1 here; the strong beat of most of the songs fits with this basic pattern.

Pattern 3 is an extension of Pattern 2. Both hands are now double-thumbing in 6/8 time, playing the same quaver-crotchet, quaver-crotchet pattern, the left hand staggered one quaver after the right. This is a common African group drumming technique, but when one player has to do it himself, it is quite invigorating.

Pattern 4 is in the same rhythm as pattern 3, the left hand now repeating on the upper rank the right hand’s note, instead of its own note.

Pattern 5 is very similar in rhythm to Pattern 3, the right hand now moving ‘up-down’ instead of ‘down-up’. Tapera generally has at least two distinct accompaniment patterns for each of his tunes, and often these are described as ‘Big Tune’ and ‘Small Tune’ (using the English words). Big refers to low notes and Small to high notes; Big Tune generally means a melody which includes most of the lowest four or five notes of the instrument. Small Tune means one on the upper manual, together with the left hand keys 6, 7 and 8 of the lower manual. In this pattern (5) the sequence G,-D-B-E etc. in the bass, when emphasised, Tapera would call ‘making the tune big’. The effect is more marked in the next pattern, No. 6.

Here the listener tends to appreciate these two tunes playing against each other:

while the player does not think mainly of these two tunes, but of the fascinating mechanical-rhythmic effect of playing a staggered 6/8 beat between the two hands. The listener can never be aware of how this accompaniment is created, unless he happens to be a player of the instrument himself.
Keeping the same double-thumbed pattern in the left hand, the right hand now plays in 3/4 time.

All the previous patterns are full accompaniments for the voice. The next three, Nos. 8, 9 and 10, are all examples of ‘Small Tune’. They may be used behind the voice, but are more often used as mbira solos in between parts of the song.

This is the main Small Tune, usually played during a quiet or lamentative section of the music. It was in fact the first accompaniment that Tapera tried to teach me for “Chemutengure”, but finding that I could not grasp it, he went back one stage further—to the basic chords.

Pattern 9 is an extension of Pattern 8. The rhythm starts to develop with the repeated bass notes E-E and D-D in bars two and four, and the added semiquaver in the treble.

Pattern 10 is a further extension of pattern 8. It shows another way of increasing the interest of the Small Tune. This filling up of all available rhythmic space is what Tapera calls the ‘njari technique’. The njari has many more duplicated keys than Taper’a mbira, and is played with four fingers, as against Tapera’s three, so he double-thumbs to get the same full effect.

This is the introduction to “Chemutengure” that Tapera played on a test recording that I made. Or rather, this is what it sounded like to me. When he came in on the song one had to adjust one’s rhythmic bearings rapidly, and working back to the start one could discover what the background rhythm in his mind actually was. Tapera often starts his tunes with an introduction that appears to be in a quite different rhythm from the main body of the song. Frequently this introduction is the main contrasting rhythm pattern that he would get a second mbira, in this case mine, to play behind him when he had eventually set up the main pattern.
This is the introduction as it is in fact felt, and the accompaniment pattern for the first part of the tune as recorded.

For the ending of the recorded tune, Tapera played this energetic “Big Tune” pattern, followed by this typical ending pattern.

Having grasped these patterns, one has to learn to vary them constantly, fading one into the other, sometimes working up from simplicity to complexity, sometimes the reverse; sometimes loudly emphasising certain notes in a pattern, sometimes unexpectedly leaving some out. The elements of humour, surprise, improvisation, reaction to the audience are all part of the art. Most tunes start slowly, even hesitantly, without complication, and gradually build up to the full pattern. They end, conversely, with a gradual reduction of the complications. This is also a typical feature of Shona njari playing.

To complete the music of “Chemutengure”, here are some of the vocal phrases regularly used by Tapera in the song. Each phrase length of four bars, marked off by double bars, corresponds with the four bar length of one accompaniment pattern.

“Chemutengure” was considered by Tapera to be his best tune; he also had the greatest number of variants in its mbira part. It is a virtuoso piece—an exercise in rhythms. Most of his other tunes have a more standardised accompaniment. One of the first that I learnt was “Kana ndoda kuramba murume”, a sad song in 5/8 time. “If I should want to refuse (divorce) my husband, I should be very worried. Have you eaten your food with the mouse’s head?” (A mouse’s head is considered a delicacy).
Alternative patterns that can be used with "Kana ndoda" are: 1. Where the right hand pattern is doubled, in imitation of the song; 2. Which is the same as the Small Tune solo of "Chemutengure", but adapted to 5/8 time; 3. The first basic accompaniment that I was taught; 4. The pattern that Tapera used when he had the extra top G' key; 5. Clap patterns that are used with this tune are any, or all of these three.

(See transcription on Page 62).

The next tune that I learnt, because Tapera considered it easy to play, was "Kuyaura kwasi nakatura", another sad personal song, sung with a catch in the throat that makes onlookers exclaim, "Anochema kwazvo"—"He is really crying, mourning", which, they say, is how old men ought to sing. Others sung like this are "Amai achauya", "Gumbukumbu" and "Ndonoifira msango". The words of "Kuyaura" were explained to mean 'the suffering of a man who has nothing, neither land, house nor cattle'. Tapera also mourns the loss of his wife in some of the exclamations that fill many of the pauses in the singing. These exclamations in most Shona mbira music, sometimes taking up more
time than the singing itself, are often an important and permanent part of a song, and invariably performed with it. They are comments in the mood of the song itself, traditional exclamations, or else topical ad libs. Many Shona mbira songs, in fact, have no sung words at all but the yodelling “woye iye iye”, interspersed with these spoken exclamations. Not being a Shona linguist, I am not able to comment on Tapera’s numerous exclamations.

“Kuyaura kwasi nakatura”

“Amai achauya” is a mourning song composed especially for his wife, Maggie, whose loss must have affected him deeply. “Mother will come; will come and see; will come and see this poor man, yuwi uye yuye iye iyuwe”.

“Kuyaura kwasi nakatura”
1 and 2 are alternative accompaniment patterns; 3 is a short solo passage in between parts of the song.

Shona mbira music in duple time is not common, and is more typical of the Eastern Shona, that is, the Manyika of the Umtali district of Southern Rhodesia and eastwards into Mozambique. “Butsu Mtandari” is a Manyika song. The clap that the Manyika put to the song is written below.

“Butsu mtandari,
Wona inenge vombe.”
"Ndonofira msango" is another song in duple time, from Tapera’s home in Mangwendi. It is a song for the Mhondoro spirits, originally played on the njari. It is performed very quietly.
It would be possible from the accentuation, and from observing Tapera’s movements while playing, to bar this song thus:

but the song definitely fits the other barring, and, to judge from the beginning and ending, the mbira part should also be barred the same way. The eight quavers of the bar are divided into three, three and two, placed not on 1, 4 and 7, as in the common Latin American rhythm, but on 3, 5 and 8.

Gumbukumbu is the name of a certain kind of small bird that frequents rivers and marshy places, and the song “Gumbukumbu” is addressed to this bird as, one imagines, the composer loiters alone and palely by the river. “Gumbukumbu, you understand; you understand but you refuse to answer”.

“Ndonofira msango”
This and “Chikunda” No. 1 are the only tunes that I heard Tapera play in any other mode than his usual one. Yet he still ends it on the tonic G-D chord. 1. appears to be the chord sequence. 2. shows two regularly played variants for bar one of the mbira pattern. 3. is the full form of the accompaniment using the right index.

“Chinotamba mudzia mwacho” was of interest as being the only song I learnt that was in triple time and of eighteen quavers length. The others are all of twenty-four quavers length. This is a children’s song from Mrewa, or it can be sung by a mother to the child on her back. According to Hinde, in NADA 1932, this is a children’s game of pick-a-back. “Little imp which is on the back, so not carry me. It dances round in its own pool, the little chigwaya” (a kind of small fish).
The rhythm of the words “Karombo kare pamsana, zandibereke” is a good example of how the Shona like to give a tricky rhythm to a sentence. It is an important part of their poetry. The barring may be in doubt here; the song starts every time on the fourth beat of the 12/8 bar, as does the introduction, so the bar line, for the song at least, ought perhaps to come in front of that beat. As for the mbira accompaniment, the present barring indicates the phrasing, the 3/4 bar being ‘on its own’.

Finally, here are some extracts from the two Chikunda tunes that Tapera learnt as a young man in Tete. ‘Chikunda’ is the name of the language of the Sena/Nyungwe people of Tete. The first is in the relative minor mode; the legato passage at the end is how Tapera would have me play against him on a second mbira.
“Chikunda No. 1”

(See Page 55).
The second is in Tapera's usual mode. It is a display of virtuosity on the instrument. You can only play it when your fingers are 'clever' he says. Its main interest is in the changing directions of the melody; the basic tune itself varies intriguingly between up and down, and, in the variations, the direction is constantly changing, with notes appearing here and there unexpectedly, giving an effect of surprise which invariably pleases an African audience. Note the use of dynamics for variation.

This is another tune with a different player- and listener-image. The player is conscious of the contrast of the left and right hand rhythms:

“Chikunda No. 2”

The listener, however, associates together notes of similar pitch and constructs his own rhythmic framework for the tune on the normal two against three pattern.