

## A TALE OF TWO MBIRAS

by

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This is the tale of two kinds of mbira from Zimbabwe: *mbira dzavadzimu* and *mbira dzaVaNdau*.<sup>1</sup> Both began as narrowly localized instruments, but they've had very divergent fates over the past one hundred years. The *mbira dzavadzimu* has become widely known throughout Zimbabwe, a presence in popular music, and a potentially viable economic choice for some musicians. It is played throughout the world, and has become part of the ethnomusicological canon, a literal textbook example of world music (Locke 2009; Turino 2011). During the same period, the *mbira dzaVaNdau* has quietly faded into near anonymity and virtual disappearance in Zimbabwe.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I explore the reasons for this divergence and the role ethnomusicology has played in this history and I ask, what is ethnomusicology's responsibility when it becomes part of the tale it hopes to tell?

There are five basic types of lamellophone in Zimbabwe: the *karimba*, the smallest of the five; the *matepe*, a ceremonial instrument from northern Zimbabwe; the *njari*,<sup>3</sup> less common now than at any point over the last hundred years; and the two mbiras I focus on in this article. I restrict my use of the term mbira to instances in which these two instruments are involved.<sup>4</sup> For the sake of such clarity, I add the common qualifiers *mbira dzavadzimu* and *mbira dzaVaNdau* as necessary.<sup>5</sup> I have been a student of each mbira for many years, and my involvement with both has underlined for me their differing trajectories on the ground in Zimbabwe and in the ethnomusicological literature.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The argument presented here has emerged from numerous long-term relationships with my mbira teachers, to whom I continue to owe a debt of gratitude. Stefan Fiol, Tom Turino, and Andrew Tracey have each provided helpful advice that has only served to strengthen my essay. I'd also like to thank Diane Thram and the reviewers for *African Music* for their attention and thoughtful insight. (In this article, the word mbira is used in the generic sense and therefore not italicized except when it occurs naming a particular type of mbira.)

<sup>2</sup> The situation may be quite different in Mozambique. I have not done enough research there to make any broad claims about the *mbira dzaVaNdau's* continued presence.

<sup>3</sup> I do not include the *munyonga* here, which is an expansion of the *njari* invented by David Tafaneyi Gweshe.

<sup>4</sup> There is a considerable literature that deals with these questions of nomenclature (Tracey 1961, 1969; Kubik 1964, 1965; Tracey 1972, 1973; Berliner 1993). My choice to restrict the term mbira to these two instruments is based on my conversations and relationships with musicians in Zimbabwe.

<sup>5</sup> In this article, the word mbira is used in the generic sense and therefore not italicized except when it occurs naming a particular type of mbira.

<sup>6</sup> I have been a student of the *mbira dzavadzimu* since 1996, having studied with Chartwell Dutiro, Tute Chigamba, Musekiwa Chingodza and others in the United Kingdom, the United States and

In exploring the role ethnomusicology has played in the contrasting trajectories of these two mbira, I am especially interested in two musicians from southern Africa, Kamba Simango and Dumisani Maraire, who arrived in the United States at very different moments in history. Their respective experiences reveal and reflect many of the complex dynamics behind each instrument's fate during the twentieth century and beyond. I show how much of each mbira's twentieth-century fortunes shift with its arrival in the United States and eventual popularity elsewhere in the world (The United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, etc.). Although Maraire was a *karimba* player who never played the *mbira dzavadzimu*,<sup>7</sup> his career in the United States had a remarkable impact on the *mbira dzavadzimu*'s eventual popularity both at home and abroad. His influence provides a stark contrast to that of Simango, who was an *mbira dzaVaNdau* player but arrived in the United States in 1914, before his identity as an mbira player could have much impact. In exploring the influence of each musician and the fate of each instrument, I introduce characteristics of the *mbira dzaVaNdau* in greater detail.

### Columbus Kamba Simango

In 1914, a young man from Mozambique named Columbus Kamba Simango and his mbira arrived at the Hampton Institute in Virginia. An Ndau speaker from Mozambique, Simango was born in 1890 near the mouth of the Save River. He traveled throughout colonial Mozambique (Portuguese East Africa) in his early years looking for work and education, before finding his way to colonial Zimbabwe with the help of the American missionary Fred Bunker.<sup>8</sup> After studying for six years at the Mt. Selinda mission, Bunker, Julia Winter, Minnie Clark, and the other American missionaries there brought Simango to the Hampton Institute in Virginia. Well-educated and ambitious, Simango became a classic product of the "civilizing mission" that characterized US relations with Africa at the time. Simango recognized this status, writing that, "Africa needs teachers and ministers to educate her vast population which is still in darkness and ignorance, to enable the African races to develop their latent powers, to cultivate their peculiar gifts, to create a characteristic life of their own, and so enrich the life of humanity by their distinctive contributions" (Simango 1919: 270).

While at Hampton, Simango helped Natalie Curtis write her book, *Songs and Tales of the Dark Continent*, as one of her two informants.<sup>9</sup> Ethnomusicology did not yet exist as a formal discipline defined by ethnographic methods when Curtis and Simango worked together. Thus, her approach of bringing musicians to her home to record songs

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Zimbabwe. I have been a student of the *mbira dzaVaNdau* since 2003, having studied with Zivanai Khumbula, Zombiyi Muzite, Davison Masiza and others in the Chipinge area of southeastern Zimbabwe.

<sup>7</sup> Maraire calls his *karimba* the *nyunganyunga*, which has become a widespread synonym for the instrument, including within Zimbabwean schools.

<sup>8</sup> After Bunker realized the Portuguese authorities would not allow his school in Beira to continue, Simango and some of his classmates walked from Beira to attend school in Mt. Selinda, a distance of approximately 380 kilometers (Rennie 1973: 381).

<sup>9</sup> Curtis's other informant was the South African Madikane Cele.

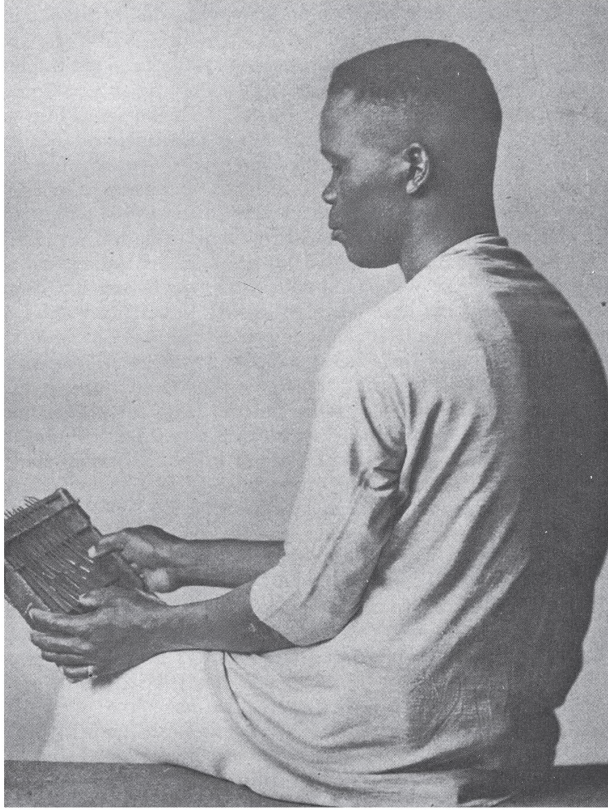


Figure 1: C. Kamba Simango. Photo by Natalie Curtis, 1920. Courtesy of Dover Publishing and Hampton University Archives.

and stories was typical of the time.<sup>10</sup> In her book, Curtis writes, “Simango had brought with him to our home a mbila [sic], a small native instrument, and this was his constant companion. When he was not working with me... he would sit quietly by himself, playing his mbila with a rapt and faraway look—dreaming of home” (Curtis 1920: 8). Curtis made several wax cylinder recordings of Simango’s music, yet seemingly never recorded him playing his mbira, despite its centrality to Simango’s own musical life.<sup>11</sup> The reasons for her lack of interest in his mbira are unclear, but she chose instead to

<sup>10</sup> Although comparative musicology had a presence in the United States (and an even stronger one in Europe), it was not until Franz Boas (who Simango worked with after leaving Hampton and Curtis) and his students codified ethnographic methods and rigorous cultural relativism that ethnomusicology emerged in the form now familiar within institutions in the United States (see Nettl and Bohlman: 1991, Nettl 2010).

<sup>11</sup> I have consulted with archivists at Hampton University and the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music where many of Simango’s and Curtis’s materials are held, but neither include mbira recordings among the songs and drumming pieces recorded by Curtis.

focus on spiritual songs, dance songs, and laments. Her reactions paralleled those of many American and European listeners reacted to African music at that time, saying,

In his weird singing of the Spirit-Songs we heard the hoarse sepulchral tones of the diviner... the groans and spasmodic shudderings, made us feel a clutching sense of obsession, as though some loosened force from out of the darkness enveloping existence had thrust parasitic claws into normal human life (Curtis 1920: 7).

Simango was a devoted Christian, so it is unclear how he might have felt about being asked to sing what Curtis calls “Spirit-Songs” instead of the Ndaou mbira’s secular repertoire or whether Simango agreed with her subsequent description of his singing. Although Simango was Christian, he grew up in a family of spiritual healers, so was likely intimately familiar with a range of Ndaou musical and spiritual practices (Spencer 2013: 57; Rennie 1973: 379).

Simango had a complex relationship with the colonial reality of the time. He was openly critical of economic imperialism, saying, “The merchants lived among the Africans, not with the purpose of helping them understand the new way, but with the purpose of getting all they could from the natives; they had no sympathy with them, and no desire for their welfare” (Simango 1917: 552). However, he called missionaries “the true friends of the African” and seemed to embrace his identity as a “New Civilized” African (Simango 1917: 554). When he graduated from Hampton after five years, Simango became a student of Franz Boas at Columbia University. While in New York, Simango’s life was a whirlwind of activity. He taught ChiNdaou language courses to help fund his studies; he served as the primary informant for anthropology articles by both Boas and Melville Herskovits (Boas 1920, 1922; Herskovits 1923), even co-authoring one article with Boas (Boas and Simango 1922); he performed on the Broadway stage with his friend Paul Robeson;<sup>12</sup> spoke at the third Pan-African Congress in 1923 at the invitation of W.E.B. DuBois (Spencer 2013: 70), and married into one of the elite families of early twentieth century Liberia when he married Kathleen Easmon. After Easmon died tragically and unexpectedly, Simango met and married Christine Coussey, returned to work in Mozambique, and eventually settled into a quiet life of exile in Ghana.<sup>13</sup> His return to Mozambique was marred by infighting within the missionary community in southern Africa and a troubled relationship with local authorities. Although his move to the home of his second wife in Ghana was intended to be temporary, he remained there for thirty years until his death in 1966 (Spencer 2013: 118).

Despite his pioneering path and personal encounters with so many key players in early twentieth-century ethnography, African studies, and race relations in the United States, Simango is now largely an historical footnote. The challenges he faced as an educated African during a time of imperialism and overt racism frustrated his

<sup>12</sup> Simango performed what is described as an, “African dance” during Robeson’s production of *Taboo* in 1922 (Johnson 1968: 192).

<sup>13</sup> See the work of John Keith Rennie and Leon P. Spencer for further information on Kamba Simango’s life (Rennie 1978, Spencer 2013).

ambitions in multiple ways.<sup>14</sup> But he remains a fascinating figure, not least because he was the first mbira player in North America. There are now student mbira ensembles at several North American colleges and universities,<sup>15</sup> and community groups scattered across the continent, but none play the mbira Simango brought with him to Virginia. Although he simply called his instrument the mbira,<sup>16</sup> it is now usually known as the *mbira dzaVaNdau*. Every student ensemble in the US plays the *mbira dzavadzimu*.

### Zimbabwe and the mbira

The mbira commonly called *mbira dzavadzimu*<sup>17</sup> (Figure 2) is widely studied within ethnomusicology (Berliner 1993, Brenner 1997, Kaemmer 1998, Kauffman 1971, Scherzinger 2013, Tracey 1970a, Turino 1998). With the help of musicians and advocates outside of Zimbabwe like Erica Azim (mbira.org) and Paul Novitski (dandemutande.org), thriving communities of mbira performers and enthusiasts have emerged in the United States (especially along the Pacific Coast), Canada, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere.

The *mbira dzavadzimu* is heptatonic; has between 22 and 28 keys fanning out from the center; has historically been played primarily for spirit possession ceremonies, hence “*dzavadzimu*,” which means “of the ancestors” in Shona; historically it is primarily a Zezuru and Karanga instrument,<sup>18</sup> two of several Shona sub-groups; and it is tuned in order to facilitate ensemble playing. Each *mbira dzavadzimu* piece has two parts, a lead part called *kushaura* and a follow part called *kutsinhira*. These parts interlock in performance and thus require a minimum of two players whose instruments are tuned to one another (cf Berliner 1993, Brenner 1997).

The Ndau mbira, or *mbira dzaVaNdau* (Figure 3), is quite different from the *mbira dzavadzimu*, despite the similar name. It is hexatonic, has from 28–34 keys with bass keys on the left; is never played for spirit possession ceremonies; is tuned very idiosyncratically, reflecting its typical solo performance practices; and is played primarily

<sup>14</sup> As Rennie suggests, Simango’s exceptional example throws the problems encountered by educated Africans at this time into, “sharper relief” (Rennie 1973: 377).

<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to get an accurate count, since many of these ensembles come and go and move as instructors travel from job to job, but there are at least seven occasional ensembles at the time of this writing (Grinnell College, Indiana University, Eastman School of Music, University of Cincinnati, Winthrop University, Carleton College, Lewis & Clark College, California State University—Northridge). This does not include the even longer list of colleges and universities that teach marimba (xylophone) ensembles based on music from Zimbabwe.

<sup>16</sup> Curtis refers to his instrument as the “mbila” (Curtis 1920: 8). Although the letter “l” is common in early transcriptions of ChiNdau by English-speaking authors, “r” has become much more common in Zimbabwean Ndau.

<sup>17</sup> It can also be called *nhare*, *mbira huru*, or *chakwi*.

<sup>18</sup> Associating the mbira dzavadzimu with any particular linguistic sub-group of Zimbabwe’s majority Shona community has grown more difficult in recent decades due to its increasing popularity and media presence. There are now also players who identify as Korekore (Tute Chigamba and his children) and Ndau (Chris Mhlanga).



Figure 2. *Mbira dzavadzimu*. Photo by author.

within the Ndau communities of Zimbabwe and Mozambique.<sup>19</sup> While ostensibly a subgroup of Zimbabwe's Shona majority, most people I met in Zimbabwe who identified as Ndau consider themselves quite distinct linguistically, historically, and politically from Shona. This is especially true among Mozambique's Ndau community, who seem rarely to identify Ndau as part of a broader Shona framework. Unlike *mbira dzavadzimu*, the Ndau mbira has nothing to do with the spirits. It is an essentially secular instrument played to pass the time and entertain people as they socialize. Whereas more and more women have come to play the *mbira dzavadzimu* in recent years, I have yet to hear any women play the Ndau mbira.

<sup>19</sup> It is also heard within the Tsonga communities of Mozambique and South Africa.



Figure 3. *Mbira dza VaNdau*. Photo by author.

The Ndau mbira has a different key layout than the other Zimbabwean lamellophones.<sup>20</sup> The bass keys are all on the left and the scales ascend to the right, much like on a piano. The scale of the *mbira dza VaNdau* is strictly hexatonic, but can imply pentatonicism in some Ndau mbira songs. The Ndau mbira player uses two thumbs and his right forefinger to play the mbira's five manuals, three on the left and two on the right. Andrew Tracey also mentions some Ndau mbiras that only have four manuals (Tracey 1972: 100). The player's right thumb is much more active than on the *mbira dzavadzimu*, responsible for as many as ten or eleven keys. There is less uniformity in construction or key layout for the Ndau mbira than the Shona mbira, and it can include anywhere from 20 to 34 keys. The extra keys can show up at the right, higher-pitched end of any of the five manuals.

<sup>20</sup> See Andrew Tracey's comprehensive article for more details on the differences in tuning, construction, and technique among Zimbabwe's various lamellophones (Tracey 1970a, 1972).

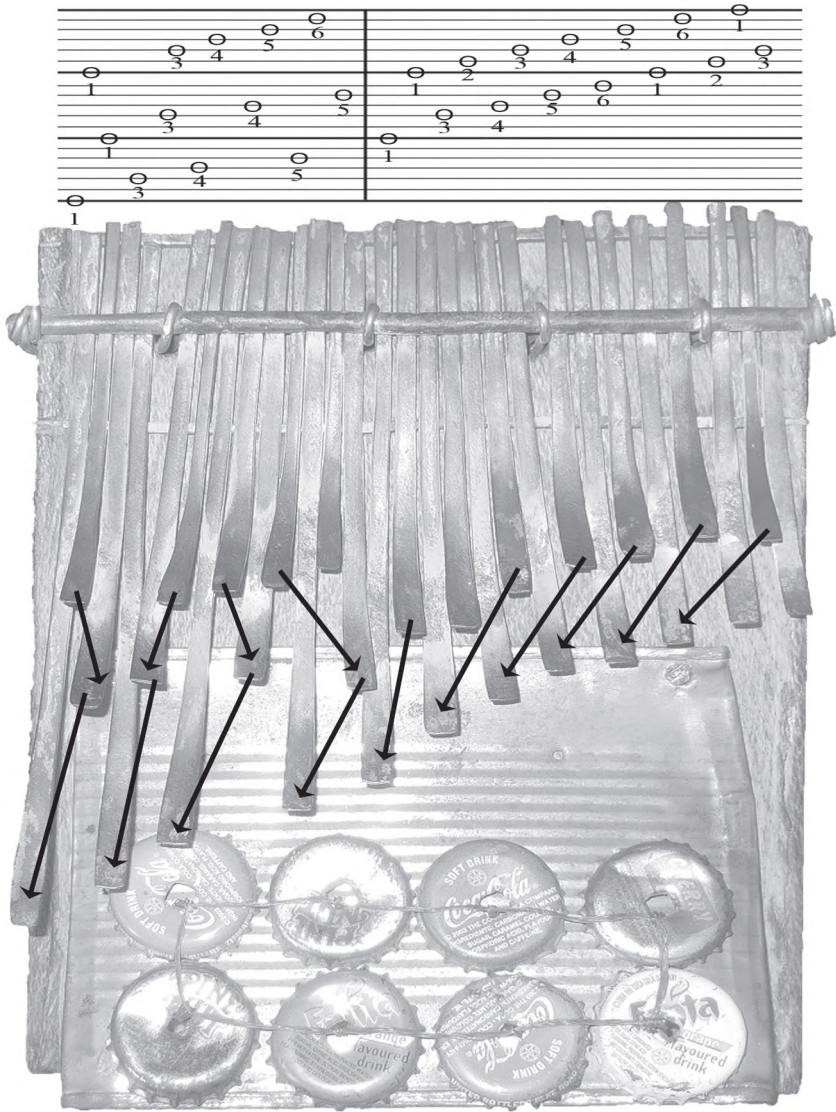


Figure 4. *Mbira dza VaNdau* key layout (Davison Masiza).<sup>21</sup>

Keys on the Ndau mbira are much thinner than those on the *mbira dzavadzimu* and much more uniform, thus key length is the primary variable for tuning. The top two rows on the left are essentially doubled by the two rows on the right, so even with 34 keys and a 6-note scale, the instrument still only has just over three octaves. The numerous doubled notes allow especially skilled players to make a single instrument

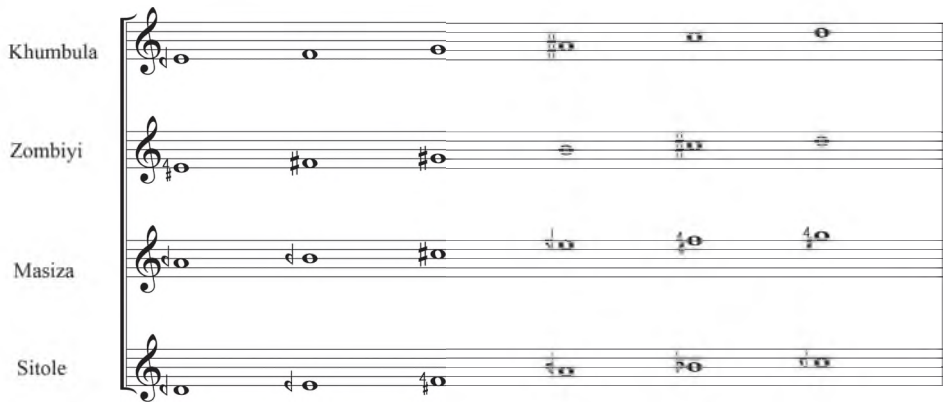
<sup>21</sup> The diagram for the layout of the keys above the photo in Figure 4 is directly inspired by Andrew Tracey's diagrams (1972). The numbers represent scale degrees in a hexatonic scale.



sound like two performers, especially if you are used to *mbira dzavadzimu* instruments that have, at most, three doubled keys. This may be partially a result of the fact that the Ndaubira is played almost exclusively as a solo instrument.


The chart in Figure 5 shows an abbreviated sense of basic Ndaubira tunings on the instruments of my primary teachers. Keep in mind that if I chose a different instrument by any of these makers, the tunings would change. So far, every instrument I've ever seen has been tuned differently. For instance, Davison Masiza made four instruments for me and each was tuned differently, even two that he made simultaneously. Conversely, my *mbira dzavadzimu* teacher Tute Chigamba made two instruments for me three years apart and they were tuned almost identically, reflecting the expectation that people play these instruments in pairs or ensembles.<sup>22</sup> Thus, although these are both types of mbira played in Zimbabwe, beyond that they have little in common.

Musically, perhaps the most immediate distinction of Ndaubira music is the brevity of the musical cycle. With some exceptions, Ndaubira songs are usually short. The typical *mbira dzavadzimu* piece can be described as 48 pulses long (12



Performer	Starting Pitch	1 <sup>st</sup> Interval	2 <sup>nd</sup> Interval	3 <sup>rd</sup> Interval	4 <sup>th</sup> Interval	5 <sup>th</sup> Interval	6 <sup>th</sup> Interval
Khumbula	318.4 Hz	165	178	339	171	195	151
Zombiyi	336.9 Hz	149	213	198	221	102	219
Masiza	425 Hz	200	195	324	200	175	105

Figure 5. *Mbira dzaVaNdau* tunings.

pulses per phrase for four phrases), Ndaubira songs are typically 16, 24, or 32 total pulses, sometimes as few as 8. For example, Zombiyi Muzite's song, "*Mukadzi Waroya Ndimhondoro*" (The Female Witch is a Lion Spirit), is a single 16-pulse phrase. In this piece shown in Figure 6, one 16th note  equals one pulse.<sup>23</sup> As shown in the

<sup>22</sup> While one could argue that mbira tunings have grown increasingly standardized over the years, mbiras that are intended to be performed together have always been tuned to one another.

<sup>23</sup> I notate each *mbira dzaVaNdau* piece here in a modified "standard" notation in the hopes that

transcription below, “*Mukadzi Waroya Ndimhondoro*” is just a single phrase and utilizes two contrasting rhythmic patterns in the left and right thumbs respectively, which reveals a clear 4:3 pattern in the first half of the phrase (as marked by the brackets in Figure 6). Unlike the standard *mbira dzavadzimu* repertoire, Ndaubira cycle lengths are highly variable, having anywhere from 8 to 128 pulses (see Figure 7), but this piece is typical in its brevity.

The figure displays a musical transcription for the piece "Mukadzi Waroya Ndimhondoro". It consists of four staves. The top staff is labeled "Left Thumb" and shows a sequence of notes with a bracket over the first three notes, indicating a 4:3 ratio. The second staff is labeled "Right Thumb" and shows a sequence of notes with a bracket over the first two notes. The third staff is labeled "Right Index" and shows a sequence of notes. The bottom staff is labeled "Composite" and shows the combined rhythmic pattern of the other three staves. The notation uses a treble clef and a common time signature.

Figure 6. “*Mukadzi Waroya Ndimhondoro*” by Zombiyi Muzite.<sup>24</sup>

The chart in Figure 7 graphs the cycle lengths of all 110 Ndaubira pieces I have heard personally or that were recorded by Hugh Tracey for the *Sound of Africa* series and Joel Lavolette for “*Mbira dzaVaNdau: From Chimanimani to Birchenough Bridge*” (Tracey 1963, Lavolette 2003).<sup>25</sup> While most songs have 16, 24, or 32 pulses, there is little consistency on cycle or phrase lengths from piece to piece and player to player. Conversely, the *mbira dzavadzimu* repertoire is surprisingly consistent in terms of form and harmonic progression.<sup>26</sup> The variety of forms within the Ndaubira repertoire reflects the individuality of each performer. There is no single template upon which

it is clear to as many readers as possible. I omit time signatures in order to avoid implying any hierarchy of beats. Each represented cycle is repeated indefinitely and thus has no obvious beginning or ending. The pulse represents the shortest value played by the performer. All transcriptions and diagrams in the figures that follow are by the author.

<sup>24</sup> Tuning for Zombiyi Muzite, E=337Hz, F=367, G=415, B=493, C=560, D=594.

<sup>25</sup> I listened to the *Sound of Africa* series at the University of Illinois School of Music Library. 52 Ndaubira recordings from *Sound of Africa* are included in Figure 7: 4 come from Lavolette’s recording, and 54 come from my own ethnographic recordings (Tracey 1963; Lavolette 2003).

<sup>26</sup> There are several publications that explore *mbira dzavadzimu* harmonic progressions in detail (Berliner 1993, Brenner 1997, Grupe 2004, Scherzinger 2013).

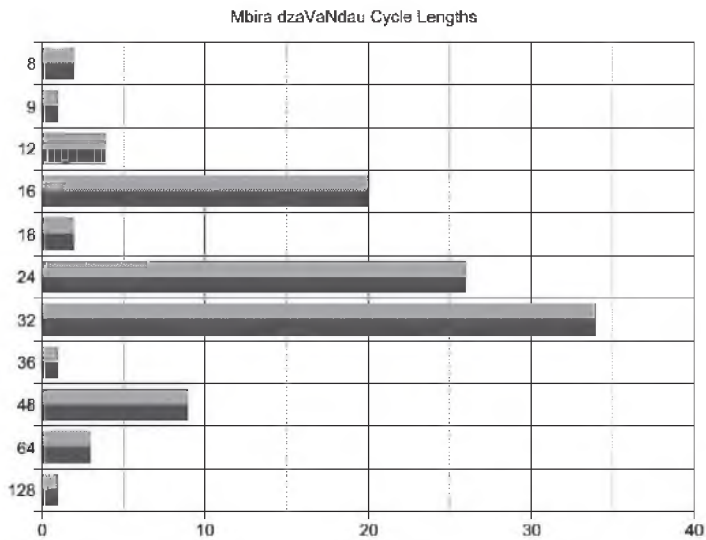


Figure 7. Distribution of Ndau mbira cycle lengths by pulse.

composers rely and, unlike *mbira dzavadzimu* players, no spirits to satisfy or ensemble expectations to accommodate.

As in “*Mukadzi Waroya Ndimhondoro*” Ndau mbira songs are often relatively static harmonically, often utilizing just one or two tonal areas (or vertical sonorities).<sup>27</sup> There is also a great deal of metric ambiguity with a familiar reliance on 2:3 polyrhythms<sup>28</sup> (cf Perman, forthcoming). Since the Ndau mbira is performed solo, and does not accompany dancing, there is little call for *hosho*<sup>29</sup> accompaniment.<sup>30</sup> Some Ndau mbira songs rely on ternary beats while others use strict duple patterns. Most pieces also contain notes grouped in 2’s or 4’s against groups of 3’s in a polyrhythmic pattern common throughout the region. This is similar to *mbira dzavadzimu* music, but the prevalence of 4:3 (as opposed to 2:3) is more common in Ndau music. This prevalence of 4:3 rhythmic relationships makes the beat itself less obvious, since neither is audibly privileged, and allows for much more rhythmic variety within an individual performer’s repertoire than for an *mbira dzavadzimu* performer. Variety itself, in form and rhythmic contrasts, is more highly valued among Ndau mbira players, who typically play to

<sup>27</sup> I use tonal area instead of “chord” to avoid any implication of harmonic hierarchies or triads. In much Shona and Ndau music, the “chords” that are heard are primarily diads based on intervals of approximately a fourth or a fifth, although Ndau mbira music uses intervals comparable to thirds and sixths as well.

<sup>28</sup> By polyrhythm, I simply mean the simultaneous presence of two or more contrasting rhythmic patterns.

<sup>29</sup> Or *makosho*, as many Ndau speakers would say.

<sup>30</sup> The one time I heard *mbira dzaVaNdau* with *hosho* was when I asked Wilbert Mumbanyiwa if he ever had a *hosho* player accompany him. He immediately found some *hosho* and passed them along to the other men gathered around us. None of them could find the beat and Wilbert eventually asked them to stop.

entertain, than among *mbira dzavadzimu* players who primarily serve ceremonial ends. Zivanai Khumbula's song "Ndoda Kuenda Kanyi" (I Want To Go To My Rural Home) is typical in its reliance on 4 against 3 rhythms.<sup>31</sup> It can be heard on the accompanying DVD. In Figure 8, one 8th note ♩ equals one pulse.

Figure 8. "Ndoda Kuenda Kanyi" by Zivanai Khumbula<sup>32</sup> [DVD track 1]

On many pieces, the left thumb plays 2 groups of 3 notes and the right index finger plays 2 groups of 4 notes (as marked by the brackets in Figure 8). The third finger, typically the right thumb, tends to complement whichever rhythm the left thumb is playing. Each of the player's three fingers often plays its own independent line, more so than in *mbira dzavadzimu* music, on which the right thumb and forefinger tend to work together. For instance, in Masiza's "Baba Imimi Ndafa Musandichema" (Father, Don't Cry For Me When I'm Dead), each line is independent. It can be heard on the accompanying DVD. As in Figure 8, in the transcription in Figure 9 one 8th note ♩ equals one pulse.

The left thumb and right index finger play a 2:3 polyrhythm (or perhaps more audibly a 4:6 pattern), while the right thumb plays two notes out of three in a rhythm familiar to any *mbira dzavadzimu* player. More typically, two of the three layers combine to generate one rhythmic idea as the third plays a contrasting rhythm. Both Masiza's "Baba Imimi Ndafa Musandichema" and Khumbula's "Ndoda Kuenda Kanyi" rely on two fingers to provide a consistent pattern of either 2 against 3 or 4 against 3 while the third finger plays a contrasting part that is the primary site of improvisation. It is also

<sup>31</sup> Zivanai Khumbula and his son Temba can be heard on the CD produced by Joel Laviolette entitled "Mbira DzaVaNdau: From Chimanimani to Birchenough Bridge" (Laviolette 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Tuning for Zivanai Khumbula, E=318Hz, F=350, G=388, A=472, C=521, D=583.

common for two of the three fingers to generate one collective rhythmic idea as the third plays a contrasting rhythm (Perman forthcoming).

Figure 9. “Baba Imimi Ndafa Musandichema” by Davison Masiza.<sup>33</sup> [DVD track 2]

### Diverging fates

While the *mbira dzavadzimu* is now known throughout the world, the *mbira dza VaNdau* is fading into obscurity in Zimbabwe. I hesitate to prognosticate the demise of any musical practice, aware of the countless cries of wolf by ethnomusicologists over the decades, but few players remain in Zimbabwe and most of those who do are old men. But this wasn't always true.

Ten years after Simango returned to his native Mozambique in the 1920s, Hugh Tracey began recording trips that eventually led to his establishment of the International Library of African Music as a research center and archive in 1954. His *Sound of Africa* series sheds unique insight into the state of lamellophone performance in southern Africa from the 1930s–1960s. In total, Tracey's epic series includes an astonishing 210 LPs. Included on these LPs are 102 recordings of the five lamellophones found in Zimbabwe. Of these performances, just more than half (52) are played on the *mbira dza VaNdau*, by far the most of Zimbabwe's lamellophones Tracey recorded (see Figure 10). Many of these were performances by *varombe*, itinerant musicians who travelled the region playing music for money, a practice that no longer seems economically viable. Bringing up the rear, with only two recordings, both by James Gwezhe Soko, is the *mbira dzavadzimu*.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Tuning for Davison Masiza, A=425Hz, B=477, C=534, E=644, F=723, G=800.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Tracey points out that chance also played a significant role in what was recorded. He has said that Hugh Tracey claimed, “I recorded perhaps only one tenth of one percent of what existed” (A. Tracey pers. comm. 19 Sep. 2015).

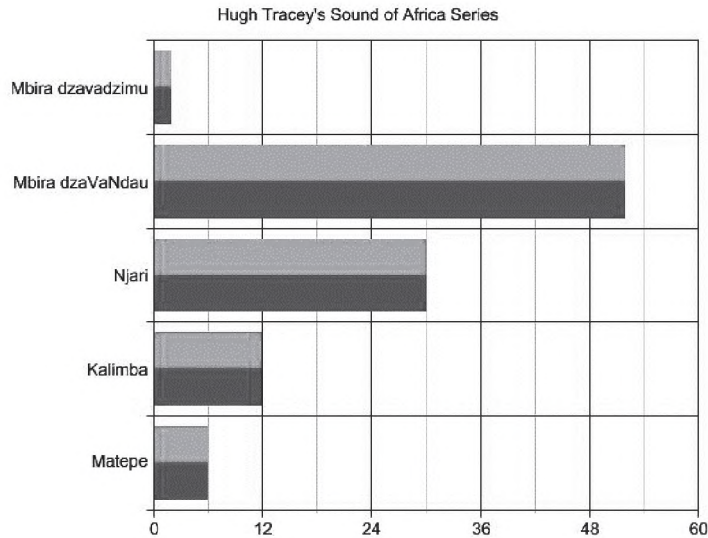


Figure 10. Distribution of Tracey lamellophone recordings.

Hugh Tracey himself seemed surprised at the rarity of *mbira dzavadzimu* performance. Writing in 1932, he says that the only place he found *mbira dzavadzimu* still being made was Chiota (Tracey 1932: 84). Decades later, the anthropologist Peter Fry met a man in Chiota who claimed he was the only *mbira dzavadzimu* player in the area until 1960, at which point several young men began taking an interest (Fry 1976: 118). Conversely, there are numerous *mbira dzaVaNdau* performers in the Tracey series, hailing from all corners of the Ndau-speaking region of Zimbabwe and Mozambique. This disparity suggests that while the *mbira dzaVaNdau* used to be a vibrant instrumental tradition, the *mbira dzavadzimu* was rare. This is striking given the state of mbira performance in Zimbabwe today. If you survey the recordings available online, the picture of lamellophone popularity now is markedly different (see Figure 11).

Why, despite being absent from local musical life in the 1930s, has the *mbira dzavadzimu* become so omnipresent and celebrated while the *mbira dzaVaNdau*, despite an obvious earlier presence, has quietly disappeared? Building on the published scholarship of Hugh and Andrew Tracey, Paul Berliner, Gerhard Kubik, and Thomas Turino, I suggest several inter-related reasons why the *mbira dzavadzimu* has had a surge in popularity and the *mbira dzaVaNdau's* presence has receded. I roughly categorize these reasons as logistical, cosmopolitan, and media-driven.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> While it is somewhat beyond the purview of this article, the career of Thomas Mapfumo reflects the influence of logistical, cosmopolitan, and media-driven factors. His version of Chimurenga music was never solely about the *mbira dzavadzimu*, but his incorporation of this mbira and its repertoire into his style had a tremendous influence on the popularity and status of the *mbira dzavadzimu* both at home and abroad. Banning Eyre's article in this issue clearly demonstrates that.

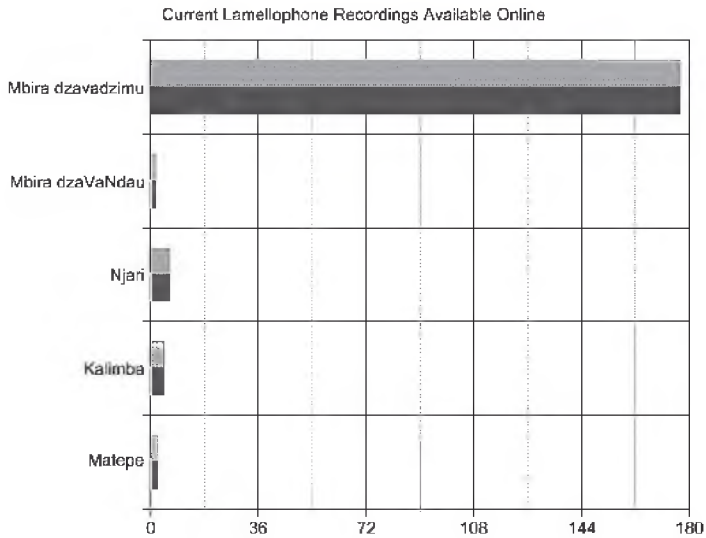


Figure 11. Distribution of Current Commercial Zimbabwean lamellophone recordings.<sup>36</sup>

Logistical reasons are perhaps the most straightforward (See Figure 12). Perhaps the single most important factor is the simple coincidence that the *mbira dzavadzimu* happens to be played in the Zezuru communities immediately surrounding Harare. Unlike Tracey's *Sound of Africa* series, recordings by the Harare-based Rhodesian Broadcasting Company (RBC) include a much higher percentage of *mbira dzavadzimu* recordings, if only because the musicians who responded to their ads for players lived nearby (Turino 2000: 78).

Secondly, following the Vatican Council in the early 1960s, local churches and missionaries became suddenly tolerant of indigenous music. Several of the musicians discussed by Berliner in *The Soul of Mbira* report the positive influence the church's change in attitude had on their playing (Berliner 1993: 243).

Thirdly, there was a gradual shutdown of Ndau migratory labor, especially to Johannesburg in South Africa, where *mbira dzaVaNdau* performance was once quite common.<sup>37</sup> Each of my elderly teachers spent time working in South Africa and used those experiences as a key inspiration for the songs they sang with the *mbira dzaVaNdau*.

These developments coincided with a rising nationalist movement tied so closely to an emerging Zimbabwean cosmopolitanism, as discussed by Turino (2000). In an effort to build a mass movement, early nationalists drew on the support of spirit mediums who relied on *mbira dzavadzimu* performers (among other instrumental traditions such as *dhinhe* and *dandanda* drumming) and utilized all-night political rallies called *pungwes*

<sup>36</sup> This calculation is an approximation based on a survey of recordings available at [mbira.org](http://mbira.org), [cdbaby.com](http://cdbaby.com), [sternsmusic.com](http://sternsmusic.com), and [amazon.com](http://amazon.com). The majority of these recordings come from Erica Azim and [mbira.org](http://mbira.org). But the disparity holds true even if her extensive catalog is omitted.

<sup>37</sup> Many thanks to Andrew Tracey for pointing this out.

similar to possession ceremonies in which *mbira dzavadzimu* music was performed (Chinyowa 2001: 14, cf Lan 1985). There was a renewed interest in indigenous spirituality and the *mbira dzavadzimu*, so strongly indexical of Shona ancestral spirits, became especially appealing. Ndau-speaking Chipinge was always marginal to these nationalist efforts and the *mbira dzaVaNdau* never reached the national stage.

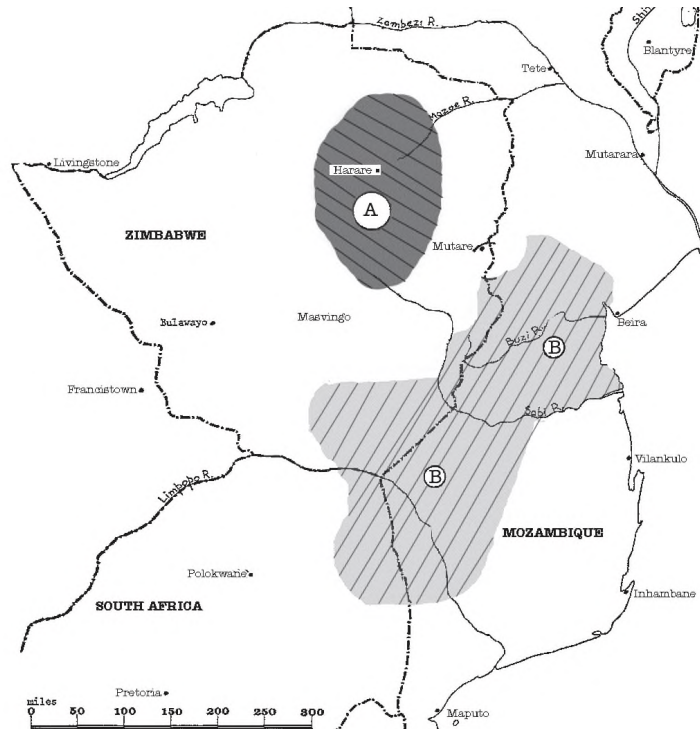


Figure 12. Andrew Tracey's mbira map. "A" represents *mbira dzavadzimu*, "B" represents the *mbira dzaVaNdau*.<sup>38</sup>

Commercial and media-driven factors draw from and overlap with all of these reasons. As Turino explains, nationalism and music professionalism emerge simultaneously in the 1960s, indicative of a growing local cosmopolitanism (Turino 2000: 263). Tute Chigamba, although born into a family of drummers and *njari* players, was partially drawn to the *mbira dzavadzimu* through those early RBC recordings. Radio became his teacher and helped expand interest in the *mbira dzavadzimu* (personal communication). Chigamba's trajectory as a performer and reliance on twentieth century media as an inspiration reflects many of the shifts in recent musical dynamics in postcolonial Zimbabwe. Among *mbira dzaVaNdau* players, the radio

<sup>38</sup> I've modified Tracey's map to focus specifically on *mbira dzavadzimu* and *mbira dzaVaNdau* (Tracey 1972).



has had a very different effect. When I asked Davison Masiza why so few people were playing the Ndaubira these days, his nonchalant response was simply, "We have the radio now," and left it at that. Because his mbira's primary purpose was to entertain at social gatherings, the radio became an acceptable and unbeatable alternative. His skills were rendered obsolete, so to speak. This was not a source of regret necessarily for Masiza, simply reality.

### **Ethnomusicology's legacy**

Finally, in conjunction with those logistical, cosmopolitan, and commercial influences mentioned above, ethnomusicology itself played an important role in each mbira's respective fate. While there are obviously numerous factors involved in this story, ethnomusicologists were instrumental in the introduction of the *mbira dzavadzimu* into American classrooms and world music texts, which have had an important indirect influence on musical life in Zimbabwe itself. These publications and the work of their authors contributed to an important international market for *mbira dzavadzimu* performance. Interest from foreign missionaries and ethnomusicologists, the confluence of church liberalization, rising nationalism, and an expanding media all paved the way for a second mbira player to arrive in the United States. Ethnomusicologists have played a significant role in the sustained presence of the *mbira dzavadzimu* ever since. Ironically, perhaps, the Zimbabwean musician who played an important role in popularizing the *mbira dzavadzimu* in the United States never played the instrument himself. But by the late 1960s, academics and musicians in the United States were prepared to receive a visiting musician from Zimbabwe with attitudes that differed markedly from those held at the time of Simango's arrival in 1914.

In 1968, a young man from Zimbabwe named Abraham Dumisani Maraire and his *karimba* arrived at the University of Washington. He came to teach the *karimba* and *marimba*, but he also triggered a broader interest in Zimbabwe and the *mbira dzavadzimu*, despite the fact that he himself never played it. The parallels between his story and that of Kamba Simango are striking. Both musicians focused on their education; both studied at Mt. Selinda Mission in Chirinda in the Eastern Highlands; both came to the US with the help of American missionaries; and both introduced their music to American university life. Their differences upon arrival say perhaps as much about the United States they found themselves within as it does about the men themselves. Maraire's arrival in the United States owes much to the legacy of Christian colonialism and the ethnomusicology of Zimbabwe, especially the work of Robert Kauffman.

In 1960, Kauffman began to incorporate indigenous music into Methodist churches and schools (Matiure 2008: 8). In the course of this work, he met Maraire, who helped compose several pieces that are still present in southern African liturgy (Matiure 2008: 106). Sheasby Matiure has written an insightful dissertation on mbira and marimba performance practices in the United States, for which Kauffman told Matiure that it was Maraire's skill as a composer that attracted his initial attention (Matiure 2008).

Kauffman paved the way for Maraire to attend the new Kwanongoma College of Music,<sup>39</sup> where he first learned how to play the *karimba* from Jege Taperera. By this time, Kauffman had returned to the US and was writing his PhD dissertation at UCLA on Shona musical practices (Kauffman 1971). He was hired at the University of Washington and encouraged by Robert Garfias to bring a mbira player from Zimbabwe to serve as an artist in residence (Matiure 2008: 108). Although he'd never actually heard Maraire play the mbira, he brought him over in 1968 because he thought he could relate better to American students (Matiure 2008: 110). It was Maraire's burgeoning cosmopolitan identity that appealed to Kauffman and the University of Washington.

His arrival in Seattle triggered a dynamic period of Zimbabwean music in the United States that reverberates today. Maraire taught countless musicians in the Pacific Northwest how to play *marimba*. Secondly, Maraire introduced this music to Claire Jones and Erica Azim, who both became widely respected *mbira dzavadzimu* performers and advocates for the broader community of Zimbabwean music performers. Azim traveled to Zimbabwe in 1974 and eventually founded her non-profit organization, MBIRA (mbira.org), that remains an important advocate for mbira performance, construction, and recording (Azim 1999). Maraire's success at Washington also paved the way for Ephant Mujuru to teach there in 1982. Finally, in a concert at Wesleyan University, Maraire's performance introduced Paul Berliner to Zimbabwean music (Berliner 1993: xiv). Berliner worked briefly with Maraire in Washington before heading to Zimbabwe in 1971 to conduct the research that eventually resulted in his book *The Soul of Mbira* (1978) and two successful recordings, *The Soul of Mbira* and *Shona Mbira Music* (1973, 1977). Berliner's work has had a powerful and sustained influence on the reception of *mbira dzavadzimu* in the United States. Several American mbira players I've worked with were initially introduced to the instrument through his book and recordings.<sup>40</sup>

As Maraire's influence was coalescing in the United States, Andrew Tracey was continuing his work on Zimbabwe's musical traditions in South Africa. While Tracey was unique in his attention to multiple instrumental traditions from Zimbabwe, with articles on the *karimba* (Tracey 1961) and *matepe* (Tracey 1970c), his booklet entitled *How to Play Mbira DzaVadzimu* coincided with Zimbabwean nationalism and the spread of Zimbabwe's music in North America described above and had a significant impact on the mbira-playing community more broadly (Tracey 1970a). His theoretical contribution to the study of the *mbira dzavadzimu* influenced academics like Berliner just as his transcriptions, writings, and workshops informed students of *mbira dzavadzimu* performance.

By Zimbabwean independence in 1980, Maraire's North American students were forming marimba groups of their own, Berliner's book was shaping the direction of Africanist ethnomusicology in the United States, and *mbira dzavadzimu* players in

<sup>39</sup> Kwanongoma College of Music in Bulawayo, which Hugh and Andrew Tracey helped to establish, has played an essential role in the direction of musical education in Zimbabwe.

<sup>40</sup> *The Soul of Mbira* (1978, second ed. 1993) remains one of the few ethnomusicology books that has an audience outside academia, a reflection of its influence and elegant writing.

Zimbabwe were institutionalizing the mbira renaissance that began during the colonial period and continue to flourish today. The continued impact of Azim and Berliner, as well as the strong “diaspora” of American musicians who learned to love Zimbabwe’s music through Maraire and his students in the Pacific Northwest should not be underestimated.

Turino claims that the *mbira dzavadzimu*’s rise in prominence is, “better understood as a result of this instrument’s fortuitous fit with cosmopolitan media, aesthetics, and musical as well as social trends” (1998: 101). It had wide appeal because it was the only indigenous instrument successfully reconsidered as both traditional and modern. I use modern here as a local Zimbabwean term reflecting aspirations of modernity and the cosmopolitan values that accompany it, combining ideas of the West, capitalism, financial wellbeing, and progress. Foreign interest provided validation for the mbira and helped prevent its marginalization as a backward relic of an outdated rural lifestyle. This may seem an exaggeration, but many of the Zimbabwean youth I know reject indigenous musical forms for this reason, particularly in the Chipinge district where Zimbabwe’s Ndau community live.

### **Present realities**

As the *mbira dzavadzimu* spread throughout Zimbabwe and the world, the *mbira dzaVaNdau* continued to be played in relative obscurity. In those rare moments when Ndau music was called for in nationalist contexts, *muchongoyo* drumming was chosen instead. Aside from Andrew Tracey’s publications from the 1970s, there was little interest in this mbira within Zimbabwe or from the rest of the world (Tracey 1970b, 1973).

There are now hundreds of *mbira dzavadzimu* performers in the United States. Grinnell College in Iowa, where I teach, has hosted at least one mbira player during each of the last four years (Musekiwa Chingodza, Patience Chaitezvi, Tute Chigamba, and Chartwell Dutiro). Musekiwa Chingodza and Patience Chaitezvi, along with other well-known performers such as Fradreck Mujuru and Cosmas Magaya, come to the US regularly, often sponsored by Azim’s non-profit organization MBIRA ([www.mbira.org](http://www.mbira.org)), or the Kutsinhira Center in Eugene, Oregon ([kutsinhira.org](http://kutsinhira.org)). The *mbira dzavadzimu* suits the purposes of higher education in the United States much more effectively than either the *karimba* or the *mbira dzaVaNdau*, both of which are solo instruments. With singing, *hosho* playing, and the combined lead (*kushaura*) and follow (*kutsinhira*) parts of the instrument itself, the ensemble nature of the *mbira dzavadzimu* makes it ideal for the pedagogy of participation, which has become so important to classroom representations of African music in recent decades. The repertoire of the *mbira dzavadzimu* is also consistent and essentially canonical. Its pedagogical value is reinforced by the fact that dozens of pieces are well known across the mbira playing community. I’ve yet to come across a competent *mbira dzavadzimu* player in either Zimbabwe or the United States who is unfamiliar with foundational pieces like “*Kariga Mombe*,” “*Nyamaropa*,” “*Shumba*,” or “*Nhemamusasa*.”

Of the pieces that I have heard during *bira* ceremonies, all but seven exhibit the same structure: four phrases of four ternary beats in a 48-pulse cycle. In conjunction with widely available teaching resources and an accessible network of mbira builders, this makes the mbira easy to teach and musical communities easy to generate. Conversely, the *mbira dzaVaNdau* is decidedly individualistic and non-canonical. Of the 110 different *mbira dzaVaNdau* pieces I have heard, only two have been played by more than one person.

Ethnomusicologists have successfully explained, advocated for, and celebrated *mbira dzavadzimu* practices to an extent that has not happened for any of Zimbabwe's other instrumental traditions, including the *mbira dzaVaNdau*. The *mbira dzavadzimu* has had particularly eloquent advocates over the years, but the disparity of attention also reflects a tendency in ethnomusicological pedagogy to rely on a canon of musical styles and ethnomusicological literature in teaching world music. Of the nine general world music textbooks that I examined, six include Zimbabwe and focus primarily on the *mbira dzavadzimu*.<sup>41</sup> None mention the *mbira dzaVaNdau*. The *mbira dzavadzimu* has now become a fixture in ethnomusicology's world music canon and is undeniably wrapped up in an international, cosmopolitan marketplace of so-called world music.

This economy of the mbira has a significant effect on musical practice in Zimbabwe as *mbira dzavadzimu* performance has become a viable career option, as evidenced abroad by Stella Chiweshe in Germany and Chartwell Dutiro in Great Britain among others, including Cosmas Magaya, Tute Chigamba, Patience Munjeri, and Musekiwa Chingodza, who are all based in Zimbabwe but teach and perform in the United States regularly. There are hundreds of *mbira dzavadzimu* recordings now available, but only two of the *mbira dzaVaNdau*.<sup>42</sup> *Mbira dzavadzimu* performers can give lessons to foreigners abroad and tourists in Zimbabwe. Instrument makers sell their mbiras for up to \$300 to American players and others around the world. As for the silent *mbira dzaVaNdau*, there is no comparable market. I take note of the fact that the only serious performer I met under the age of 60, Temba Khumbula, began performing because he and his father Zivanai could survive selling instruments to tourists at the

<sup>41</sup> Those that include at least brief discussion of the mbira include, the "Africa" chapter in *Worlds of Music* by David Locke; *World Music* by Terry E. Miller and Andrew Shariari; *World Music* by Michael B. Bakan; the "Music in Sub-Saharan Africa" chapter in *Excursions in World Music* by Thomas Turino; *Exploring the World of Music* by Dorothea E. Hast, et al; and *Music of the Peoples of The World* by William Alves. Those that did not include attention to the mbira included *Music of Many Cultures* by Elizabeth May; *Soundscapes* by Kay Kaufman Shelemay; and *Pieces of the Musical World* edited by Rachel Harris and Rowan Pease.

<sup>42</sup> While there are only two commercial recordings available, the International Library of African Music (ILAM) has made all of the referenced recordings from Hugh Tracey available for sale on their website at <http://www.ru.ac.za/ilam/>. 30-second sample are available for free. One of the two commercially available recordings with mbira dzaVaNdau music, "Other Musics from Zimbabwe," is actually a re-release of many of these old Hugh Tracey recordings (Tracey 2000). Joel Lavolette's recording "Mbira dzaVaNdau: From Chimanimani to Birchenough Bridge" is the only other commercially available recording of mbira dzaVaNdau (2003). Zivanai Khumbula, who I mention above, can be heard on that recording with his son Temba.

Birchenough Bridge market until the government destroyed his stall during Operation Murambatsvina in 2004. He charged \$5.

### The role of ethnomusicology

Kay Shelemay suggests that, "Preservation is... part of an implicit contract between ethnomusicologists and the tradition's native carriers" (1997: 198). In apparent agreement, Davison Masiza continues to hope that he can make money selling his music through me in the United States. Tute Chigamba expressed understanding that the Americans he teaches can eventually teach his descendants once Zimbabweans have all forgotten how to play. Much as Ellen Koskoff suggests that, "Our main responsibility as teachers is ... to pass on our canon and our own canon's value *without canonizing*" (1999: 558), Bruno Nettl suggests that, "Ethnomusicology can seem tailor-made to represent the anticanonic side; it ought to be, one may think, the profession of canon-busters" (2010: 197), a suggestion that seems at odds with the ethnomusicology of Zimbabwe. Canon-building may be an inevitable part of putting ethnomusicology within the orthodoxy of higher education, but there is a certain irony in the fact that world music instructors rely on a canon that ethnomusicologists themselves have built rather than busted. This emerging canon is a noticeable consequence of our collective ethnomusicological inquiry. Now, thanks to nationalism, music commodification, and ethnomusicological attention, the *mbira dzavadzimu* is much more widespread, common, and dynamic in daily Zimbabwean musical life than is the *mbira dzaVaNdau*, *matepe*, or *njari*.

It remains to be seen how I might bust up ethnomusicology's canon or live up to my contract of preserving my teachers' musics, but I do carry the burden of acknowledging the tiny role I play in their respective fates with every class I teach and presentation I give. I teach the *mbira dzavadzimu* in my own classes and bring *mbira dzavadzimu* performers from Zimbabwe to campus whenever possible to serve my own pedagogical interests. In a small way, this also helps shape musical life in Zimbabwe. I can't help but wonder if Kamba Simango had come to the US now, instead of 1914, playing his *mbira dzaVaNdau*, how the response would be different. As it is, the one Ndau student I have had in my class had never even seen one. Instead, he learned to play the *mbira dzavadzimu* from his American professor, me.

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