

## ***Kashaura karimba*” Innovation and Hybridization of Mbira Instrument in Zimbabwe: The Birth of Karimbashauro**

**Matiure P.**

Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Music and Musicology  
Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe

### **Abstract**

*Technological development in the construction of musical instruments has enabled mbira makers to produce various hybrids of mbira by adding keys to indigenous mbiras. The aim was to enrich the sonic efficacy of the instruments. Consequently this led to the birth of several types of mbiras like hera, munyonga, mbira dzavadzimu, njari, karimba, ndimba, dzvandau, matepe common in Zimbabwe today. Although these mbiras differ in a number of ways, they all retain the core keys of karimba. As a mbira player by inheritance, the writer posits that any additional key/s to a mbira can make the instrument produce new sonority different from the former and this gives birth to a new hybrid. Several mbira researchers like Andrew Tracey concur that the need for the mbira player to improve the resultant sound of his/ her mbira together with technological advancement are the driving forces behind innovation of mbira hybrids. The writer has been playing and teaching kwanongoma karimba commonly known as nyunganyunga since 2005 and discovered that the instrument could not produce lead line, kushaura which is a common feature in the Shona mbira music. For instance when playing pieces like nhemamusasa and taireva on Kwanongoma karimba one would notice that the top register is limited such that it is impossible to play the traditional descending lead melody. It is against this background that the writer prompted to improve on the existing karimba to enable the instrument to play the lead in a more surrogative manner hence the innovation of karimbashauro. This paper will trace the evolution of karimbashauro from kwanongoma karimba and unpack the temperament of the new innovation by employing a comparative analysis approach. The bulk of the data informing this paper is drawn from a field study carried in Hwedza District, Kwanongoma in Bulawayo and Mbira Centre in Harare. An ethnographic paradigm was adopted in which participant observation and face-to-face interviews were used to solicit data about mbira in general and kwanongoma karimba in particular.*

**Key words:** *Karimba, nyunganyunga, mbira, innovation, hybrid, Kwanongoma*

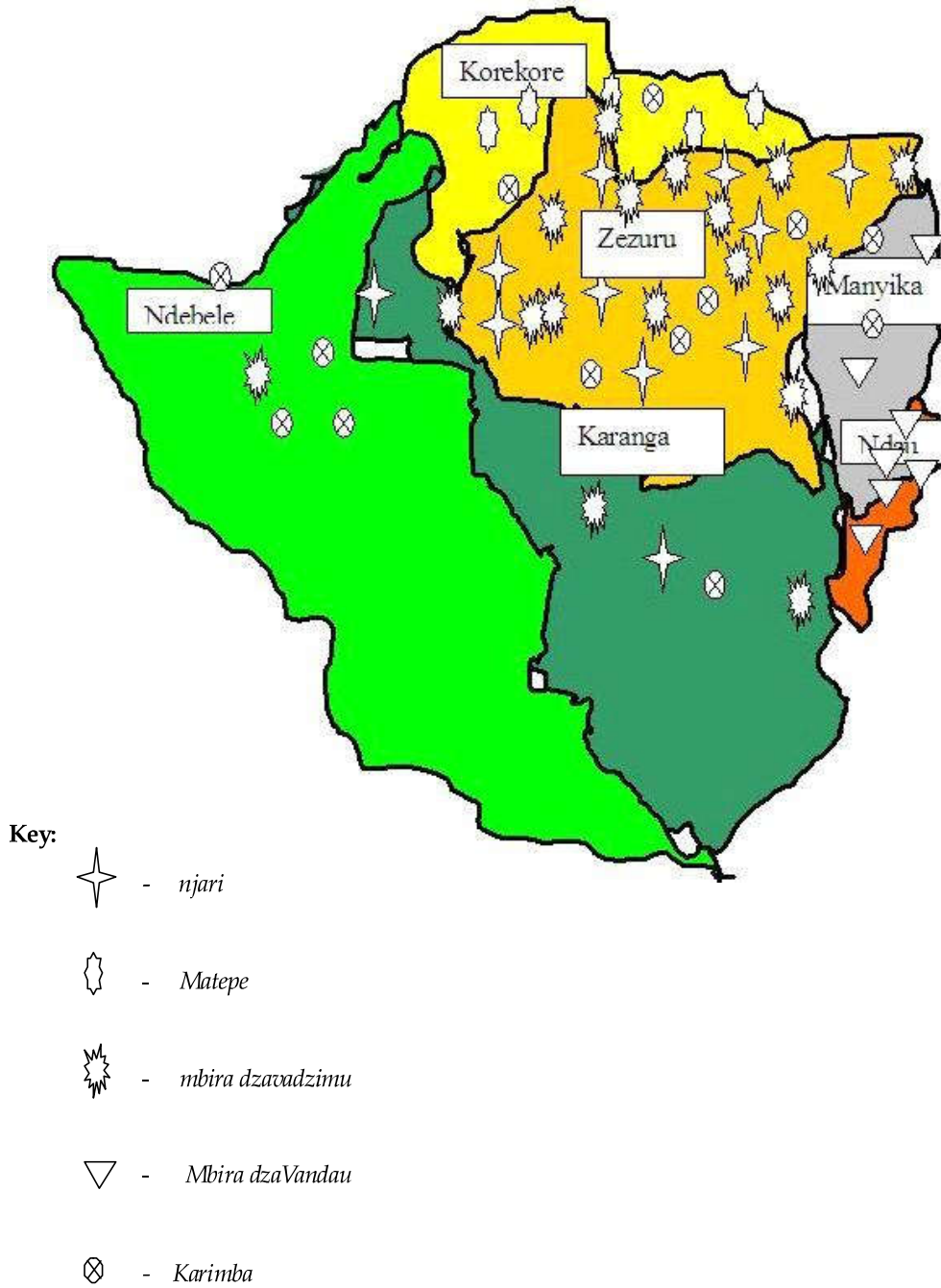
### **Origin and distribution of mbira instruments in Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe enjoys among other things the prestige of possessing a musical heritage which very few countries of the world possess. This musical heritage is in form of over fifty different dance styles which include *dinhe, mbende, shangara, anabiza, izangoma, ngoma butibe of the Tonga, tsotsa, jukwa, dandanda, chinyamumbera, jiti,*

*muteveteve, gomani, gure, mhande, zhana*, and many others. The name Zimbabwe was derived from the country's shrine called Dzimbahwe<sup>1</sup>, which means houses made from stones. This shrine is one of the wonders of the world found in the area now called Masvingo. It is believed that the "Shona"<sup>2</sup> inhabited this shrine and areas around it as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Berliner 1993:18). They then broke into sub-dialects which are Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika, Kalanga, Korekore and Ndau. These sub-ethnic groups settled in different parts of Zimbabwe as shown in map 1 below.

The Shona people's social cosmos is characterized by the use of their traditional music whose efficacy is embedded in its ability to solve their social, spiritual, political and economic problems. The Shona use music to dialogue with their ancestral spirits during *mapira*<sup>3</sup> ceremonies in which they forward their problems to God, Mwari via their ancestors, *kupira*. (Berliner 1981:23). For them music is not for entertainment but is used for solving economic, political, spiritual and social problems. They use instruments like the traditional drum, *ngoma* and *mbira* to connect the living and the spiritual world during sacred ceremonies called *mapira*. (Refer to my Ethnographic film accompanying my unpublished Master thesis, 2009). The *mbiras* commonly used for spiritual purposes are *njari*, *dzavadzimu*, *matepe (hera)* and *karimba*. The distribution of the *mbiras* in Zimbabwe is shown in the map 1 below. They also play Kwanengoma *karimba* also known as *nyunganyunga*. This is a secular *mbira* commonly taught and played in schools and colleges (Tracey in P Matiure 2009). In this article I will use the term *karimba* as it links well with the name of the *mbira* under discussion, *karimbashauro*.

The *mbira* family in Zimbabwe almost disappeared during the colonial period. The instrument was taken to be unholy by white settlers whose sole aim was to weaken the Shona and destroy their heritage and sovereignty so as to pave way for colonization. This was upon the realization that the instrument has the power to call the ancestors who then helped the Shona to resist western pressure. The instrument regained its status soon after independence and several groups started playing the *mbira* in *mapira* as well as fusing it with western instruments. This saw the "mediaization" of *mbira* music in Zimbabwean radios. A further development was that the instrument was introduced in colleges like College of Music, Kwanongoma and several teachers' colleges and universities. During the same period the instrument was introduced abroad where it gained popularity. Several scholars began to study and analyze the *mbiras* and this led to innovations on the structure and keys of the instrument, a practice that has in operation since the creation of the instrument. It is against this background that the writer, through research and performance came up with an idea of improving the ability for *karimba* to produce the lead line, *kushaura* which he coined the name *karimbashauro*.



*Map 1. Distribution of mbiras in Zimbabwe.*

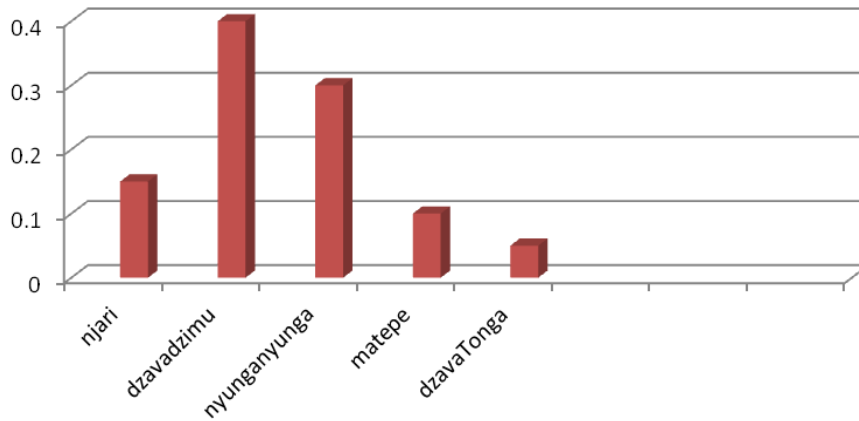


Figure 1 Graph on distribution of mbiras in Zimbabwe

#### The structure of *mbira*.

A *mbira* instrument comprise of a wooden board with an aggregate of metal keys laid on it. The board is normally made out of special wood called *mufenje* or *mubvamaropa* also called *mukwirambira* whose log is shown below. The keys are forged from any high carbon iron wire which has high tension.



Figure2. *Mubvamaropa* wood before developed into a *gwariva*



Every *mbira* has four basic parts which are soundboard also called *gwariva*, keys or *mbira*, cross bar or *mutanda*, bridge, *danhiko* and resonator or *deze*.

### **Playing technique.**

The *mbira* is played by plucking the keys using thumbs and index fingers. The technique involves chordal and splitting which produce a web of sounds that criss-cross as well as push and pull. The resultant sound produces what Berliner (1993) calls inherent sounds. That is sounds that are produced as a result of clashes of sounds of different keys. The music can be described as being, interwoven, intertwined, highly polyphonic and highly polyrhythmic. The sound is rich in many voices which makes the instrument unique in its own right.

### **The history of Kwanongoma *karimba***

The birth of Kwanongoma *karimba* commonly known as *nyunganyunga* came as a result of its introduction at Kwanongoma College in Bulawayo where Jege Tapera was invited to teach *karimba mbira* which he brought from Mozambique. This development is attributed to technological development which enabled the college to have a well equipped workshop in which several innovations were made not only on *mbira* but on several indigenous instruments. Kwanongoma *karimba's* innovation came as a result of combined efforts by Jege Tapera, Hugh Tracey, Andrew Tracey, and Eliot Ndlovu. The team added seven keys to the original eight key *karimba* to produce fifteen key instruments. In other words the keys were added to the core *karimba* keys which are common in any type of *mbira* in Africa as previously alluded to. In order to make the instrument more audible, the college introduced a wooden resonator in which the *mbira* was permanently fixed with screws. This is in line with Malinowski 1945's theory of diffusion which postulates that music of a culture can be diffused with elements of another culture. In this case the changes on the instrument employed were influenced by the west. These are the tuning system, use of wooden resonator instead of gourd, use of bottle tops to replace the sea shells and even the use of chain guides to hold the cross bar instead of wire. The new hybrid produced at Kwanongoma can be in F or in F sharp. The instrument is given recognition worldwide and was introduced in America by Dummy Maraire, a product of Kwanongoma who is also responsible for coining the name *nyunganyunga* for the same instruments. Below is the layout of keys of the instrument as they look right now.



Figure 4 Layout of notes on karimba

Note that the top manual has notes; E D C F' C D E with C, D, and E duplicated to allow a quick repetition of the same note, *hwindimbi*. The bottom manual has notes A G F A, F, C, D, E,. The notes added onto the original *karimba*, widened its sound range hence enabling the players to add more flavour to the resultant sound. The modes<sup>1</sup> that are commonly played on this *mbira* are *kukaiwa*, *chemutengure*, *nhemamusasa*, *bungautete* and *chembere dzemusango*. The sound range is from F, to F' and there is no B Flat.

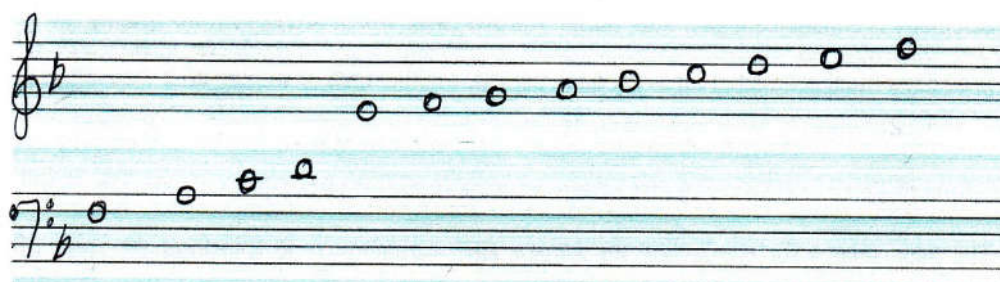


Figure 5 Range of notes of karimba/nyunganyunga

### What led to the birth of *karimbashauro*

As a Zezuru by descent the writer grew up in a village where *mbira* music was the heart of all the cosmological activities. Like any other Shona dialect the Zezuru believe that there is a very strong relationship between the living the dead, ancestors

or *vadzimu* to such an extent that the living can communicate with the ancestors through spirit mediums, *masvikiro* who get possessed by the spirits of the ancestors during a *bira* ceremony. This is in line with Placide Tempels' 1959 theory of cosmology which emphasizes the strong relationship that exists between the progenitor (the spiritual force) and the progeny (the living force). Though disapproved by many scholars but the researcher finds it useful in this study. It is only after the spirits have been evoked by the meditative and soothing music of *mbira* that communication between the living and the dead can take place. In this case the *mbira* can be *dzavadzimu*, *matepe* or *njari*. For the Shona both the *mbira* and the songs belong to the ancestors. The writer performed in *mapira* ceremonies as a *mbira dzavadzimu* player since the age of twelve. His experiences juxtaposed with the findings of his 2008 unpublished thesis on the relationship between *mbira dzavadzimu* modes and Zezuru spirit possession drew me closer to the intricacy and efficacy of not only *mbira dzavadzimu*, but also Kwanongoma *karimba*.

The writer was introduced to Kwanongoma *karimba* by S Matiure who was my lecture at the University of Zimbabwe in 2004. From that time the writer played and studied the instrument closely and enjoyed the high and clear voice of the Kwanongoma *karimba* and its flexibility, softness and ability to articulate notes clearly in both horizontal and vertical form. For him it is more harmonic than *dzavadzimu*. However he had a problem with Kwanongoma *karimba's* inability in producing a surrogate lead line, *kushauro*. In an attempt to solve this problem the writer innovated *nyunganhare* in 2006 which only proved to be good at fusing *nhare* and *karimba* but still did not please him. He was then forced to reconsider the sound range of *karimba* which is F, to F'. That is two octaves apart. The note B was added to the middle register which is missing in Kwanongoma *karimba* in F major and G' A' B' C' in the top register to extend the scale of C major up to C''. These five notes created wonders. It is now possible to surrogate and produce a descending lead line common in songs like *karigamombe*, *nhemamusasa*, *taireva*, *chipembere* and *nyamaropa*. Without these notes it has been impossible to produce this common descending melody which characterises the lead line not only in *mbira* music but in most of the Shona traditional songs which employs yodelling, *huro*. Because of this breakthrough on *karimba* which came after six years of several attempts, I decided to coin the *mbira* the name *karimbashauro*<sup>1</sup>. The name bears both its original name and its role in an ensemble, *mhuri*.

### Lay out of notes on *karimbashauro*

The notes on the new hybrid are such that they retain all the notes of *karimba* but accommodate a B and this extends the scale of C up to C''. In other words the number of keys are now 17 and the range is from F, to C'' instead of F, to F'. This development allows the instrument to produce higher notes thereby giving the

player chances to surrogate any song played on any other *mbira*. Figure below shows the range of *karimbashauro* from highest to lowest note.

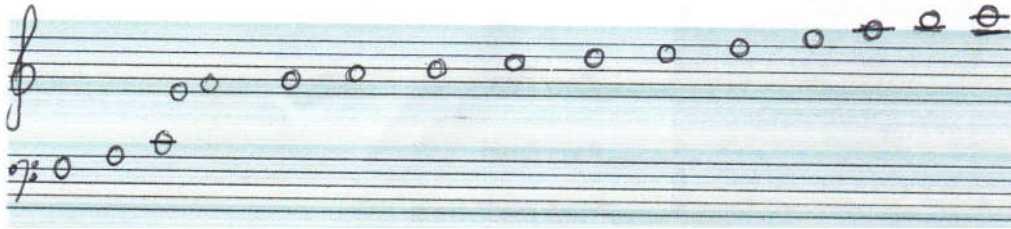


Fig 6 Range of notes on *karimbashauro*

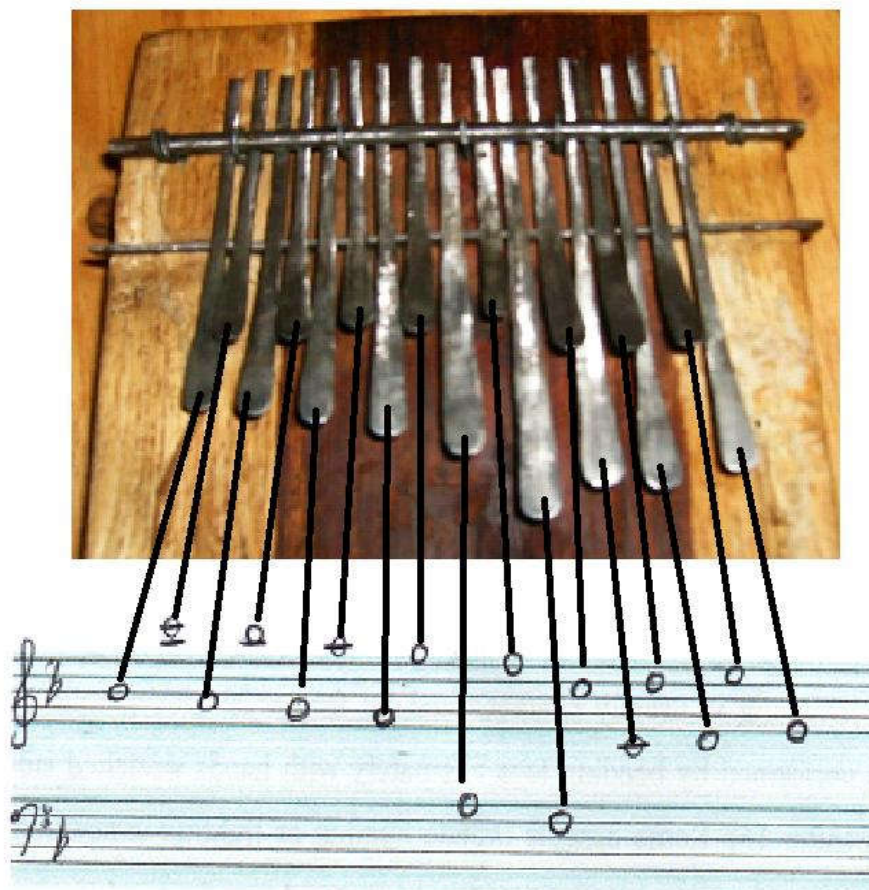


Figure 7 *Karimbashauro* and layout of keys

Note that the top manual is now having the following notes from left to right; C' B' A' G' F' C D E different from the usual *karimba* which are E D C F' C D E. The bottom notes are B<sup>1</sup> A

G F A F C D E. Also note that only one note, B was added on the bottom.

### A comparative analysis of songs

Since the innovation of Kwanongoma *karimba mbira* players and researchers have managed to improvise on the instrument to play traditional sacred *mbira* pieces that are usually performed on *mbira dzavadzimu*, *njari* or *matepe*. The first to be played on Kwanongoma *karimba* was *nhemamusasa*. Although there are different variations they all performed the song in the key of C major with the first chord having C and G as part of the tonic chord of C major which is CEG. The piece sounded well with the general flow sounding *nhememusasa* mode. The writer rearranged the following songs borrowed form *mbira dzavadzimu* in 2004; *nehondo*, *nyamaropa*, *chipembere*, *taireva* and *dande*. However the pieces played in C major could only sound F as the highest note making it impossible to surrogate the lead, *kushura* which depicts the authentic

Shona traditional *mbira* songs. In other words most of the songs not only in *mbira* but even those accompanied by traditional drums have a communing descending lead that follow d' t l s f m r d in tonic solfa or as follows in staff notation.

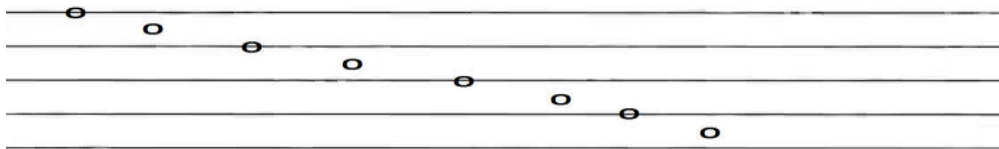


Fig 8. Descending lead notes

This is also common even in ululation and several songs. The innovation of *karimbashauro* made it possible to produce this descending lead line after adding the keys G, A, B, and C above the usual F on *karimba*. This made it possible for the instrument to surrogate several songs like *taireva*, *nhemamusasa*, *nyamaropa*, *nehondo*, and *chipembere*. Below is the song *nhemamusasa* and *taireva* as they would sounds on *karimba* and on *karimbashauro*. Note the difference in range of notes of the upper register which surrogates the descending lead, *kushaura*.

---

*mbira* songs do not make use of B flat but B instead.



Song: *Nhemamusasa*Song: *Taireva*

Fig 9 Transcription of *nhemamusasa* and *taireva* on *karimba* and *karimbashauro*

Note that open circles represent the top right notes of *karimba* and the circled *x*s represents the top left notes of *karimbashauro* (the hybrid in question), the black dots represents the bottom right notes and the open circles with a loop represents the bottom left notes. The innovation of *karimbashauro* was not meant to discard *karimba* but to augment and improve on the resultant timbre. When performing as an ensemble the two can be played together and the result sounds rich and more traditional. The author demonstrated the use of the two in Harare where the presentation was covered by Terence Mapurisana and was broadcasted over Zimbabwe's Television station.

It is the projected aim of the author to popularise not only *karimba*, but even *mbira*



*dzavadzimu* by introducing the *mbira* family in schools on a massive campaign. The first phase which has kicked off already is the introduction of an annual *mbira* conference which becomes a hive of activities where performance, dialogue, presentation of papers and innovations as well as discussion on cultural policy issues will be conducted. In some sense this is an effective way of preserving our *mbira* cultural heritage through what calls collaborative archiving system. This is in line with Baumann (1991) who posits that any kind of cultural music possesses dignity and value that is to be respected and preserved. He goes on to say that the questions of what music should be and with which programs and by which means its variety should be preserved and promoted are linked to operational principles of cultural policy.

## Conclusion

Innovation and hybridization of *mbira* instrument has been in progress since the creation of the mother *mbira*, *karimba*. It is highly commendable that ethnomusicologists and ethnographers are taking chance to lift the field of *mbira* music *mbira* construction and playing to greater height Hats off for the good works of *mbira* researchers like Andrew Tracey whom I had a chance to interact with in August 2008 at Grahams town and Paul Berliner who started the journey of the scholarly research on *mbira* and its music in Zimbabwe.

To date we have a good reliable source of not only knowledge about *mbira* but also an archive of the instruments themselves which are housed at the music archive of The International library of African Music (ILAM) in South Africa. Not forgetting the works of our fellow Zimbabwean *mbira* player who worked hard to preserve our heritage as well putting Zimbabwe on the map by performing and teaching not only locally but also internationally. Special mention goes to D Maraire, his son Chiwoniso, S Matiure, Ambuya Stella Chiweshe, T Mapfumo, the late E Mujuru, S Mujuru, Mbira DzeNharira group, Sekuru Mashoko, Sekuru Gora, Tute Chigamba, Cosmas Magaya and many others for the technological development as well as the desire to improve on the resultant sound of the instrument. Further studies on the instrument by the author, based on an emic perspective may one day give birth to a totally unique creation of a *mbira* which from an epistemological premises will contribute significantly to our indigenous knowledge system about *mbira* as well as fitting perfectly well in this world of ever changing technology.

## References

- Baumann, M. P. (1991). "Music in the Dialogue of Cultures: Traditional Music and Cultural Policy." *Notes* 49(1):602-603.
- Berliner, P. 1993 (3<sup>rd</sup> edition). *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona people of Zimbabwe*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Malinowski, B. (1945). *The dynamics of culture change: An inquiry into race relations in Africa*. London: Oxford University.
- Maraire, D. (1984). "Mbira and its Function." *Insight* No.1 pp 7-9.
- Matiure, P. 2009. "Learning how to play *Karimba/Nyunganyunga* the easy way". *The Talking Drum*. 2008. No.30.pp 15-19.
- Matiure, P. (2009). *The Relationship between mbira dzavadzimu modes and Zezuru spirit possession*. Masters Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal.
- Temples, P. (1959). *Bantu Philosophy*. Paris: Presence Africane.
- Tracey, A. (1963). "Three tunes for 'Mbira dzavadzimu'." *African Music*. 3(2):23-26.
- Tracey, A. (1969). "The tuning of *mbira* reeds." *African Music*. 4(3):96-100.
- Tracey, A. (1972). "The Original African Mbira?" *African Music*. 5(2):85-104.
- Tracey, H. 1932. "The Mbira Class of African Instruments in Rhodesia." *African Music* 4:3 pp 78-95.
- Tracey, H.(1935). "Tuning of Musical Instruments." *Nada* (Bulawayo), 13:35-44.
- Tracey, H. (1958). "Towards an Assessment of African Scales" *African Music*. 2(1):15-20
- Rutsate, J. (2007). *Performance of mhande song-dance: A contextualized and Comparative Analysis*. Master's Thesis, Rhodes University.

**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The present name of Dzimbambwe is Great Zimbabwe which is found in Masvingo.

<sup>2</sup>Note that by then the people were not yet called the Shona. The word Shona was coined by Doke when amalgamated the different dialects of Zimbabwe for educational purposes.

<sup>3</sup>Mapira is the plural of bira which is an all-night ceremony in which the Shona perform music to evoke spirits in spirit mediums.

<sup>4</sup>A mode in this case means a style of playing which is flexible enough to create many songs.

<sup>5</sup>Karimbashauro is a name formed from the word karimba and shauro a noun from the word kushaura which means to lead.

<sup>6</sup>Note that I opted for B instead of B flat which is supposed to be part of the scale of F major because most of our mbira songs do not make use of B flat but B instead.

## We are scientists too: Mbira dzeNharira's new innovations on the instrument *mbira dzavadzimu* and its music

Chipendo C.

Department of Music and Musicology  
Midlands State University  
Gweru, Zimbabwe

### Abstract

*This paper focuses on Mbira dzeNharira ensemble's new innovations on the instrument mbira dzavadzimu and its music. It (the paper) is based on the results of my Doctoral thesis entitled, "Continuity and Change in Mbira dzavadzimu music and performance practice in Zimbabwe". The study was in a qualitative form superimposed on case studies. Interviews and participant observations were the main instruments for collecting data. This paper reveals that Tendai Gahamadze and his Mbira dzeNharira ensemble have brought new innovations on the instrument mbira dzavadzimu. Instead of playing two mbiras or more in call (kushaura) and response (kubumira) as was/is the norm in many traditional performances, the ensemble now plays a set of four mbiras which they named, nheketo, dongonda, duriro and nhova pasi. Mbira dzeNharira's singing is also unique as in most cases is harmonised and is sung in several voices as opposed to the traditional two of kushaura and mahon'era (low range singing style synonymous with the men's voice) blended with kudeketera (poetic lines that accompany mbira pieces). The mbira ensemble under review, led by Tendai Gahamadze has also devised a new system of amplifying the mbira instrument. They now use guitar pick up microphones attached to the instrument instead of using the traditional deze (gourd resonator).*

**Key words:** Mbira dze Nharira, Mbira dzevadzimu, instrument, new innovations, music

### Introduction

The famous Zimbabwean instrument *mbira dzaVadzimu* and its music have always been a central symbol of the Zimbabwean culture and played a crucial role in the religious activities of the indigenous people of that country. However, due to globalisation and the coming of modern technology, the instrument under review has undergone some modifications. This paper therefore focuses on the innovations and modifications (on the instrument *mbira*) done by Tendai Gahamadze and Mbira dzeNharira ensemble. It, (the paper) will be divided into three sections. The first section gives a brief background of the instrument *mbira dzaVadzimu* and its music. The second part will give a brief background of Tendai Gahamadze and his group, Mbira dzeNharira. The last section will discuss the latter's new innovations and modifications on the instrument *mbira*; that is the amplification system, the new four (4) *mbira* arrangement with voice accompaniment.

### Description of the *mbira*

The word *mbira* generally refers to a family of instruments found in Zimbabwe. It is made up of metal keys and a flat wooden *gwariwa* (soundboard) on which the keys are affixed. It also refers to the music and dance that accompanies it and the keys on the instrument.



Plate 1

by author)

The *gwariwa* (sound board) has a small finger hole in the lower part of the instrument on the extreme bottom right hand side. *Deze* (gourd resonator) is usually used for amplifying the sound.



Plate 2

author)

### Mbira Musical style

Famous traditional *mbira* compositions were based on the famous traditional *mbira* tunes. *Mbira* players often rearrange the tunes to come up with different songs depending on the preferences of the performer. In many instances, *mbira* players would play the same traditional tune but change the text to make the song new. For example, from the same *chemutengure* tune, one could play *Jari Mukaranga*, *Zvandairwara pano ndaiona ani*, *Tsvimborume dzinobayana* among others. Berliner (1993:78) mentions that, as with all the *mbira* pieces, there are starting points for a tune like *Nhemamusasa*. The tune can take an entirely different sound depending on the harmonic cycle the player may choose to start from. Improvisation, creativity and the environmental setting helped differentiate the songs.

On a different note, Brusila (2001:36) and Williams (2001: 39) concur that *mbira* music performed in the traditional context was primarily based on an improvisational traditional style. The cyclic melodic and harmonic patterns were a common feature. According to Williams (1997:39), the Shona *mbira* music was built on a melodic and harmonic structure that is cyclic in nature. In that regard, the music had no specific beginning or ending. The melody and the patterns of the music were repeated over and over again. But every time the patterns were repeated, improvisations were carried out on them. This made the music to sound new every time it was performed. In addition, each *mbira* player played the same piece differently all the time. According to Berliner (1978), *mbira* music produced polyphonic, interlocking and Inherent rhythms.<sup>1</sup>

...Participants usually perform two contrasting patterns. As they interlock, they create a number of resultant phrases with different relationships to the *mbira* piece: when pattern B joins pattern A, it articulates a triple subdivision of the 1<sup>st</sup> pattern and produces a resultant part which repeats 4 times during every phrase of the *mbira* piece: when pattern C combines with pattern A, together they create a polyrhythmic of two against three (Berliner 1978:50).

Contributing to the same debate, Grupe (1998) mentions that interlocking rhythms could also be as a result of the *kushaura*, mainly consisting of a duplication of *kutsinhira* one pulse later in what he called *kupesansa* (echo interlocking). On the same note, Berliner (1978) mentions that inherent rhythms are the product of psycho-acoustic fact that the ear does not perceive a series of tones as isolated pitches but as a gestalt.



Furthermore, Berliner (1993:73) states that the instrument played two basic patterns known as *kushaura* (lead) and *kutsinhira/kubvumira* (response). He further explains that *kushaura* was the part that lead a performance and gave the song identification while *kutsinhira* responded by serving as an answering phrase to the lead part. In agreement, Brusila (2001:36) states that the *kushaura* (lead) contained much of the melodic essence of the piece. The *kutsinhira* was usually staggered one pulse behind the *kushaura* and provided an interlocking and contrasting rhythmic part. Furthermore, Berliner (1978:81) mentions that *kushaura* (to lead) could be in two parts, *kushaura kwepamusoro* (upper lead) and *kushaura kwepasi* (lower lead). He further states that the *kushaura* (to lead) parts utilized all the three registers, (L, B and R) on the *mbira* keyboard. This enriches the texture of *mbira* by giving it the polyrhythmic aspects typical of *mbira* music. On listening to the sound, one would mistakenly view it as that of a large orchestra yet it was the sound of one or two *mbira* only. The latter is typical of the Music of Mbira dzeNharira, for the combination of their new set of 4 *mbiras*; the *nheketo*, *duriro*, *dongonda* and *nhovapasi* (to be discussed later) made it sound like a big orchestra.

During a performance, it was a common standard to play two *mbira* instruments, resonated by a *deze* (gourd/calabash) and a *hosho* (rattle). But due to the advent of modern technology, new innovations have come up. Over the years, we have seen the modification of the *mbira* instrument in response to the modern technological advancement. But these innovations were grounded on the traditional aspects of *mbira* music discussed above. This is evidenced in Mbira dzeNharira's new innovations as will be discussed later. Before discussing the innovations of the group under review, it is important to understand their historical background.

### **Mbira DzeNharira , a historical perspective**

The Mbira dzeNharira ensemble was founded in 1987, with only three members at that time, Tendayi Gahamadze, David Mutizwa and Magwimbe Mlambo. David Mutizwa used to play the shakers with Tendayi Gahamadze and Magwimbe Mlambo as the *mbira* players. Five years later, in 1992, Wilfed Mafrica, better known as Nyamasvisva, Edward Mutede, popularly known as Mukanya as well as Charles Masona Gwenzi also joined the group. However, most of the above players have since left the group to lead their own *mbira* ensembles.

### **Current group**

The current Mbira dzeNharira ensemble is made up of Chaka Chakandika who plays *karimba* (modified with 23 keys), Clemence Rice who plays *nhovapasi* (bass)-

with 21 keys, Takawira Devera on the *nheketo* (a high pitched *mbira*), Tadias Gushure on the *duriro* (a *mbira* which maintains a constant rhythm) and Tendai Gahamadze/ Guzha who plays the *dongonda* (the baritone *mbira*).

The formation of the ensemble was the brain child of Tendayi Gahamadze (in picture below).



Plate 3. Tendayi Gahamadze (Picture by author)

He was born on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July in 1959 in Musengezi, a farming area designated for the black people during the colonial era. He grew up in that area and did his primary education at Mukwasha Primary School. He later went to Moleli High School where he completed his 'O' level.

He was awarded a scholarship to study pure maths, applied maths and physics at North Wale University from 1979 to 1981. After completion of his studies, he then returned home. He was awarded another scholarship to study metallurgy in Germany in 1982. He also studied electrical engineering at Krefeld University. From there, he went to the Duisburg University to study metallurgy which he completed in 1986 before coming back to Zimbabwe.

### **Tendayi's inspiration**

During the time Tendayi was studying abroad, students, both foreign and local would be asked to showcase various cultural activities from their own countries.

Those from Zimbabwe (including Tendayi Gahamadze) had nothing in common to showcase even though they knew that they had the *mbira*. One Zimbabwean student had carried the instrument with him just to show friends that there was *mbira* in Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, he could not play it.

We were called for a seminar where we were supposed to perform music from our own countries. We were about 12 guys from Zimbabwe. When it was our turn to showcase music from our own country, (Zimbabwe) we were found wanting. We had no common thing to showcase, so we decided to sing *Ishe Komborera Africa*. This was very embarrassing to us. Every student except us Zimbabweans had performed music from his/her own country. Students from Congo for example, had performed their own rumba music. We found ourselves nowhere, without any identity. That's when I started thinking seriously about *mbira*, about self identity (Tendayi Gahamadze).

On the same note, Tendayi Gahamadze had taken guitar lessons when he was in United Kingdom, but he could not showcase the guitar pieces he had learnt because they were not part of his cultural activities.

When Tendayi left Germany, he had already made up his mind that he would focus on *mbira* music when he returns home. He then bought guitar pick up microphones because he already had an idea of how to transform the *mbira* to emulate the electric guitar. Upon setting his foot in Zimbabwe, Tendayi started working on his new area of interest, the *mbira*.

When I heard the sound of *mbira* back home, I likened it to my experience of what I had heard on the guitar. I imagined how the *mbira* would sound if tuned like a guitar. I became eager to learn how to tune *mbira*. This I did. I managed to tune the *mbira* before I could play even the simplest piece. *Mbira* players would bring their *mbira* to me for tuning even though I could not play the instrument (Tendayi Gahamadze).

As Tendayi walked, worked or did other activities, he would hear *mbira* sounds in his head. He would then accompany the sounds with some singing of his own words. This made it easy for him to learn how to play *mbira dzavadzimu*. After buying a *mbira (dzavadzimu)* of his own, Magwimbe Mlambo, a child of *ambuya* (grandmother) Chivero invited Tendayi to play together with him. Magwimbe would play and he (Tendayi) would follow. They played the instrument together for sometime. Within a short period of perhaps one month, they were performing at

*mapiras* (all night ritual ceremonies) for no payment, but just for the love of the music. At that time Wilfred MaAfrica, Edward Mutede, Charles Masona, Chrispen Munjongondi and precious Mupangavanhu (*hosho*) came along. They then constructed their own *mbiras*, tuning them from the one they already had bought. The above-mentioned *mbira* players started playing together as Mbira dzeNharira in 1991.

### **Mbira dzeNharira's innovations**

As Tendayi Gahamadze and Mbira dzeNharira ventured into *mbira* performance, they realised that their music was not as popular in comparison to that played on guitars. According to Tendayi Gahamadze, many Zimbabwean people favoured the latter possibly because of the way the lead, rhythm and bass guitars blended when performed together. According to Mbira dzeNharira, there was therefore a need to revisit *mbira* music in an effort to make it more appealing to the majority of the Zimbabweans.

Can't we reorganise mbira music? Can we blend it in the same way as guitars in popular music?" If After making the six string guitar, people managed to research and came up with the bass guitar, and even with a 12 string guitar, why don't we do the same with the mbira? (Tendayi Gahamadze).

So he (Tendayi Gahamadze) carried out his own research and realised that the sounds of a 12 string guitar can be found on the *njari* or the *dongonda mbira*. Therefore, making a *mbira* instrument that incorporated keys from various *mbira* types (with high or low keys like *njari* could make the sound richer and possibly make the instrument popular too. To make the instrument popular meant that Tendayi had to find out how he would include the three different sound registers; *yepamusoro* (high pitch), *yepakati* (middle pitch) or *yepasi* (low pitch) bass in the two modes and play them. According to Tendayi, the inclusion of the three registers was not a difficult task because they had to use what was already available. The bass, the lead and the rhythm parts had always been there on the *mbira* although the parts did not have dedicated distinct performers. Tendayi says,

The bass has ever been there on the mbira. You could hear on the mbira some playing a mbira *makonde* (a lower tune), *vamwe vane* (some playing) *kanyuchi*, (higher pitch), *vamwe vachinzi vane dzepakati*. (Some said to be playing middle pitches).

Tendayi mentions that it was not difficult to come up with the innovation under review

...we took the lower, the middle and the top Pitches of mbira and re-organised them into individual instruments. We had to take the idea of *kanyuchi* (high pitch) and designed our own. Also, one could play the mode *nhemamusasa* and *bangiza* at the same time. That made the song automatically new (Tendayi Gahamadze).

The combination of high, middle and bass pitch registers when played together added more melodic lines to the mbira music, thus making the texture richer. The (combinations of pitches) interlocked in such a way that they filled all the gaps in the music.

### The mbira set of four

The above-referred ideas culminated into one of Tendai Gahamadze and Mbira dzeNharira's greatest innovations, 'the unique set of four'. Instead of performing the traditional two *mbiras*, one for *kushaura* (lead) and the other for *kutsinhira* (response), the ensemble has introduced two more *mbiras*. They (Mbira dzeNharira) now play a set of four which they named, *nheketo* (plate 4), *dongonda* (Plate 5), *duriro* (plate 6) and *nhova pasi* (plate 7) below:



Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6



Plate 7

*Pictures of plates 4 to 7 were adapted from the album Fare Fare Tindike pamphlet, with permission from Tendayi Gahamadze.*

According to Tendai Gahamadze, *nheketo* is the lead *mbira*. It leads all *mbira* compositions. The other three come in as accompaniment. The other *mbira* is called *dongonda* in Shona. This has more of the baritone sound. It also has a relationship with some keys of the *njari dzemaKorekore* of the Dande region. The *dongonda mbira* has the capacity to blend with all other *mbira* instruments, *nheketo*, *duriro* and *nhova pasi*. The *dongoda* has a queer contour of keys, the top left keys have their equivalence on the top right. This enriches the technique of *hwindimbi*, repeated notes. The other *mbira* is called *duriro*. It is more of a rhythm *mbira* and has about twenty three keys as well. The latter combines well with the bass *mbira* called *nhovapasi*. *Nhovapasi* is a bass *mbira* which covers the low sound spectrum of the *mbira* genre. All the notes on this one are transposed an octave above *duriro* and *nheketo* is also transposed an octave higher than *duriro*. From the above innovation, Tendai Gahamadze extended the manuals on *mbira dzavadzimu* so that the *nhetete* gave birth to *nheketo*, top left notes gave birth to *duriro* and low notes to *nhovapasi*. The above-mentioned set of 4 types of *mbira* blend very well when performed together.

### Mbira Amplification

According to Tendayi Gahamadze, the above innovation became popular with many Zimbabweans. This was evidenced by the large audiences that attended Mbira dzeNharira's shows. As a result, the group faced challenges in *mbira* amplification.

After having come out with such a *mbira* combination (the set of four), our next task was to find better ways of amplifying the instrument because the *deze* (gourd resonator) we were using was not loud enough for big crowds. We could not be clearly heard when performing at big auditoriums and other such places. We looked at the guitar and we said to our selves- look the guitar is loud enough for everybody to hear. We were quite convinced that it was because of the modern systems of amplification it used. So if the guitar could be amplified using such systems, why not the *mbira*? (Tendayi Gahamadze).

Tendai Gahamadze and Mbira dzeNharira tried to amplify the *mbira* through using a microphone as a sound picking device. They had to put it (microphone) in a *deze*. This was not effective enough as the microphone at times failed to pick the intended sound and in some instances made incidental movements in the *deze*



which distorted the sound of the *mbira*. They then tried to emulate amplification systems used by some other sound engineers such as Dan Pauli who according to Robinson (1999) made an electric *mbira* (no specific years given). In the same vein, Mbira dzeNharira then decided to use magnetic fields for watches, alarms, transducers, and computer magnets to construct pick up microphones for the *mbira*. Holes were drilled at the back of the *gwariwa* (sound board) to fit in the pick up microphones. After the devices were fitted, the holes were then patched as seen in pictures below.



Pickup jack

Plate 8. (Picture by author)



Patched hole where the pickup device was inserted

Plate 9. (Picture by author)

This type of amplification distorted the sound of the *mbira*. A lot of overtones could be heard in between the sound during a performance. As a result, the naturalness of the sound was lost. Therefore there was still need to come up with a better way of amplifying the *mbira*.

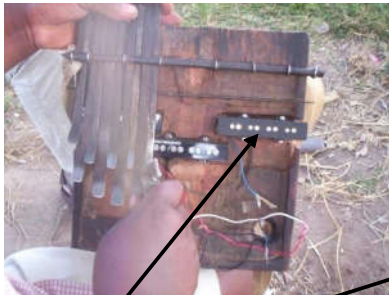
### New Amplification System

"It dawned to me that one of the best ways of amplifying the *mbira* was to use modern systems of amplification similar to those used to amplify the guitar and other modern instruments." said Tendai Gamadze. This would not be a difficult task as he (Tendai Gahamadze) had guitar pickups he had purchased in Germany. He thought of trying them out as he had contemplated whilst he was still studying abroad. When he tried to put guitar sound picking devices onto the *mbira*, other members of his ensemble argued against it. They preferred the continuous use of magnetic fields from watches alarms, transducers, and computer magnets as sound picking devices. They (group members) were not sure that Tendai's idea would work. As far as Tendai was concerned, the sound picking devices preferred by his

ensemble members had failed to produce a good sound quality. So there was no need for the ensemble to keep on using them. It was time to move on and try something more effective. With such a mind set, Tendai had to fit the guitar sound picking devices in the absence of his mbira ensemble members. When they (other members) came later on, they found out that Tendai had already put the pickups on the mbira. What amazed the other members of Mbira dzeNharira was that the sound quality was excellent with no overtones whatsoever.

### The process of fitting the guitar sound picking devices on the mbira

What Tendai did was to insert the guitar pick up microphones onto every mbira. The lead mbira would have a lead guitar pickup. In the same manner, the bass mbira would have the bass guitar pickups; the rhythm mbira would also have the rhythm guitar pick ups and the baritone fitted with the sub rhythm pick up. *See plates 10 and 11 below which show a sound picking device being fitted onto a mbira sound board (all pictures by author).*



*Guitar pickups being inserted*

*Plate 10*



*Plate 11*

This helped in the production of a better sound quality. Such sound picking devices have no overtones as in the earlier system. Also, the amplified sound has no interference such as that produced by incidental movements of microphones placed in a *deze*. This amplification has also allowed mbira instruments to be connected to a large and powerful public address (PA) system. This has an advantage that it (mbira) can be played for a large audience unlike before.

Pictures on plates 12 to 15 below show a PA system used by Mbira Dzenharaira at one of their performances at Nyamachoma the Kraal on 26 October 2010 (all pictures by author).



Plate 12



Plate 13



Plate 14



Plate 15

### Other Achievements

Mbira DzeNharaira has recorded and published a total of 8 albums. Their first album, *Rinemanyanga Hariputirwiiri* was recorded at ZBC studios in 1998. During the recording, microphones were placed in the calabash to pick the sound of the instrument. The album was an instant hit. On the second week of its release, it was on the top of Coca-Cola charts top 20 in Zimbabwe.

In 2000, the group recorded its second album, *Gomo remandiriri*. The later album was recorded using a mixture of electric amplification and *mateze* (gourd resonators). Recordings of all the albums after *Gomo remandiriri* were done using *mbira* instruments inserted with guitar pick up microphones devices. There is not much

difference in the *mbira* sound produced by the electric amplification and the *deze* resonators except that the tracks recorded using the latter were accompanied by a buzzing sound produced by the buzzers affixed to the *deze* thus produced a more natural traditional *mbira* sound. In 2001, the group recorded *Tozvireva tingaputike neshungu*. Another album, *kudya kwenzeve* was recorded in the same year. The group also recorded such other albums as *Rwendo rwekure*, *Farefare tindike*, *Toita zverudo* and *Dziva renjuzu*

### Musical Awards

Mbira DzeNharira have received the following awards;

- Tsama award 2001 for best Mbira Artist
- NAMA award for best selling album
- ZIMA 25<sup>th</sup> Jubilee award 2005 for best mbira Artist
- NAMA award for best Music video-2012

### Conclusion

From the discussion above, it is evident that globalisation and the coming of modern technology have greatly contributed to the development and modification of the instrument *mbira* and its music. This was evidenced by the innovations and modifications (on the instrument *mbira*) done by Tendai Gahamadze and Mbira dzeNharira ensemble. The latter have come up with a new set of 4 *mbiras* which they named, *nheketo*, *dongonda*, *duriro* and *nhova pasi*. The *mbira* set of 4 in question produces four different *mbira* lines during a performance. This set up is completely different from the traditional way of playing *mbira*. In addition to their *mbira* set of 4, Tendai Gahamadze of Mbira dzeNharira has also borrowed from the new technological world to come up with an amplification system that uses guitar pickups as sound picking devices. Mbira dzeNharira's singing is also unique in that it is mostly harmonised and is sung in several voices as opposed to the traditional two of *kushaura* and *mahon'era* (low range singing style synonymous with the men's voice) blended with *kudeketera* (poetic lines that accompany *mbira* pieces).

This paper has proven that apart from performing and making *mbira* instruments in a traditional way, *mbira* and other artists are capable of modifying their instruments in a more scientific way. In other words they (*mbira* artists) have adopted the use of modern technology into *mbira* making thus have become scientists in their own right. It therefore remains to be seen how far *mbira* artists will go in the use of modern technology in their works.

## References

Berliner, P.F. (1978). *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Berliner, P.F. (1980). *John Kunaka, Mbira maker*. *African Arts*. 14(1):61-67, 88.

Brusila, J. (2001). *Modern Traditional Music from Zimbabwe*. Virginia Mukweshu's Mbira Record "Matare" In: Palmberg, M. and Kirkegaard, A. *Playing with Identities in Contemporary Music in Africa*. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

Gumboreshumba, L. (2008). *Understanding Form and techniques: Andrew Tracey's Contribution to Knowledge of Lamellophone (Mbira) Music of Southern Africa*.

Unpublished Thesis. Masters of Arts in Ethnomusicology. Rhodes University.

Kubik, G. (1964). *Generic Names for the Mbira*, *African Music*, 3(3):25-36.

Kubik, G. (1965). *Generic Names for the Mbira*, *African Music*, 3(4):72-73.

Tracey, A. (1970a). *How to Play the Mbira (DzaVadzimu)*. Roodepoort: The International Library of African Music.

Tracey, H. (1969). *The Mbira Class of African Instruments in Rhodesia (1932)* *African Music*, 4 (3):78-95.

Williams, B.M. (1997). *Getting Started with Mbira dzaVadzimu*. *Percussive Notes*. 35:4 38-49.

Williams, B.M. (2001). *Learning Mbira: A beginning*. Everett, PA: Honey Rock.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Inherent rhythms those melodic/rhythmic patterns not directly being played by the performer but arising from the total complex of the *mbira* music.