

Using The Kalimba in Music Therapy:

Informal Case Studies

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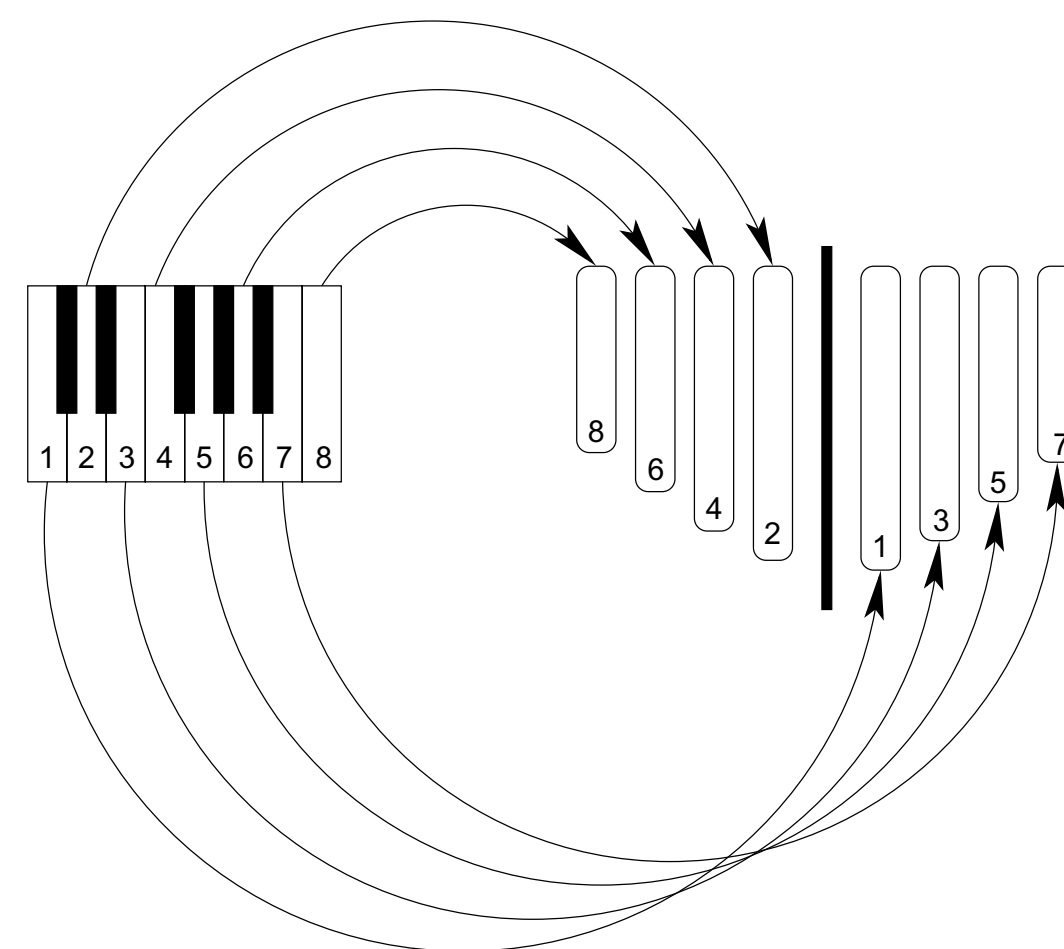
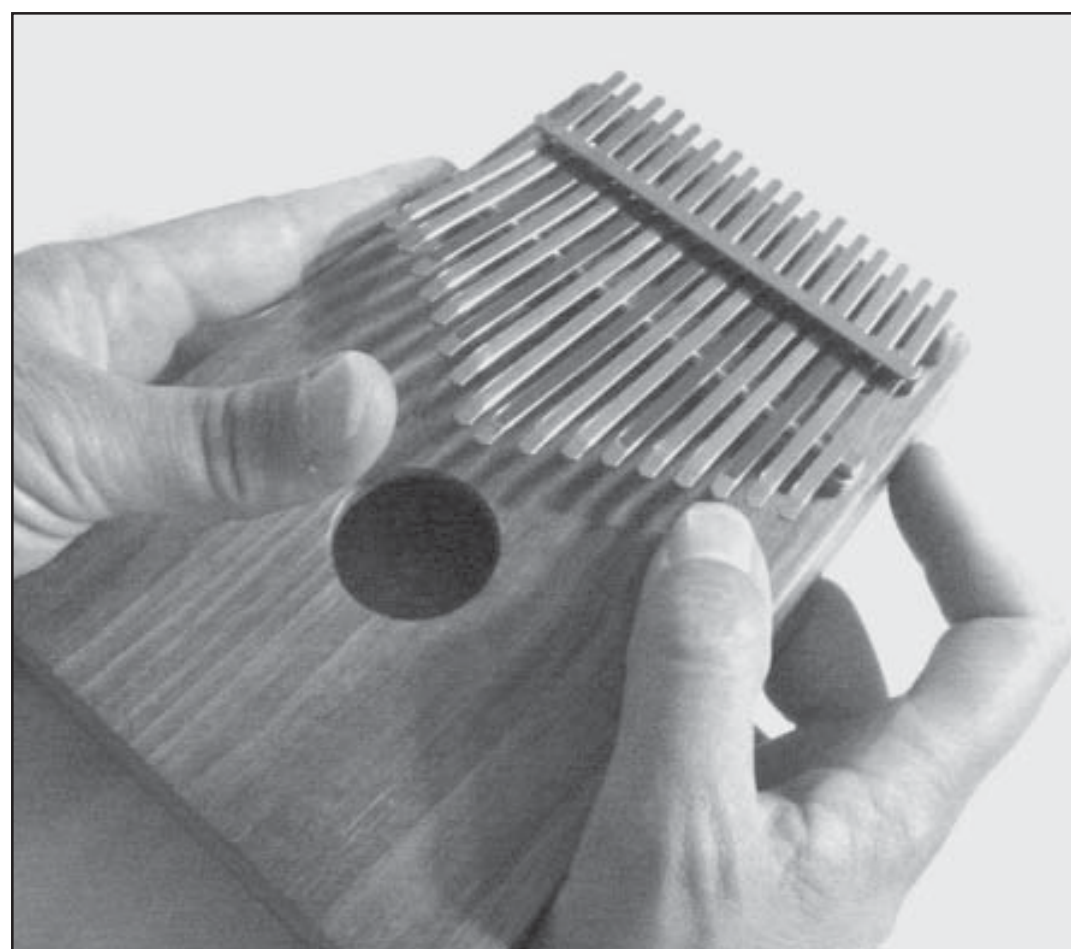
What is the kalimba, and where did it come from?

The kalimba is a westernized version of an ancient African instrument. The first kalimba-like instruments appeared in Africa over a thousand years ago. As the kalimbas spread throughout sub-Saharan Africa, they changed in form and in cultural use. Some groups of people, such as the Kalahari Bushmen, only seem to have gotten the kalimba in the last century, and the instrument is not central to their culture. The other extreme, the Shona people of Zimbabwe, have highly developed instruments called *mbira*, which have between 20 and 50 tines. *Mbira* music is essential to the fabric of their society: to the Shona, they owe their existence to the grace of the spirits of their ancestors, and *mbira* music is required for the continued communication with the ancestors' spirits.

Hugh Tracey, an Englishman who studied traditional music across Africa from the 1920s until his death in 1977, was the first person to popularize the kalimba outside of Africa. His kalimba design put the low notes in the center, with notes increasing in pitch outward to the left and the right as is common among traditional instruments. He chose the western diatonic scale. To aid in harmony, he arranged the notes in the scale alternating strictly between right and left. The modern kalimba has spiritual and musical roots in African traditions, but can play Bob Marley or Bob Dylan songs. Modern therapeutic use of the kalimba can be suggestive of the powerful traditional roles this instrument played in Africa.

Disclosure: I have been importing and selling the Hugh Tracey kalimbas since 2005, so I have a business interest in the kalimba succeeding. I've also been playing the kalimba seriously since 1986, and I believe in this instrument as a tool for healing in ways that I can only begin to describe. I am not a therapist by training; my role is to hold up examples of things I find to be amazing, and hope that these are also meaningful to the Music Therapy community. I am committed to helping people learn how to work with the kalimba, and have developed working relationships with many of the people who buy kalimbas from me. I spend time with many of these people to discuss various aspects of playing kalimba, to transcribe songs, or work on kalimba issues that may arise. Because of the nature of these relationships, I refer to these people as clients rather than customers.

The kalimba's note layout



The diatonic treble, alto, and 8-note kalimbas are western modifications of traditional African instruments. The notes in the scale alternate from right to left, so chords are simply made by playing two, three or four adjacent kalimba tines, *i.e.*, 1-3-5, and most melodies you might think of playing require a high degree of left-right coordination. Left-right integration is essential to playing the kalimba.

My personal experience of playing the kalimba

I find the kalimba to be magical, compelling, beautiful and hypnotic, both to listen to and to play. As an experienced musician, I remember being frustrated with the odd layout of the notes, which required of me a new form of left-right cooperation. I also remember feeling somewhat clumsy that I could not make the kalimba do precisely what I wanted it to. Nonetheless, it almost always sounded beautiful. The internal logic of the kalimba's note layout makes certain musical ideas come out quite naturally. After learning to walk within this internal logic, I have found a great freedom, and almost feel as if the kalimba has learned how to play me.

Along my path with the kalimba, feelings of deep joy and gratitude for this simple instrument and its beautiful music have been plentiful. Now I use the kalimba as a companion when I am bored, an internal mountain range to explore when I need a sense of adventure, an emotional comforter, a way of expressing deep emotions of wide variety, a way of giving thanks to the universe, an activity that often lifts me up into joy, an intellectual puzzle or a Zen koan, a tool to create a simple beauty, and as a doorway to many things spiritual and to deeper interpersonal intimacy. Often when I play, I am enveloped by feelings of peace and well-being. After playing for an hour, I find I am in a different state of being. Sometimes when I play kalimba, I become introspective, thinking about things I did earlier in the day, even recognizing mistakes I made and seeing ways I can do better. I feel that playing the kalimba opens me up to love.

How Gary Diggins uses kalimbas in MT

One obvious use of the kalimba in music therapy is to help the client express emotions. The kalimba has its own magical voice and a predisposition to beauty. But different musical scales or modes usually evoke different sorts of emotions. A diatonic instrument with two or more octaves can play in all the different modes, but you have to know where to start. On the other hand, you can tune a kalimba to be in a particular mode - major, minor, or other - setting the lowest note to be the root of that scale to suggest that mode to the music therapy client. Each kalimba with its different tuning will have its own range of emotional expression.

Toronto-based music therapist Gary Diggins likes to work with minor-tuned kalimbas in expressing and processing emotion. "In music therapy, the kalimba has proven to be a supportive instrument for clients who are vocalizing. The melancholy nature of the minor is especially effective for grief work or evoking more of a tender mood. The major tuning brings out a joyful expression." One can imagine having a small array of kalimbas, color coded for different tunings (blue for minor, yellow for major), each used by the client to express a different range of emotions.

Gary Diggins also uses the kalimba simply as a light instrument which invites play and helps the client loosen up. "I also use the Kalimba to assist non-musicians to feel confident about their sounding. We get beyond 'right and wrong' notes and simply experiment with exploration and surprise."

A simple way Gary uses the kalimba in play therapy is to have a musical conversation with the client using two similarly-tuned kalimbas. A good starting model for a conversation is a series of questions and answers. As therapist, you ask a question on one kalimba, and the client will answer with another kalimba. "Keep your questions short, at least in the initial stages. Intention is important. Feel a genuine question forming internally before you make that into sound. 'How are you feeling today?' 'Do you want to play with me?' 'Can you have fun like a child?' Think about when you verbally ask a question of someone. The pitch of your voice tends to rise on the final word or words. Consequently, in your musical phrases, imitate the way we incorporate ascending or descending pitches into speech, as well as how we integrate rhythmic variation."

Even an activity as simple as a structured question and answer session can be a doorway to much more complex interactions. "As you become familiar with making up questions, your range of possibilities will naturally expand. For instance, you might vary the volume or speed of your inquiries. Variation is important because the way you say it will elicit diverse responses from the client. Be gentle, assertive, quick, slow, even long-winded on a couple of questions. Above all, make it a fun experience for the client. This type of sonic play generally courts confidence in a client since there are no right or wrong exchanges. Two people are simply sharing a conversation."

"One of the primary goals in this kalimba exercise is to develop independence. Looking at this exercise from a regressive standpoint, you might represent a parental or authority role to the client. In that case, the object is to help a client enter a mature and secure relationship with you, one that goes beyond dependence and celebrates the joys of collaboration."

Other therapeutic uses of the kalimba

One client had a serious hand injury and started using the kalimba to recover fine motor control of his thumbs.

A hemophiliac who loves music but couldn't play most other instruments because of internal bleeding in his joints, is enjoying playing the kalimba.

The kalimba's celestial sound can comfort hospice patients.

One client with Asperger's had withdrawn from most social interactions, but the kalimba provided a regular positive experience which helped give him the confidence to return to social situations with a renewed sense of self-worth.

One client suffered from clinical depression and antidepressants were prescribed, but the light didn't start to shine until he supplemented his medication with daily kalimba playing.

Playing towards wellness

I have two clients who have self-prescribed the kalimba for dealing with pain. My interpretation is that playing the kalimba requires a certain kind of concentration which can take the player far away from the immediate daily situation - it takes the player deep within their mind as in meditation, or it helps the player dissociate from the present. The pleasant sounds the kalimba makes provide positive feedback for this meditation or dissociation.

Fibromyalgia is a syndrome which results in pain in the muscles, ligaments, and tendons. About 2 percent of the population is affected by fibromyalgia. B.A. suffers from fibromyalgia and uses the kalimba to deal with her symptoms.

"My pain is constant; my hands ache and are so stiff that I am no longer able to draw as I once did (I was a professional illustrator). Even now I am awake not because I choose to be but because the pain has taken me from sleep, abruptly and violently, and I came downstairs both to give my husband a chance to sleep and to seek comfort. I picked up the kalimba, stroked it, and felt the music such as it was, and it let me cry. And then I played some more. Then I just stroked and let the little thing sing its own song to me. I am not musical by nature... but the kalimba doesn't limit me that way - I can feel the notes and they make sense. I can have music through this toy in a way I could never have before, and as I said, I sought it out for relief from the pain.

"I hope to learn to play the larger [kalimba] so I can learn more songs and escape more, not only bringing life back into my fingers, but back into my heart. This has been a painful and difficult year for me; I have lost so much because of my disability - but I have gained something I never thought I could have - the ability to create music"

L.B. bought a kalimba in early 2006, and in summer 2006 she was involved in a serious accident which resulted in spinal chord injury and nerve damage. Muscle control in one leg was lost, and she also had severe pain in that leg. She had spinal surgery in early 2007 to address the pain.

"I will tell you about my relationship with my kalimba first, because there definitely is one. Since my surgery I am unable to sit for more than about 10 minutes. This makes it near impossible to read my music and play my kalimba. Actually for the last few weeks prior to the surgery and often over the months leading up to it I could not sit long enough to sit up and read music. Instead, I have been using the kalimba to help me with the pain, the boredom or just because I hold the kalimba and close my eyes and just let my fingers pluck the tines and let whatever music wants to happen become reality. When I am feeling less creative on my own I put on a cd I like or just the radio and I strum along with the music. That in itself can be an experience! But I also have to say it is how I have been learning to create my own music as well, because it forced me to listen to the sound each time made and try to match what I am hearing. I hope as I get well, I will be able to put this to use for writing songs.

"I can honestly say I can not imagine a day without my kalimba now. This is my personal experience of how the kalimba has been helping me not only heal, but also as an aid to get me through the physical and emotional pain each day brings to me. My kalimba is more like a treasured friend."

The kalimba can help people transcend the limitations their situations and bodies place upon them. The kalimba can help transform a tough situation into hope, peace, and beauty.

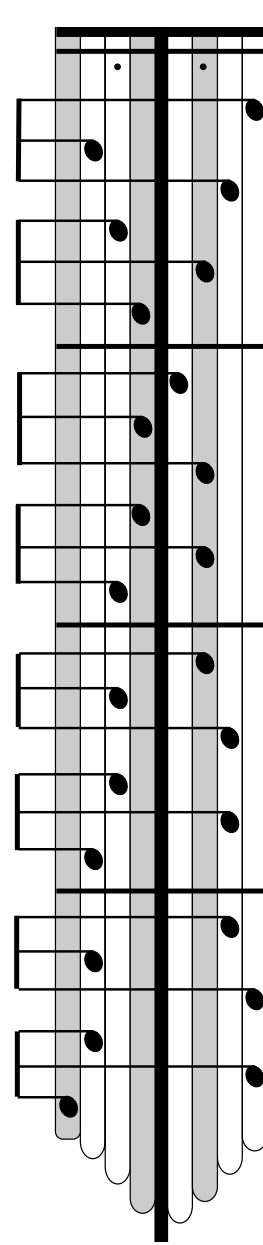
Kalimba resources

www.ilam.ru.ac.za - International Library of African Music, Hugh Tracey's legacy
www.kalimba.co.za - African Musical Instruments - Hugh Tracey Kalimbas
www.KalimbaMagic.com - Kalimbas, books, CDs, daily tips and monthly newsletters
ktabs.TheirHouse.org - The KTabS site for kalimba tablature software and kalimba music
www.GaryDiggins.com - Gary uses kalimba in soundwork (but no kalimba info on this page).
www.NScottRobinson.com - Diversity of kalimbas, excellent bibliography and discography
www.mbira.org - For promotion of the traditional Shona mbira
The Soul of Mbira - Paul F. Berliner (1978)
Music Among the 3u'l'wa-si and Related Peoples of Namibia... - Nicholas M. England (1995).

A man with cerebral palsy plays kalimba using KTabS to help with timing

Cerebral palsy (CP) is a class of neurological disorders which affect muscle control and coordination from birth or infancy, but do not worsen over time. About 1 in 500 people have one or more symptoms of CP. Music Therapy is now commonly used for children with CP.

G.B. contacted me in July of 2006 wanting to play the kalimba, but was concerned because his fine motor skills are compromised by CP. I recommended the pentatonic or the diatonic alto kalimba - both having wide tines with the pentatonic having extra space between the tines, to facilitate playing. He took both kalimbas, along with the KTabS kalimba tablature software.



In 2005, to improve the state of kalimba education, I invented a simple tablature that shows which tines to play and when to play them. The tablature reads from bottom to top.

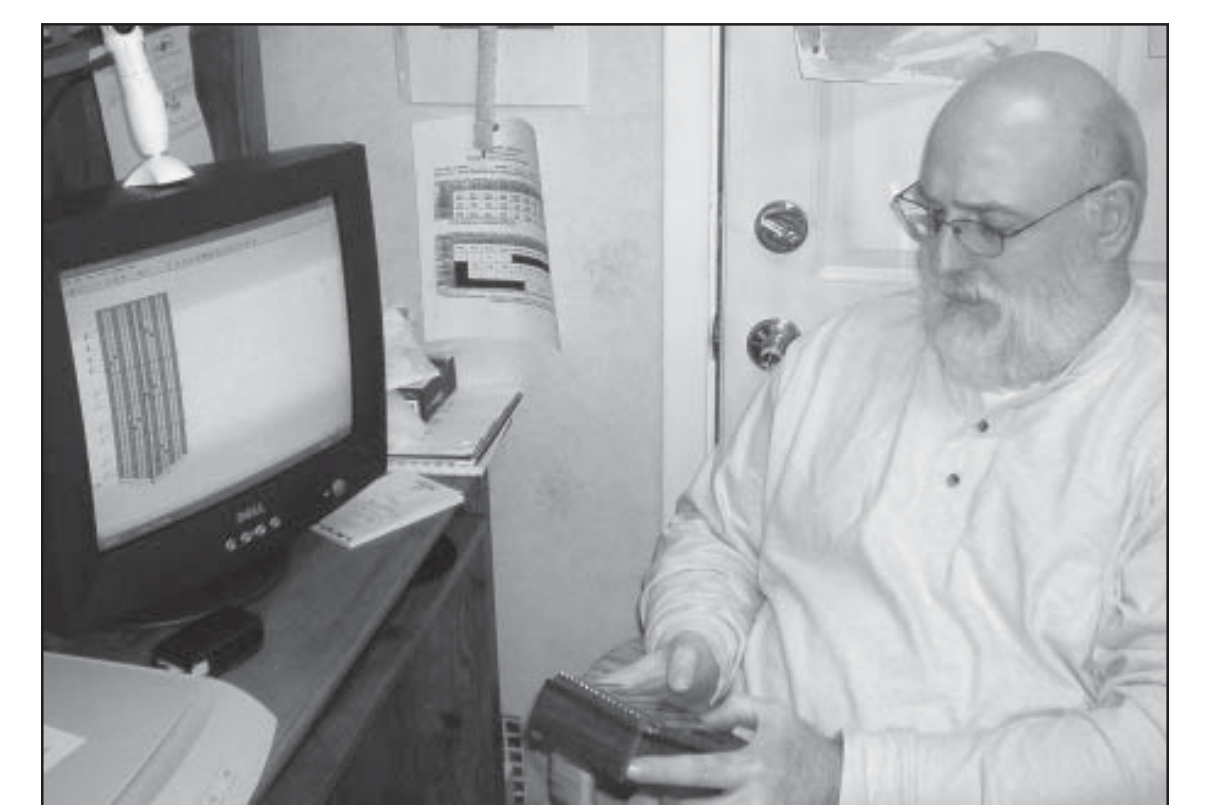
In June 2006, Randy and Sharon Eaton independently wrote the KTabS program to create and play this new kalimba tablature on Windows computers. KTabS helps the student both visually and with simultaneous audio.

G.B.: "I was born with Cerebral Palsy, which affects mostly my lower body, but also has it's drawbacks regarding my upper body, specifically fine motor coordination in the arms, hands, and fingers. And yet at the age of 50yrs, I have found an instrument I can play with confidence and joy..."

"The software KTABS helps me immensely in my personal learning process... Because of my CP I use KTABS to play back a piece of music to learn timing and playing speeds (I cannot tap my feet well to the beats needed). So I find a timing I can physically handle at first, and work towards improvement from there."

Says G.B.'s wife: "He has enjoyed music all his life and was always told or always thought that because of his disability he was unable to play an instrument. In the last year and a half he's found interest in the bowed psaltry, the kalimba and most recently a penny whistle. I must admit though I most enjoy listening to him practice the kalimba."

It is greatly fulfilling for me to see a 50 year old person with little musical experience pick up the kalimba. I'm also thrilled that this man with CP is overcoming his psychological and physical challenges by making joyful music. But also consider the possibilities of using the kalimba therapeutically with children with CP. Many music therapy practices with CP children are limited to purely rhythmic instruments, but the kalimba provides rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic elements simply and naturally.



Using KTabS as a time keeper and an audio-visual guide, G.B. plays the song "First Look Inside" on his alto kalimba.