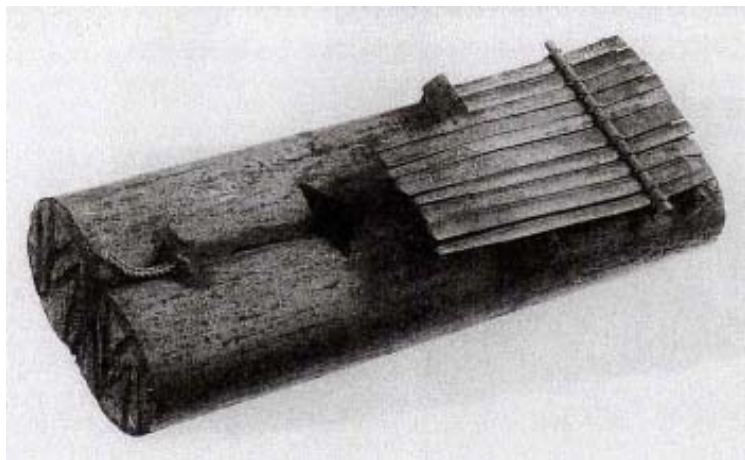
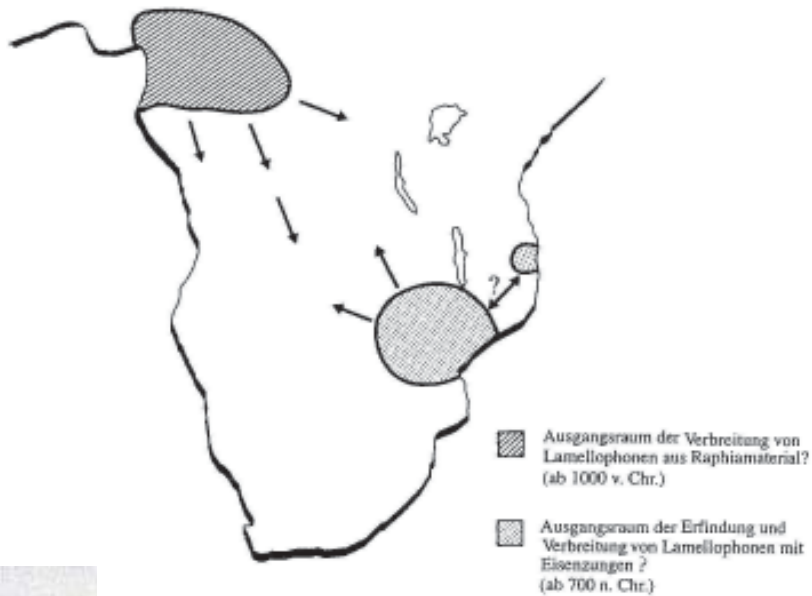


The Kalimba: A Brief and Biased History of an Ancient Instrument

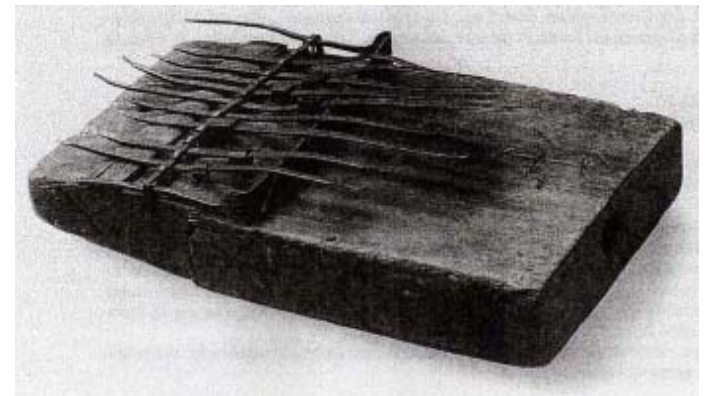
Mark Holdaway, PhD
April 21 2007



The kalimba is believed to have been independently invented in two different places and times in Africa.

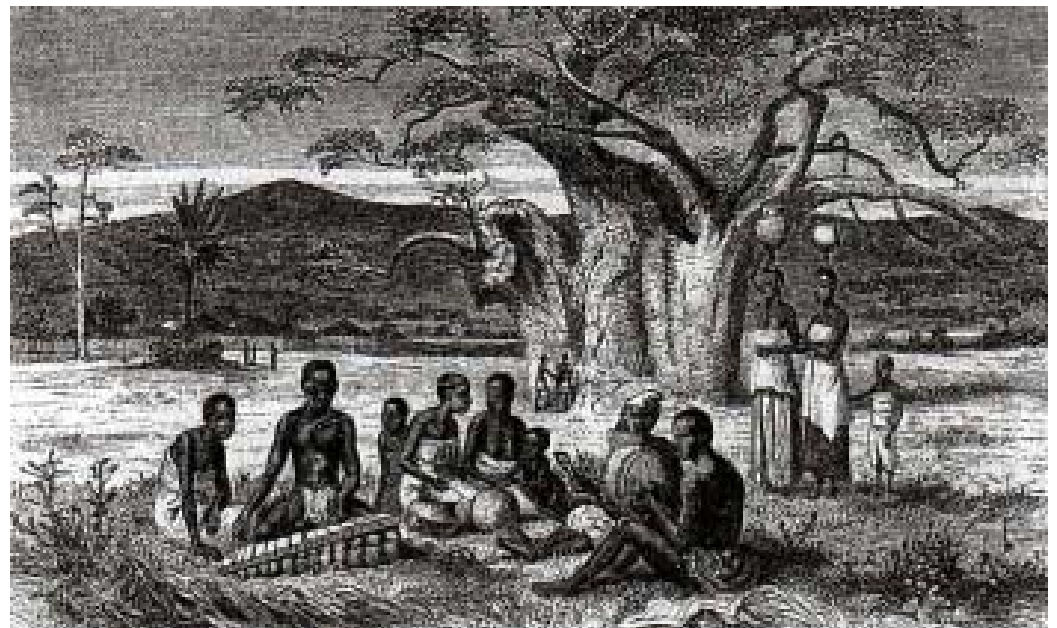
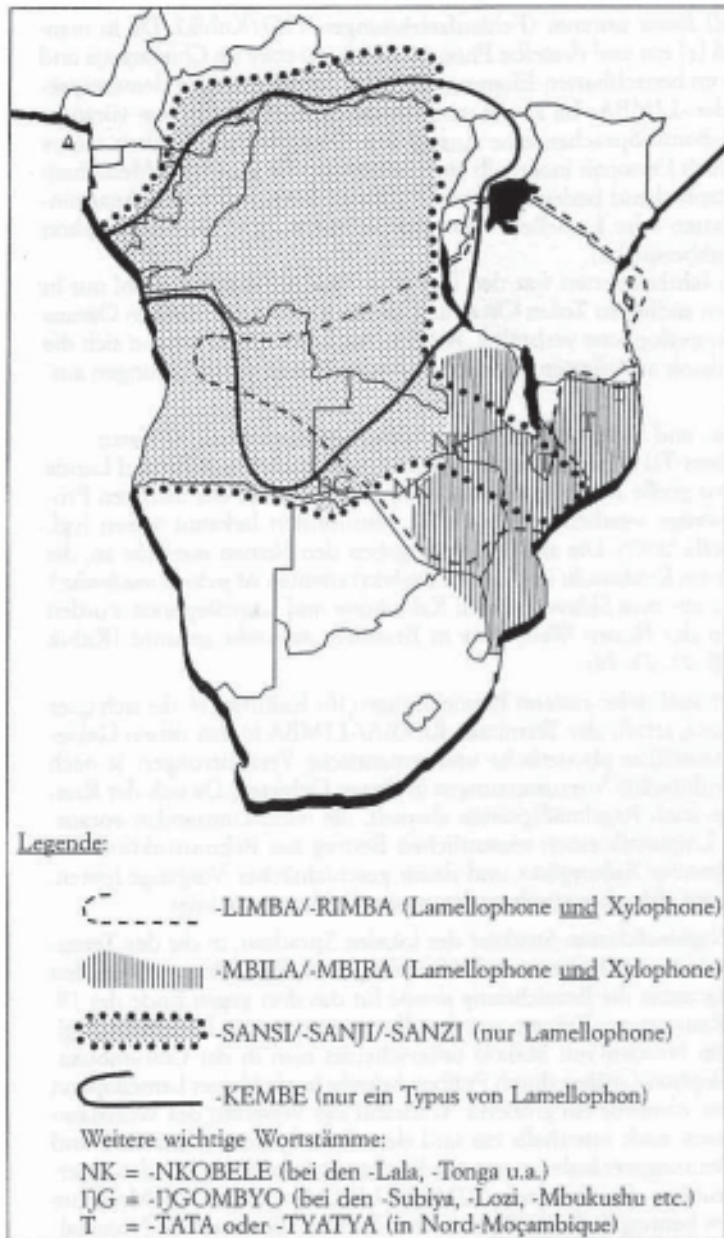


Bamboo: 1000 BC



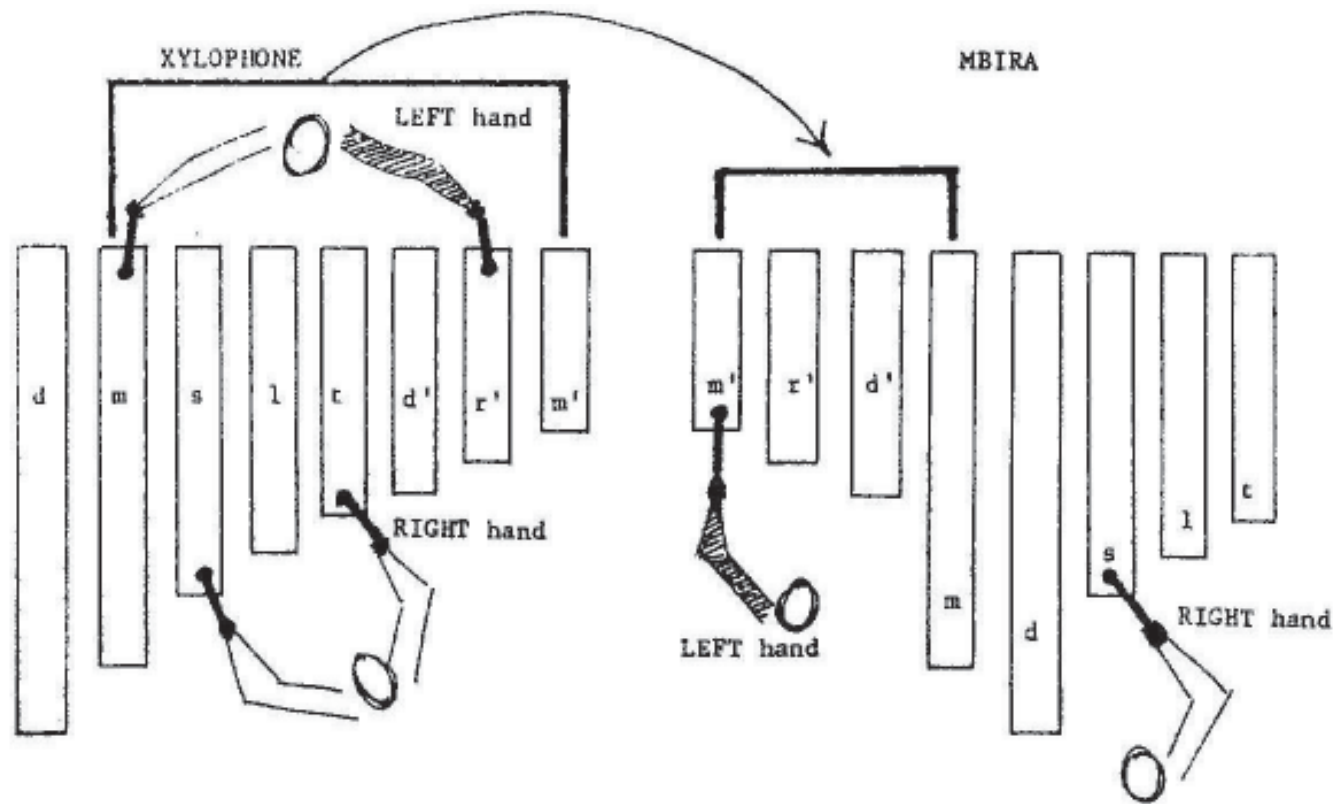
Metal: 700 AD

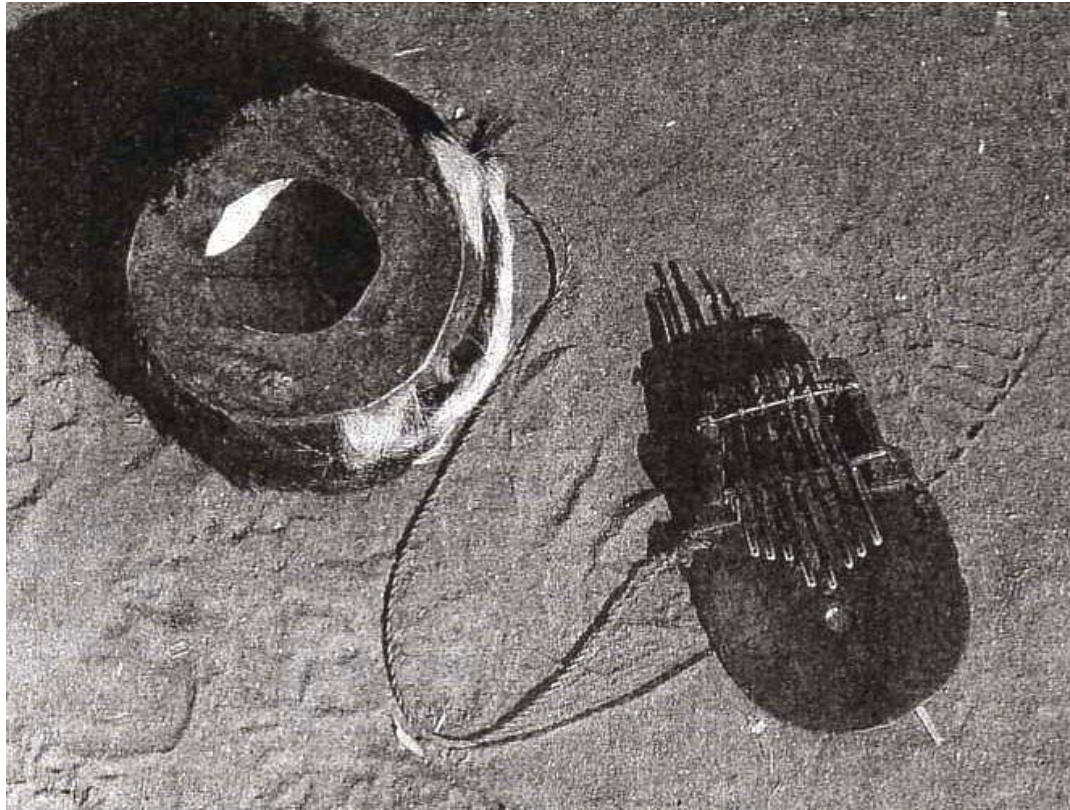
Studies of xylophone and kalimba music indicate that the kalimba was likely invented as a portable xylophone.



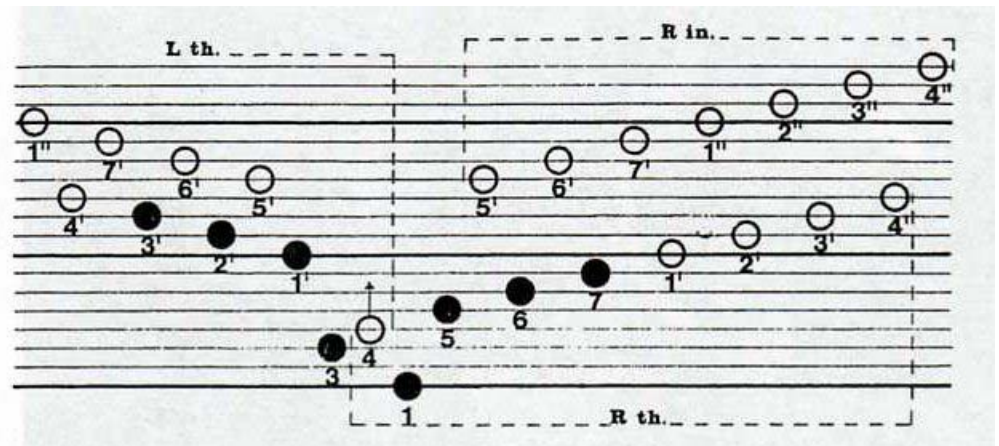
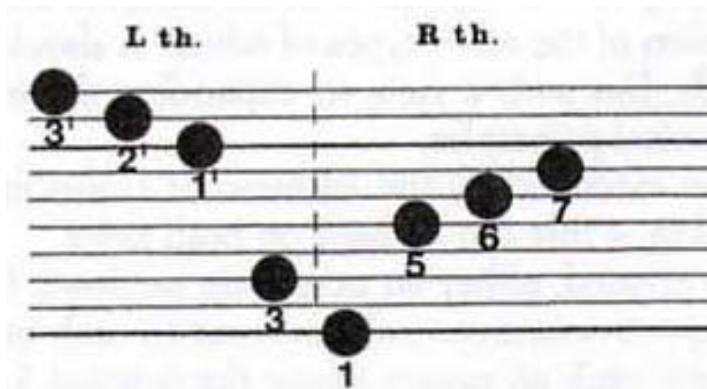
From David Livingston, before 1865

Xylophones were played by 2-3 people on opposite sides with interlocking patterns. On the kalimba, one person could perform those interlocking patterns.





By the way, this tuning and note layout are thought to be many centuries old, and we'll play it today on the *karimba* or the *karimba-tuned 8-note kalimba*.

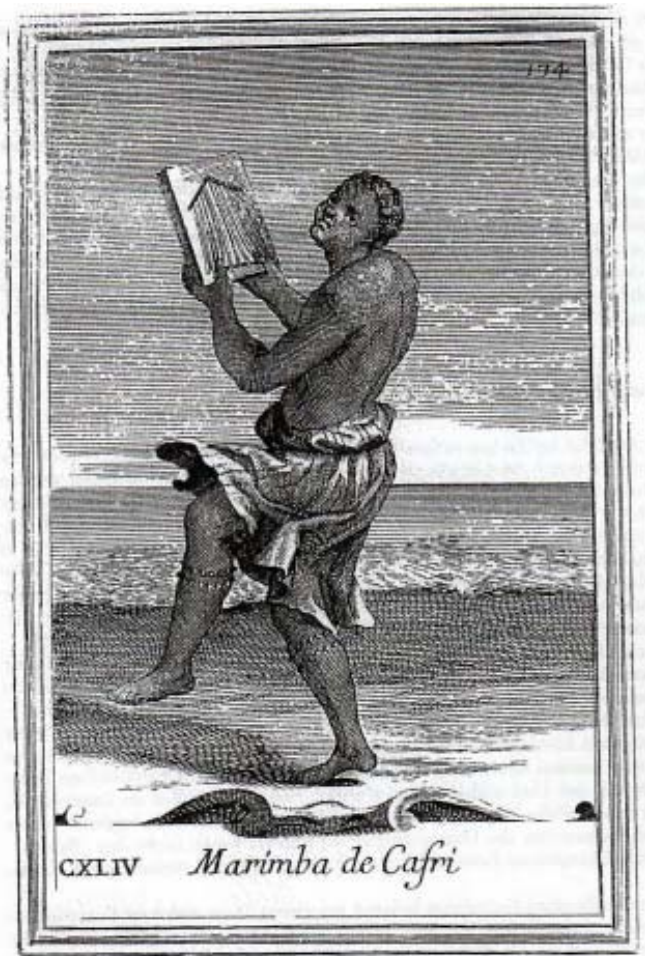


How do we know how old the *kalimba* is?

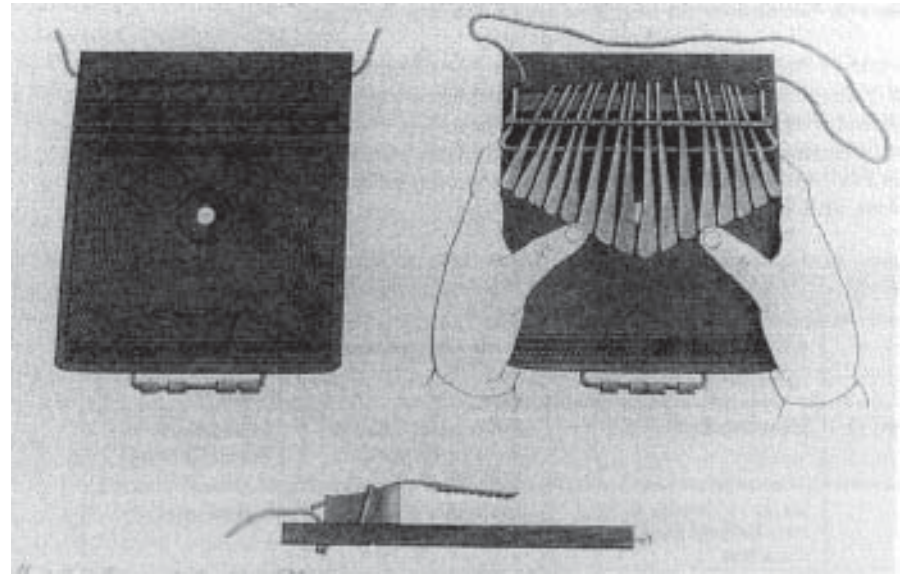
Shona creation myths indicate that the *kalimba* was given to humans by the spirits when the world was young. *So its probably less than a million years old.*

Archaeological digs have found metal *mbira* tines that are about 1000 years old.

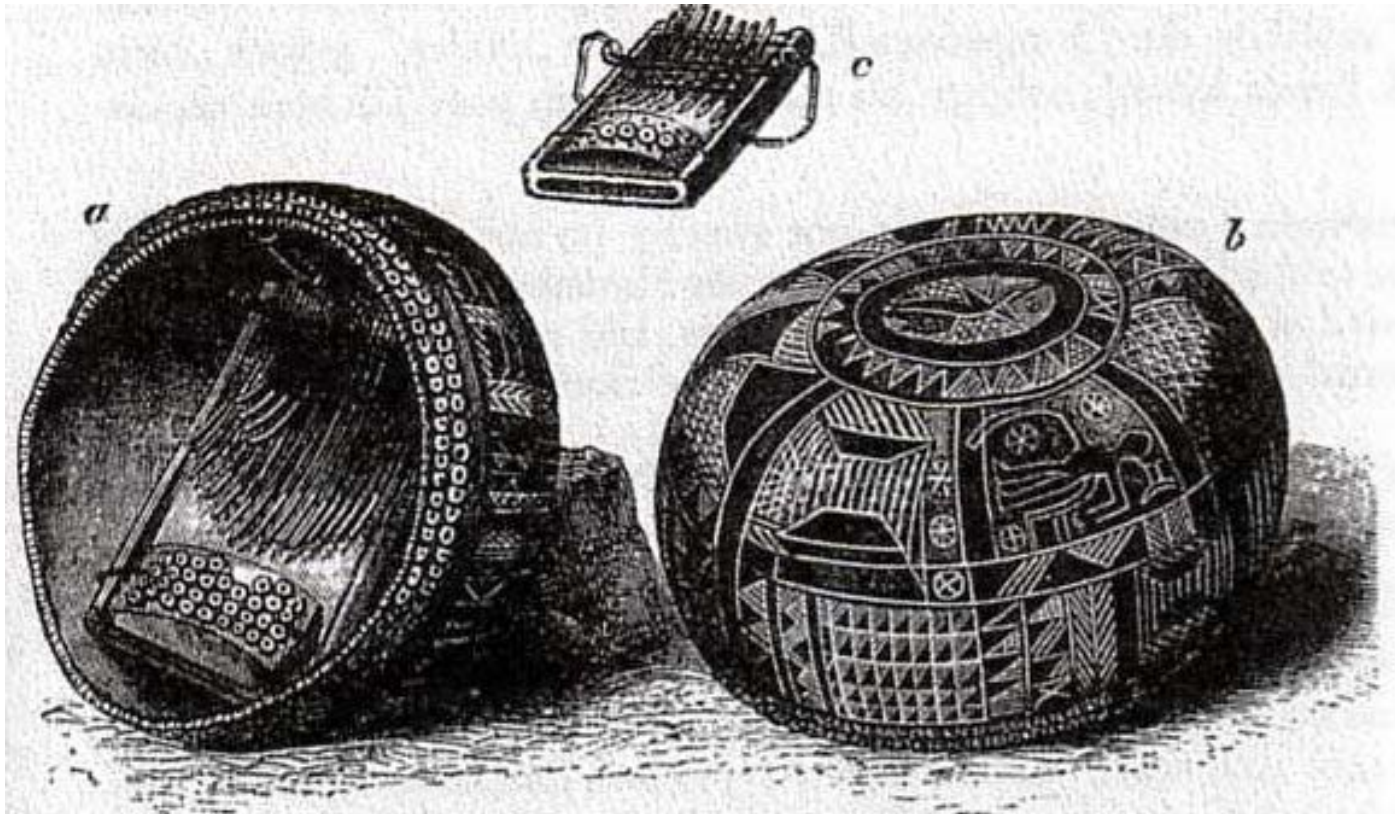
The first European documentation of the *kalimba* was around 1570, by Portuguese explorers. But the metal-tined *kalimba* had already spread across Africa by then.



A wood carving of a *kalimba* player dancing, Mozambique, 1723.

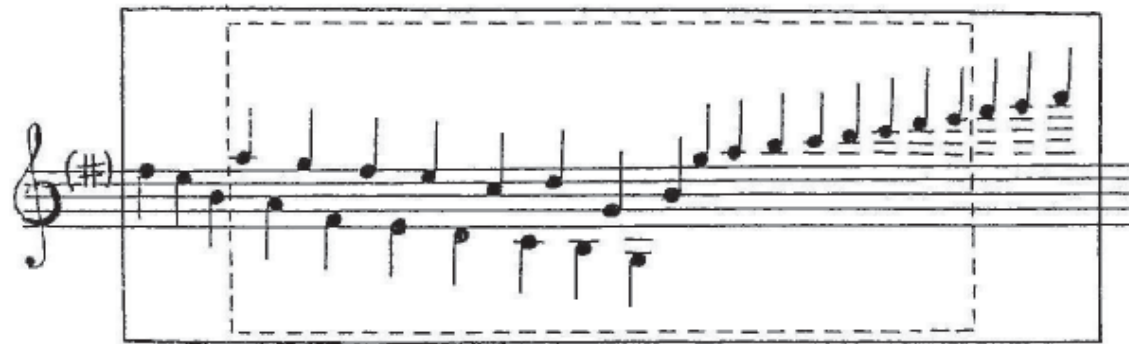
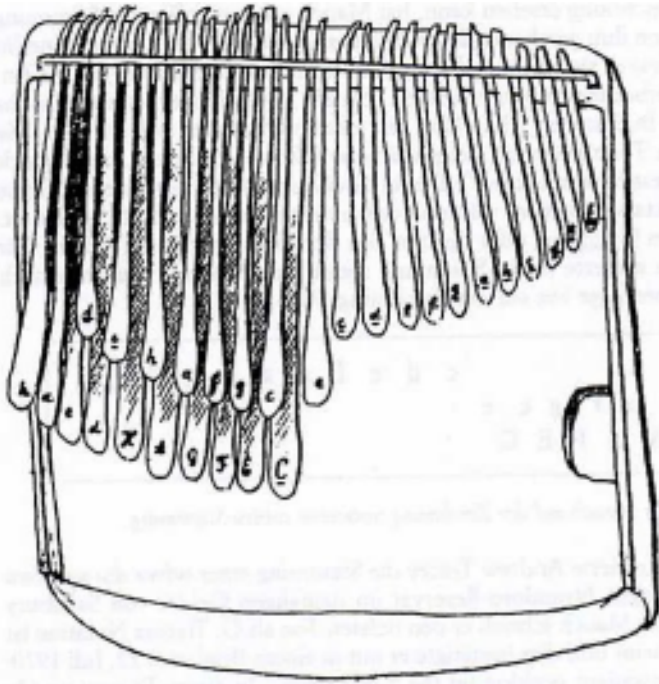




African slaves in Brazil were documented to have had *kalimbas* in the late 1700's, but the instrument disappeared in South America by about 1900. *Note similarity to Hugh Tracey Kalimba!*



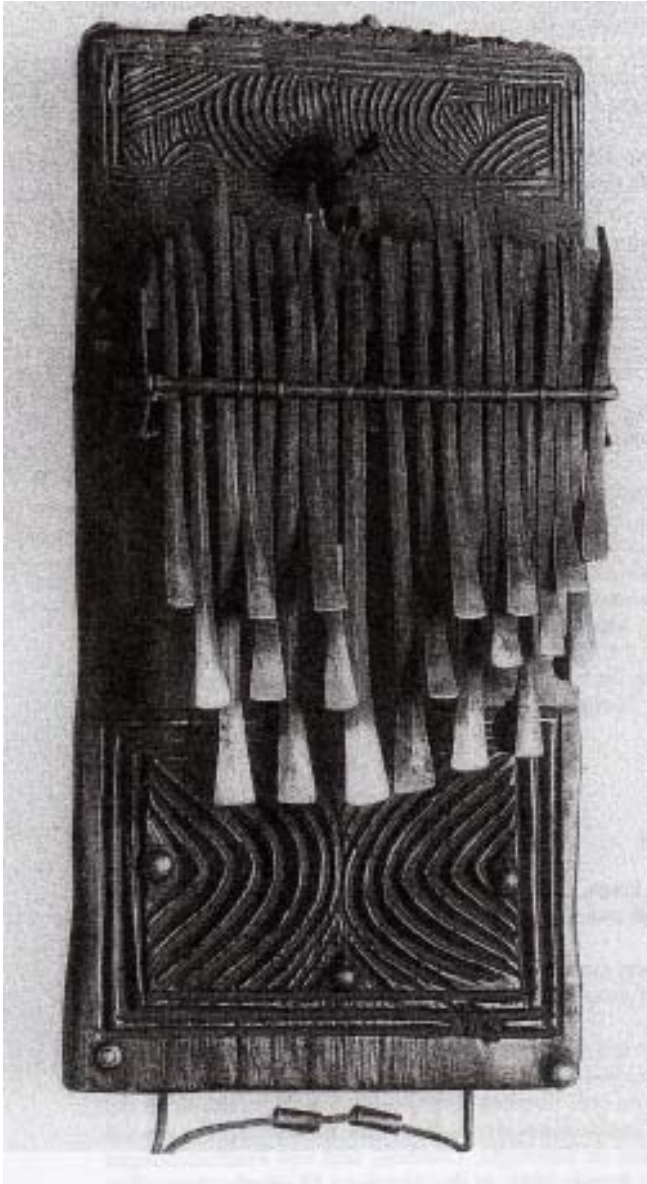
David Livingstone documented the Sansa and Mbira before 1865.

Carl Mauch documented the tuning and note layout of the Shona Mbira in 1872.



-  Anordnung der Töne auf Mauchs *mbira*
-  Anordnung der Töne auf Traceys *mbira*

When Andrew Tracey documented the Mbira tuning 90 years later, the instrument had evolved, but was consistent.



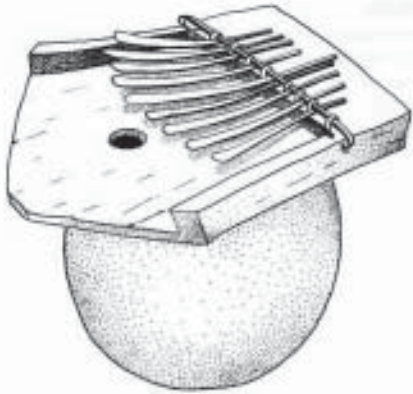
By the late 1890's several *kalimbas* had found their way into European museums, but the museum pieces were not well studied or appreciated until Gerhard Kubik's work in 1998.

The understanding that kalimbas were real musical instruments dawned slowly on people in the 20th century.



The recording caravan in the early fifties, with from left to right: HT, Sam Shabalala, unknown, Peggy Tracey, (probably) the recording engineer Cooke, and Danieli Mabuto.

An Englishman named Hugh Tracey fell in love with mbira music in Rhodesia and started recording it in 1929. Major grant funding permitted him to spend most of 1952 and 1957 recording across Africa.



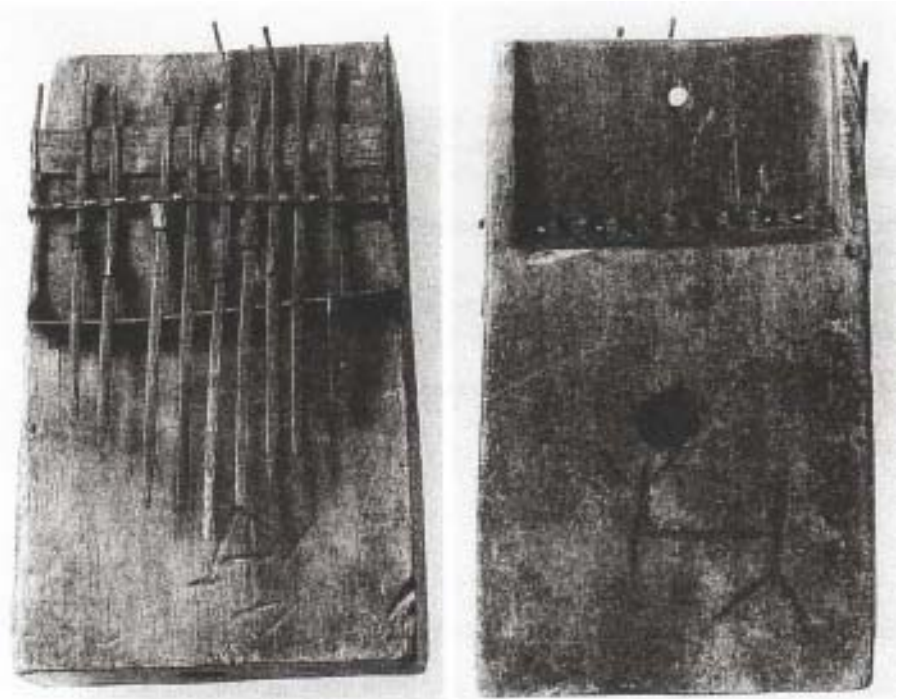
Hugh Tracey also learned to play the different kinds of *kalimbas* and *mbiras* he encountered, and he documented their tunings and note layouts.

In 1954, Hugh Tracey founded the International Library of African Music to archive the thousands of hours of recordings he had taken. Shortly after, he founded African Musical Instruments (AMI) and started making high quality kalimbas for export to Europe and America. Within a few years, dozens of kalimba makers sprung up around the world.

The Hugh Tracey Kalimba used the western diatonic scale (a departure from Tracey's love of traditional African scales), but the instrument was not too different from traditional kalimbas.

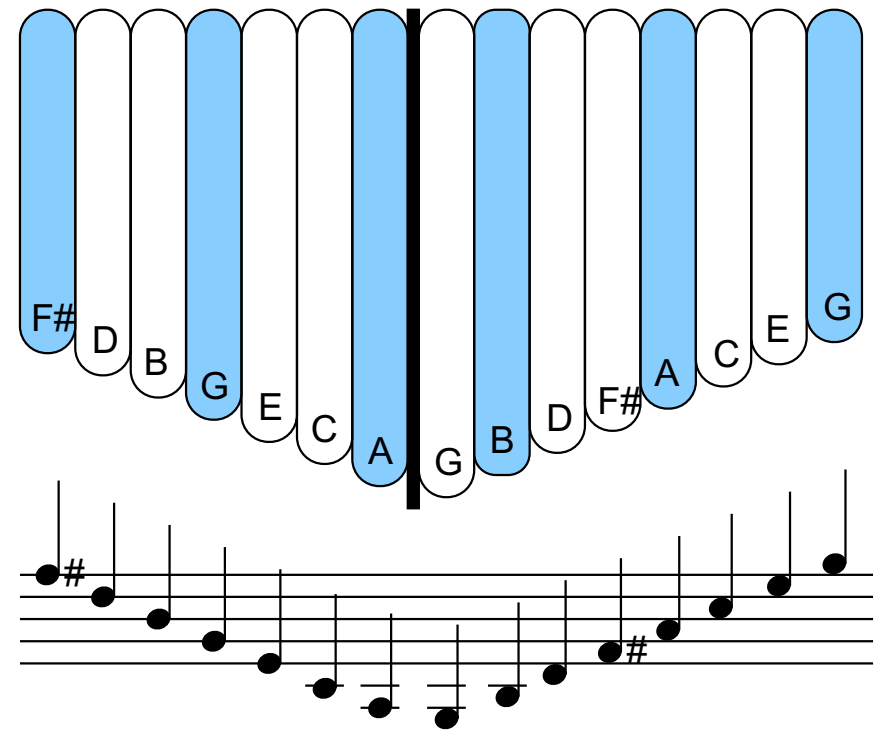
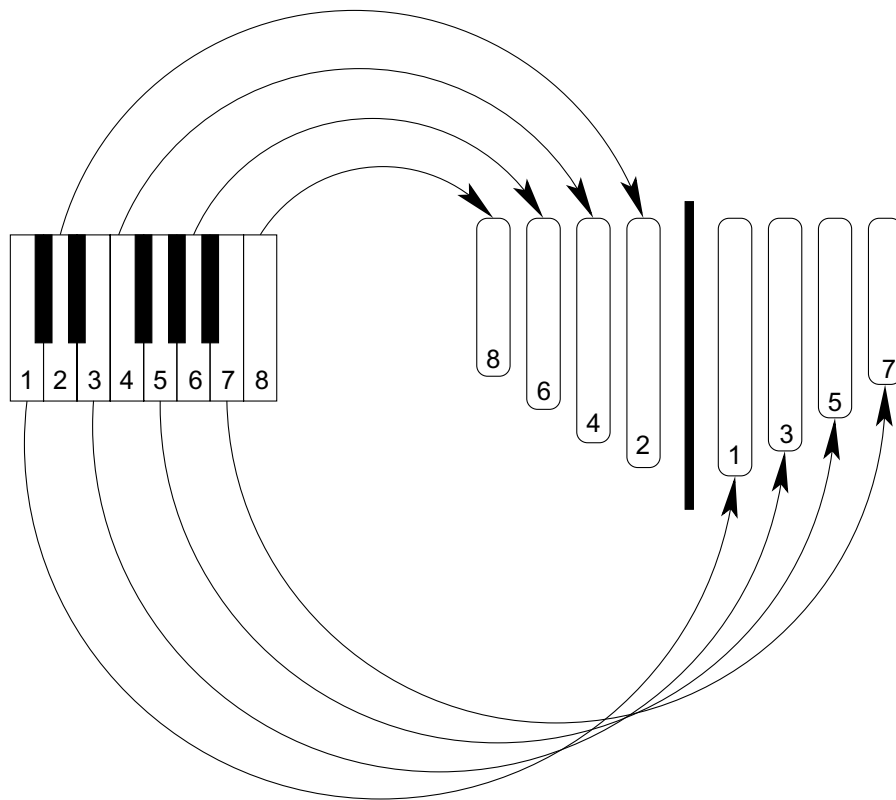


Hugh Tracey Kalimba, circa 1960.



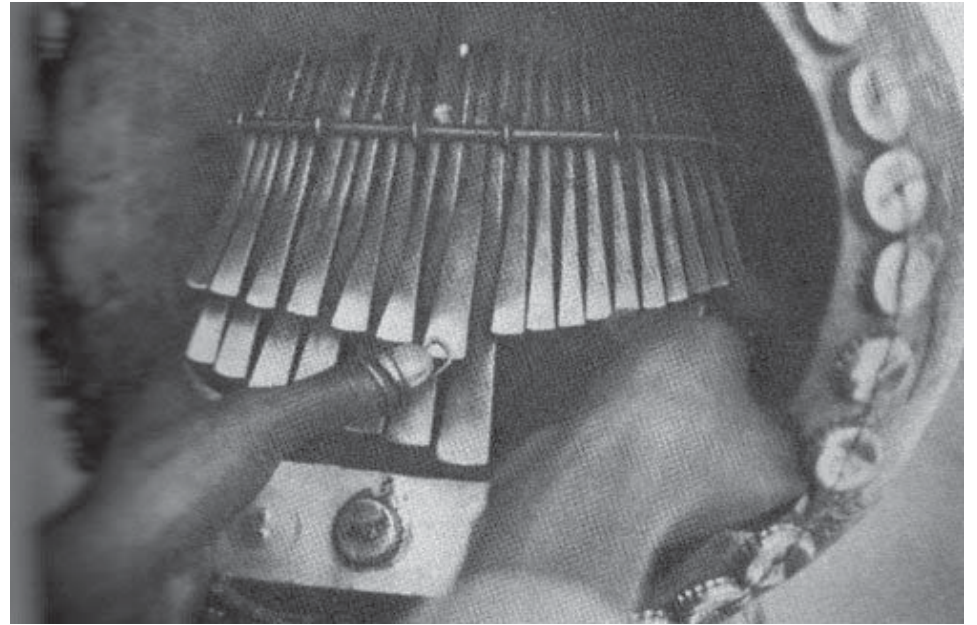
A hollow-body kalimba, 1898.

The Hugh Tracey Kalimba was a hybrid of African and Western sensibilities.



Left-Right coordination is African, but strict left-right alternation is rare in African tunings.

Other people popularized more traditional types of instruments.



In the 1970's Paul F. Berliner spent years in Africa learning to play the mbira and related instruments. His approach was to understand the music, culture, and traditions without imposing his own western values.

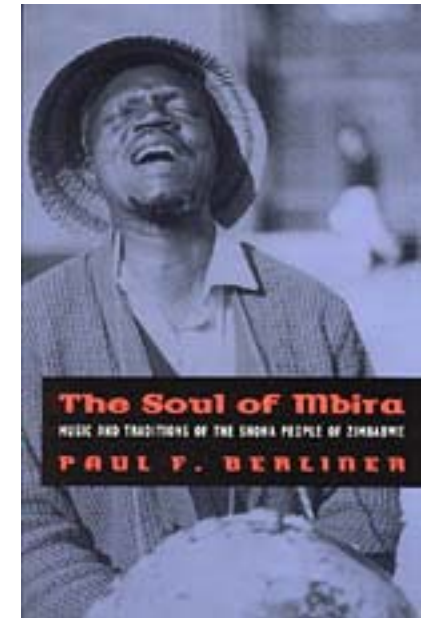


Mbira players at a *bira*, a ceremony where the spirit of a deceased person returns to inhabit a medium for a few hours to visit with family and friends.

A spirit medium and his older keeper.



Paul F. Berliner's book *The Soul of Mbira* brought mbira culture to the US. He taught hundreds of students at Northwestern, U. of Chicago, and now Duke University how to play *mbira* and its grandmother, the *karimba*. These instruments usually required one-on-one instruction.



Since the 1970's, Erica Azim has been studying and teaching the mbira. She runs www.mbira.org and an annual mbira summer school in Berkeley.

The Hugh Tracey Kalimba had possibilities for written music and self-instruction.

Hugh Tracey wrote out kalimba music with both left and right thumbs' notes on a single staff:

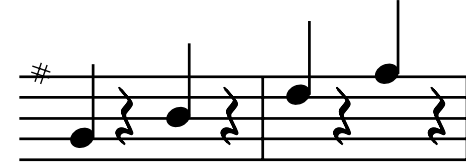
"IRISH JIG" Traditional



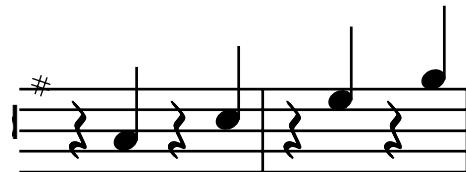
The image shows a single staff of music for a piece titled "IRISH JIG". The staff is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The music consists of a single melodic line with many beamed eighth and sixteenth notes, characteristic of a jig. The notes are arranged in a way that suggests they are being played with both thumbs on a single staff.

In 1979, Carol Burt-Beck developed a two staff system for the kalimba. While this was a good idea, I find it non-intuitive: 1) hands are backwards, 2) staff is at right angles to tines, and 3) one the left hand's notes move opposite the tines.

RIGHT



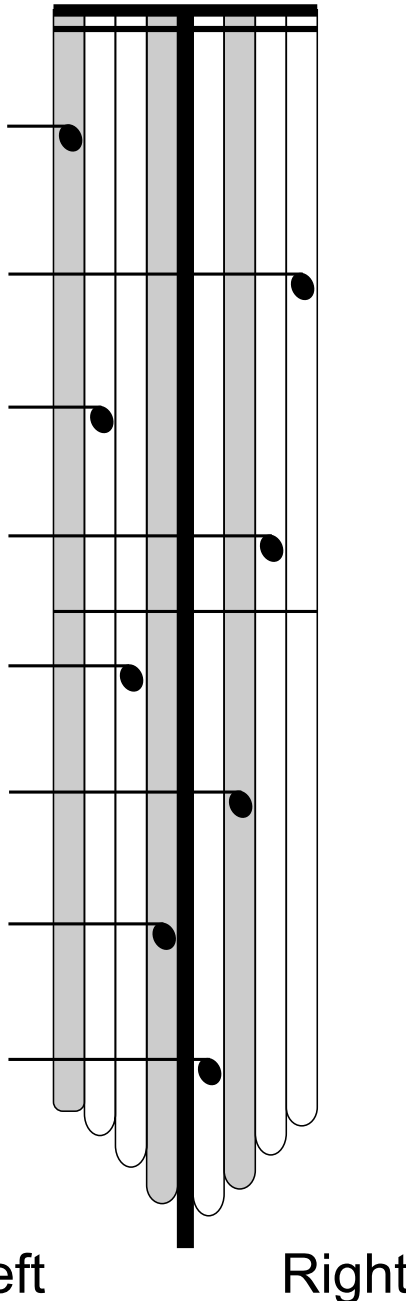
LEFT



The image shows two staves of music, labeled "RIGHT" and "LEFT". Both staves are written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The "RIGHT" staff shows a sequence of notes: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5. The "LEFT" staff shows a sequence of notes: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. The notes are connected by stems and beams, indicating a specific rhythmic pattern.

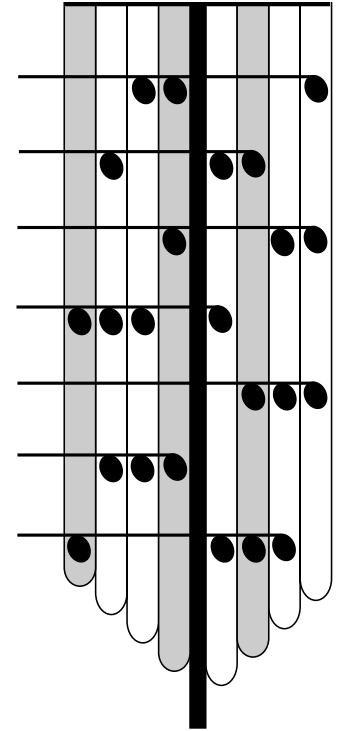
The kalimba with a regular western scale really is simple and it sounds great the first time you play it, but the alternating left-right note layout does take a lot of time to master (years). So, for decades, there have been great kalimbas masters such as Taj Majal or Maurice White, but lacking good instructional materials and lacking a traditional repertoire, there has been no clear path for learning the kalimba. So people invented their own path.

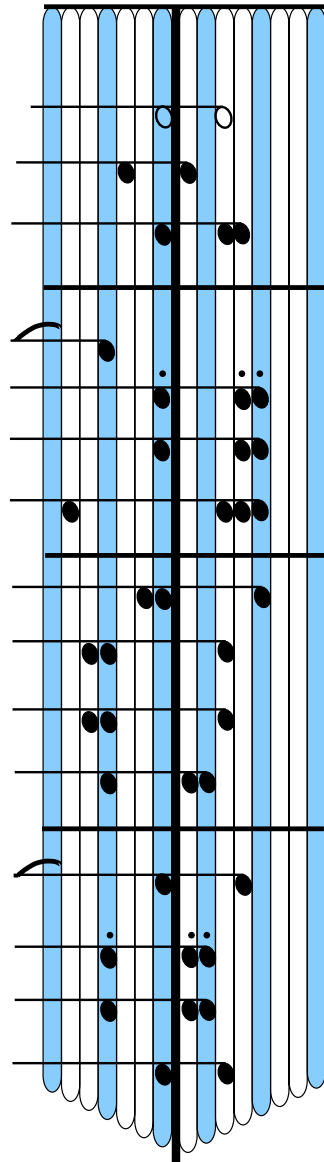
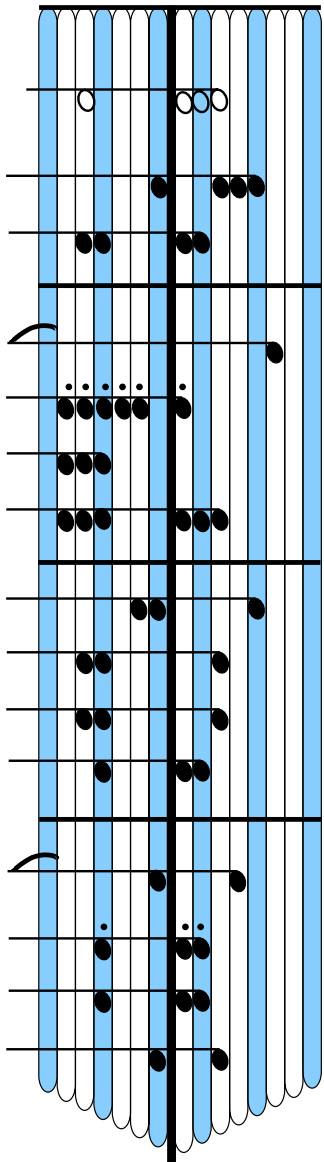
Scale



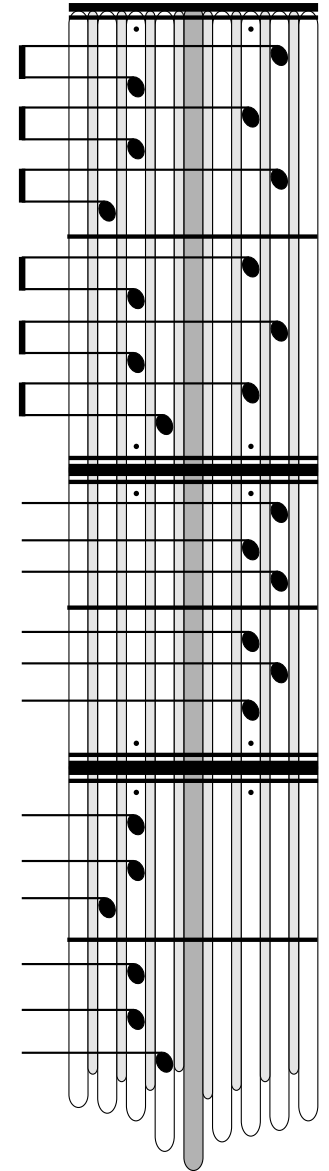
In 2004, while teaching an “at risk” student how to play kalimba, I invented a form of **tablature** that is well-suited to the Hugh Tracey Kalimba. Reading from bottom up, it is a map of the kalimba and is parallel to the kalimba. It breaks all Western musical conventions, but it is well-suited to the kalimba.

Chords





This **tablature** can be modified for virtually every type of kalimba. It is tied to the physical reality of the kalimba and is less symbolic than music staff.



With seven new **kalimba** **books**, it is an exciting time to be learning to play the kalimba.

The Best Ever Book of
8-Note Kalimba Music



Kalimba Fundamentals

for the Hugh Tracey Alto Kalimba

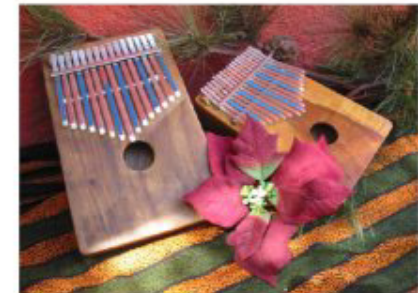
by Mark Holdaway



Kalimba Christmas Carols

for the Hugh Tracey Alto and Treble Kalimbas

by Mark Holdaway



Kalimba Duets and Trios

Alto Kalimba, Treble Kalimba, Cloud 9 Marimbula,
Sansula, Treblito, Pentatonic Kalimba,
Karimba, and 8-Note Kalimba



Kalimba Fundamentals
for the Hugh Tracey Treble Kalimba

by Mark Holdaway



A revolutionary new guide to playing the African thumb piano

Playing The Pentatonic Kalimba

by Mark Holdaway



Written for the Hugh Tracey
11-Note Pentatonic Kalimba

*Covers with X-Tab's Tablature
Reader for Windows computer!
Includes a CD with all songs!*

Playing The Hugh Tracey Karimba

by Mark Holdaway

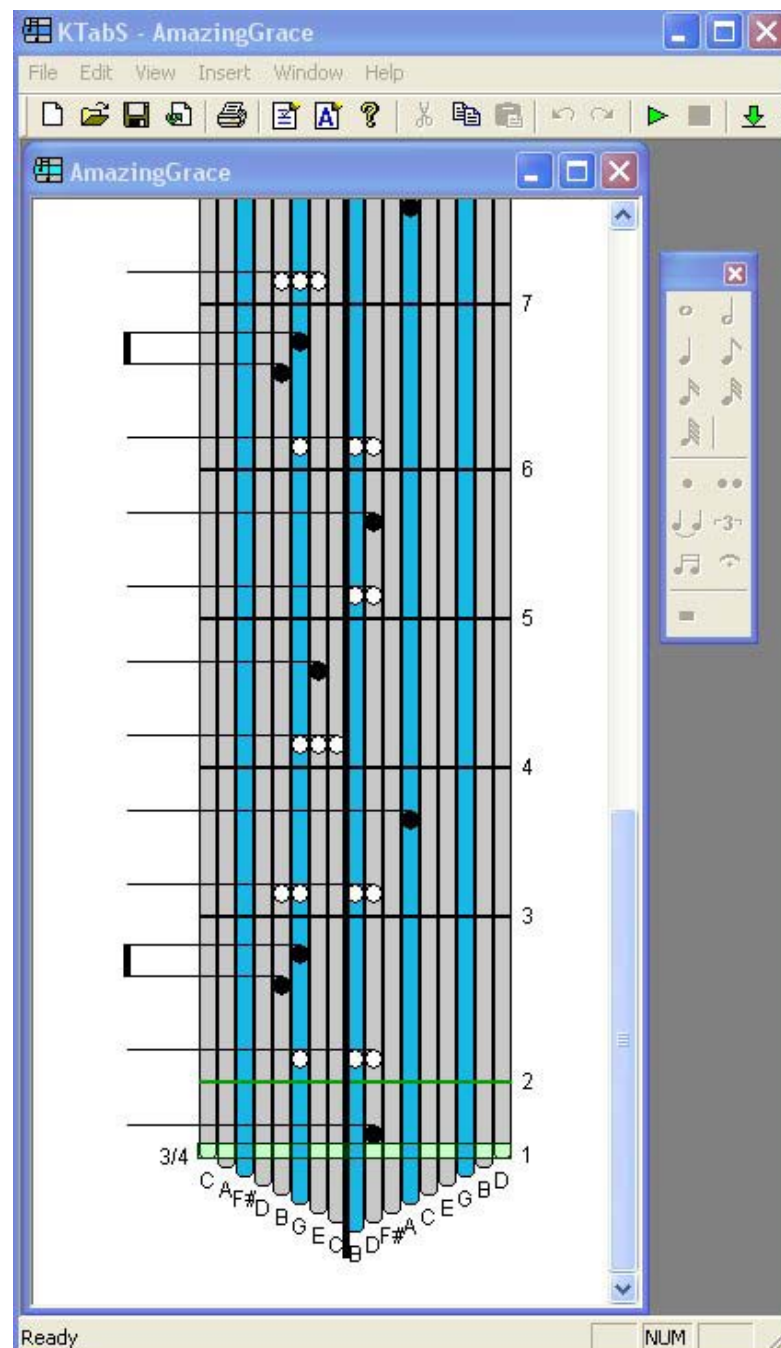


A revolutionary new guide to the traditionally tuned African Karimba

Includes a CD with all exercises!

Kalimba Technology!

In 2006, Sharon and Randy Eaton wrote a simple computer program called **KTabS** which greatly speeds up the tablature-writing process. The notes sound as you plop them down, and your computer will play the song, so most errors are eliminated. KTabS is also a wonderful learning tool for students.



Back to Hugh Tracey's Roots: African Tunings



In the 1970's to present, Andrew Tracey (Hugh's son) ran the International Library of African Music and continued to study African music and kalimbas. In the 1990's AMI started making the *African-tuned karimba*, the grandmother of the *mbira*. The lower row of tines is that ancient tuning we started with.

More New Tunings: the Final Frontier?

The kalimba is an ancient African instrument with hundreds of forms and tunings and a rich spiritual tradition. Every group of people that encounters the kalimba makes it their own, adapting its uses and tunings.

Now, as people around the world encounter the kalimba, we can give it a Japanese or Persian tuning. Each different tuning turns the kalimba into a different instrument with a different voice, which helps it to express different emotions.

The Promise of the Kalimba

The kalimba is a symmetric instrument, treating Left and Right on equal footing, stimulating our brains in a bilateral manner. It is a simple instrument - the magic lies in the tuning which defines the landscape in which the player will explore, and if it is in tune, it will sound good for anyone. It is a healing instrument, with beauty and symbolism that lead people into a place of peace and joy. It is an instrument that asks us to approach it both intuitively and intellectually, and it holds the possibility of bringing us into unity as human beings.

And it is an instrument which is ripe for innovative uses in Music Education and Music Therapy.