

10 EASY WAYS TO USE THE KALIMBA IN MUSIC THERAPY

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KALIMBA MAGIC

1) In a drum jam, the kalimba can be used as a rhythm instrument. Of course, the kalimba will have tonality (as do the drums), but if you are playing kalimba with drums (and without a guitar or piano or marimba), you don't have to worry about key or pitch or anything - just play. You don't even need to be in tune! That said, for every other mode of using the kalimba in music therapy that we present, being in tune is the most important thing you can do to keep your kalimbas sounding great. About once a month, you should spend 5-10 minutes tuning with a tuner and fixing any buzzes that arise. Learn how to do that at www.kalimbamagic.com/learnhow/learnhow.php

In improvisational music, rhythm is more important than pitch - ie, being in the groove with your timing is often good enough, and in this situation the pitches you play totally don't matter. On the other hand, you are free to create melodies or chords or arpeggios or chord progressions... but you don't have to. You have total freedom.

Advice for playing kalimba with drums: get an electric kalimba and plug in? Play with shakers or quiet drums? Play the kalimba on a drum head or in a gourd to amplify it? In a drum circle, the leader can bring the volume and energy level down so that the kalimba can be heard.

Listen to the drums. Most people don't think of drums as being tonal, but even in a drum jam, you can often hear one pitch that seems to be the key of the drum circle. You probably have a note that is close to this tonal center on your kalimba. If you can find that note on your kalimba, make that be the "root note" - ie, home base. You can figure this out. Most of your clients could use some help from you in this regard, but it is not required.

See how much music you can make with just two notes. When you get bored with that, try a different pair of notes. Some pairs of notes will work very well. When you feel you have that under your belt, expand to three notes - experiment with a different note to add to your favorite two notes. You can make great music with only a few notes.

2) The kalimba can be used as a chording instrument that can back up singers, just like a guitar. A diatonic kalimba in the key of G can play all of the modal chords: G, Am, Bm, C, D, Em, and F#m dim - enough to play thousands of folk, popular, even rock and classical songs. Kalimba Magic has chord charts for most of our kalimbas, and chords are actually very simple on the diatonic kalimbas, made by playing three adjacent tines. The book *Rise Up Singing* has the chord progressions to 1200 songs, and you probably know 200 of them. *Blowin in the Wind*, *Ripple*, *The Rose*, *Bicycle Built for Two*, *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* are examples. Any song that requires accidentals or odd chords needs to be finessed or abandoned. A very common finesse can be found in *Bicycle Built for Two*. On the words "all for the love of", the II chord needs to be played - or A major if you are in the key of G. As the G kalimba lacks the C# required for the A major chord, it seems this song is out. An easy work-around: you can skip the C, and just play the A and E, the 1 and 5 of the A chord, and nobody will know the difference!

A song might be in the key of your kalimba, in which case you just read the chords right out of the book. If the song is in a different key, you have two choices - you can retune your kalimba (ie, to change a Hugh Tracey Alto from G to C, you just retune your two F# tines to F natural, and now C is the root); or you could transpose the song (from the key of A to G for example, bringing every chord down a whole step). Kalimba Magic has a free 6 page download that explains in detail how to do these tricks.

Once you have gotten the hang of playing kalimba chords to support your singing, it is actually not difficult to add the melody. On a diatonic kalimba, two notes an octave apart will be on opposite sides of the kalimba, so you can often play chords low down on one side of the kalimba and melody higher up. Most melodies require you play on both sides, and as the chords change, you will have to change sides as well. So, it requires some thought and some practice, but once you get the hang of it, it is actually very natural and it sounds great.

3) Two or more similarly-tuned kalimbas can play together in many, many ways. We name just a few:

Game 1 - each person plays just two notes, one player after the other. Try to build structures together - try to mimic each other's playing. Try changing the rules (ie, play three notes). This technique also works for differently-tuned kalimbas.

Game 2 - play a simple riff, maybe 4 or 6 notes long, and consider this "home base" - teach it to everyone. Then one player will break away from the pack and play louder than the others, shining their light, soloing for a measure or two while everyone else hangs out on "home base". When the soloist is done, it is the next person's turn. It helps to have a strong musical presence in this game to direct the rhythm of the changing of the turns.

Game 3 - Two people on one kalimba. Lets say you and the client are side-by-side, you to the left. Your left hand is on the kalimba, and the client's right hand is on the kalimba. Start by playing a scale in which notes strictly alternate from side to side. Try playing different types of patterns. Work together. Now switch sides. I don't know if it is similar for other people, but I find my left and right hands have very different "personalities", and that comes out in the way they play the kalimba. You can do "role play" with your left and right hands!

You probably know similar musical games that can be applied to the kalimba - when something works well, write it down or otherwise remember it! You will develop your own catalog of successful games.

A Great Teaching Method - while you can usually teach a short 4 or 6 note phrase without resorting to any tools, longer pieces can sometimes be more efficiently taught by using some props. A great example is to draw out a two or three foot version of the kalimba tines on a large piece of paper, and label the tines. I personally like to label the tines on this diagram with numbers, "1" for Do, "2" for Re, "3" for Mi - and also write the numbers on the actual kalimbas' tines with a Sharpee marker. I have two great big cardboard "thumbs" which I swat the tines on the diagram with, and I sing numbers to the tune: "Three two one two three three three..." Start out slow and wait until everyone gets the note before progressing. You need to know the song pretty well yourself, so no faking is permitting! This method works really well with the 8-note kalimba. Larger kalimbas which have two of the same note in different octaves can provide a bit of a challenge - the student needs to decide between the low "1" and the high "1" - but they get the hang of it - they hear you singing low or high, they learn that low notes are longer tines, and they see you swatting the low "1" on the right or the high "1" on the left. You can teach fairly complex tunes this way, and you can even teach some harmony and counterpoint.

4) Two or more differently-tuned kalimbas can work well together, but you need to be careful not to get "sonic mud". If they are played at the same time, the possibility of dissonance exists. If you understand the nature of the scales on the different kalimbas, you yourself can stay away from the notes that clash with your client's kalimba. However, an easier way to make this work is to take turns playing. The different scales will have different emotional pallets - for example, a major and a minor scale. Of course, any kalimba that plays a major scale will also have the relative minor scale, but making the lowest note be the root note is very suggestive - if you have a kalimba with C as the lowest note, trained musicians will easily be able to play in A minor just by switching the root note from C to A, but if you want your clients to play in a minor key, you would be better off retuning the kalimba to C minor - ie, C D Eb F G Ab Bb C, which is accomplished by flattening the E, A, and B. If you need help retuning a kalimba, go to YouTube and search on "tuning kalimba".

My suggestion: if you have an array of kalimbas in different tunings, the client can sample each and select the one that sounds the way they feel. You (or another client) will pick a different kalimba. Now, the two (or more) kalimbas can have a polite conversation, each expressing a musical statement with an emotional undertone, in turns. Each player needs to listen to the other(s), but when they respond, their kalimba will be loaded with different notes, and different emotions as well.

5) Chordal 5-note choirs. Hokema makes delightful little 5-note kalimbas which are beautiful and robust, and they fit well in small hands. I would recommend these kalimbas for ages 5 or 6 and up, and make sure the clients use their thumb nails! The standard tuning is an F minor chord, but they can be tuned to any chord (though not any voicing of any chord, as there are physical limitations). The retuning of the Hokema kalimbas and sansulas is a bit tricky as these kalimbas' tines are very slow to budge, and it is possible to hurt your fingers badly if you are pushing on the tines and something slips. If you have any doubts, let Kalimba Magic perform the retuning for you. My idea was to retune each 5-note kalimba to a different but related chord. For example, to Fm we could add Bbm and C7. If these chords are played one at a time, they can play some great music. For starters, you could direct the order in which they are played - Fm - Bbm - Fm - Bbm - Fm - Bbm - C7 - Fm for example. You may start out with some rules, such as each person plays three or four notes, or plays a specific rhythm that everyone can copy, or perhaps sometimes play the three right-side notes and sometimes play the three left-side notes (the central note can be on either side).

If you have more chords - Fm Bbm C7 Ab G7 - you could let everyone off the leash and just have them take turns - while one person is playing, someone else steps forward to signal that they are next, giving a quasi-random order to the chords. Because the chords are related, they all sound good one after the other, almost like Bach, though they won't all sound good if played at the same time. The music will have some logic even though that logic may not originate in the minds of the players. The tunings tilt the odds in favor of musical success. Playing in this way teaches the players to take turns, to listen to each other, to mirror the physical patterns of others, and to recognize a higher structure which is formed by the music as a whole, and to recognize their individual roles and contributions to that higher structure.

Another tuning option: if you have a C major diatonic kalimba, try using 5-note kalimbas tuned to C, F, and G (ie, I, IV, V), or to Am, G, and C. Your clients can play the chordal kalimbas in turn while you provide a melodic framework with the diatonic kalimba. Your clients will actually have the power to cast your melody into a different light (ie, C major or A minor work equally well with most C major melodies).

6) Use a pentatonic kalimba with a guitar for chording. The major pentatonic scale consists of the notes 1 2 3 5 6 8 - ie, it is missing the 4 and 7, notes which are only a half step away from the 3 and 8 notes. As such, the possibility of strong dissonance is reduced. If your client has a G major pentatonic kalimba, play music on your guitar using the chords G C D (ie, the I - IV - V of G) and the relative minors of these chords, Em Am and Bm, and let your client just go crazy - anything goes, at least for your client. As for you, it may be better if you do a repeatable chord progression so your client can begin to predict what the changes are. Over time, your client may realize that some kalimba notes work better with some of the chords you are playing. They won't know what chords you are playing, but they may feel the chord changes. You can help with that realization - point it out when you hear them doing something really consonant with what you are doing.

Don't feel the need to play all the possible chords. For example, the opening riff of the verses of the Indigo Girls song *Closer to Fine* - G Am C D (with or without suspension on the D) could be slowed down and repeated. Even easier for starters: play a two chord progression, repeat as necessary.

There are two different models of 11-note Hugh Tracey pentatonic kalimbas in G (G minor is also a good tuning for these). Hokema makes a very nice A minor pentatonic (A major also works). The 8-Note Catania kalimbas can also be retuned to a pentatonic scale - C major or minor, but the tines are long enough that they could be tuned down as low as A or G. As a music therapist, you should be building up an arsenal of tonal musical instruments that work together in some particular way, so give some thought to what key or keys you want your kalimbas to be in.

7) You can learn a beautiful song on the kalimba. While the kalimba is magical, it is not magic. A good scale or tuning or note layout can tilt the probability of success, but if you want to learn a particular song, you aren't going to get there randomly. You will have to spend some time working on it. You might totally know how a song goes in terms of notes and intervals, but you need to translate that onto the physical reality of the kalimba. I've seen some musical geniuses who could do that on the fly, but most of us need some time to get the Left-Right thing going. A very common mistake: let's say you are playing a note on the left, and you know you need to go to the next note *higher* in the scale. You know it is on the other side (on the right), and the tine you need to play is just a bit shorter than the one you just played on the left. A very common mistake is to play the wrong tine on the right side - ie, one note *lower* than the left side note, or a 3rd lower than the note you intended to play. The good news is that your mistake will harmonize with the note you wanted to play, so the mistake won't be a disaster note, but it won't sound like the song you were trying to play either.

Fortunately, there is a trick to getting this right. On the Hugh Tracey kalimbas, every third tine is painted. These painted tines are your guides in at least four ways: they help you keep your place (a tine is either painted, one above a painted tine, or one below a painted tine); they help you relate the left side tines to the right side tines (a painted tine on the right will be one note higher in the scale than the corresponding painted tine on the left); they help you relate notes across kalimbas (if you see someone play a painted tine and then the unpainted tine right above it, you can translate that to your kalimba's tines and play the same thing); and finally, the painted tines allow you to translate from the printed page - ie, tablature - to your kalimba. At this point, hundreds of songs are available in tablature. Check out the Kalimba Magic books. If we don't have the song you want, ask me - I might have it already in tablature, or I might agree that this would be a good song for me to put into tablature. Or you could put the song into tablature yourself. By the way, if your kalimba's tines are unpainted, you may want to paint them. Take some time to figure out which tines to paint. Ask me if you have doubts.

Once you learn a good song, you can use that as a tool - an opening ritual, a soothing piece of music, something beautiful and captivating. There are endless uses for beautiful, reproducible songs on the kalimba. Last year, I was preparing a medley of classical pieces on the kalimba for a performance in a church when I was approached by a social worker who asked me to play for her client who had been at death's door for over a month but could not let go. I asked her what kind of music her client liked. "Classical." My image was to give the client something so beautiful that she might feel her life was complete. She passed an hour after I left.

8) You can use the kalimba to connect with our African ancestors. We all have DNA that takes us back to Africa. For some, that takes us back a few hundred years. For others, it might be tens of thousands of years. But connecting with Africa, our ancestral birthplace, can be something of value no matter who we are.

Every kalimba owes its existence to the genius of unknown Africans and their innovations, so this African connection works symbolically with any kalimba. However, we can do better if we want. The 8-Note Student Karimba (made by retuning an 8-Note diatonic kalimba) is a truly ancient instrument, possibly the original tuning of the first metal-tined kalimbas from about 1300 years ago. Tablature for the basic parts of nine different traditional pieces is available from Kalimba Magic. Using the karimba diagram method described in **3)** above, I have successfully taught some of these pieces to students as young as 8 years.

The 17-Note African-tuned Karimba, also known as the *mbira nyunga nyunga* (*mbira sparkle sparkle*), is based on the 8-Note Student Karimba, but with nine additional notes. The additional notes are shorter (higher) and are put in between the original notes. On the right side, they are an octave above the adjacent lower tines, and on the left side they are a fifth above the adjacent lower tines. This arrangement makes for easy embellishment of the basic tunes, which are played mostly on the original lower notes. 10 traditional African tunes, each with up to 10 different variations that use the upper tines, are available as a download from Kalimba Magic. By the way, the karimba is the grandmother of the *mbira dzavadzimu*, or the great mbira of the ancestral spirits, one of the highest forms of traditional African kalimbas.

9) The kalimba can be played in contact with a client's body. I'm a scientist by training, and I won't give you any new age ideas about how this works. I will tell you that for many people, it feels good or tickles.

Several times a year, I play for a group of about 20 developmentally and/or physically disabled young adults at a day care place, and they *love* this. I ask permission to play kalimba in contact with their body - a few people don't want this at all, so I respect that. I ask them what sort of music they want. One kid who usually wears a Dale Earnhardt Jr racing cap always answers "Something fast!" Another common answer is "Something soothing" or "Something peaceful". Other people want to feel as if they are dancing. I have had answers as complex as "Flowers and butterflies, a warm summer day in a beautiful meadow." You can see, having some familiarity with the kalimba helps! I ask where they would like the kalimba to be placed in contact with their body. In some cases, I just play near them - over their head, waving the kalimba like a magic wand as I play it. I have played on the head, on the back of the neck, on the shoulder or upper arm, on the back, or on the side. Sometimes it tickles, sometimes people laugh. What good does this do? The best answer I can give is that I am giving something special to each person - they get something unique to who they are, something beautiful, with some special attention from me just for them. Of course, you can do that without the kalimba. But the kalimba is a special little toy, a beautiful prop, that gives me an excuse to be present with each person. It gives the client something to feel magical about. While I am being present with one person, everyone in the room experiences the music and the personal connection in their own way, so there are both individual connections and connections with the group, and nobody gets bored waiting for their turn.

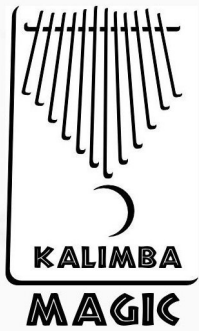
10) Supportive backing for improvised vocal expressions. Sometimes it is hard to say things. Sometimes it is hard to feel things. Facial expressions don't just reflect emotions - they can also drive emotions. The connections in our brains between the emotions and the facial muscles goes both ways, and if we smile we can make ourselves happier, and if we frown, we can make ourselves feel sad. A similar thing happens with music - we can drive our emotions with music, and different tunings can be helpful here. It might be great to be happy all the time, but sometimes the things we need to work on are sad things from our past. We might just need a minor-tuned kalimba in our hands to help us get in the mood to help us speak to our fears, our pains, our regrets.

At Kalimba Magic, we try to give you more than you bargained for, and here is one for free!

11) Story Telling / Guided Meditation. I use kalimba extensively with story telling. I feel that I am actually more expressive on kalimba than I am on voice. The expressive kalimba music pulls and pushes my voice and helps me fill it with emotion. There are so many little tricks you can do with the kalimba - any upward or downward motions in the story line can be mirrored by upward or downward motions on the kalimba. The emotion of the story, or changes in the energy level of the story line can be mirrored on the kalimba. Kalimba notes can be used as book ends, setting the scene for your words like royal trumpeters announcing the presence of the king or queen. You can do these things, but even more importantly, your clients can do these things too. Even though I have been playing kalimba for exactly half of my life - 23 1/2 years - I have been amazed at the new ideas that have come from people who have just picked up the kalimba. There are no rules, and people often seem to have immediate access to something wonderful when they pick up the kalimba.

In my new book *Playing the Sansula*, I have a section devoted to *guided improvisations*. Guided improvisations are like guided meditations, with a spoken (or internal and unspoken) story line and a musical response. For a guided meditation, the kalimba could help set the emotional stage along with the guiding words.

12) What are your contributions? I am not a Music Therapist, but a musician. A good intuitive musician will have some of the instincts that Music Therapists learn to develop, but I am really just shooting into the dark, or playing with fire. I think these techniques are generally useful, but you will be able to fine tune them to use as tools for different situations. But as you become familiar with the kalimba and its wonders, you will blaze your own path and invent or adapt your own techniques. When you learn to fly, that is where the real fun begins.



Did you know:

Kalimba Magic has the largest selection of kalimbas we know of anywhere?

Kalimba Magic has a “Tip of the Day” Monday through Thursday to help you improve your kalimba playing? The archives have over three years of tips.

Kalimba Magic is the top-ranked kalimba site on the internet?

Kalimba Magic has dozens of top-rated music videos on You Tube?

Kalimba Magic has a buyers guide online to help you select the right kalimba for you?

Kalimba Magic has 24 high quality books (many with CDs) and instructional downloads that will help you learn to play 10 different types of kalimba?

Kalimba Magic has a monthly e-mail newsletter packed full of great information (such as this Music Therapy article) on the kalimba and its history and what other people are doing with their kalimbas?

Kalimba Magic has “Learn How to Play” pages for the Hugh Tracey Alto, the Hugh Tracey Treble, the Karimba, the Pentatonic Kalimba, the 8-Note Kalimba, and the Sansula? These pages serve as an index to help you find the books, newsletter articles, and tips that are geared towards each type of kalimba.

The Kalimba Magic web site has a powerful search tool to help you find the information you need from its thousands of pages of top-quality content?

Kalimba Magic has a kalimba doctor service? We can often fix your broken or neglected kalimba, and we can retune your kalimba to the key or scale that you need if you can't or don't want to do it.

Kalimba Magic is in the process of starting a non profit, Tuning in to Africa, that will return some of the profits from the kalimbas to the people who are making the kalimbas in Africa?

Kalimba Magic is listening to you! Give us a call or send us an e-mail, and we'll help you figure out what you need to know. Or if you figure out something cool, we might feature you in our newsletter!

I'm Mark Holdaway, creator of Kalimba Magic, and I've been playing the kalimba for half my life. I am a musician first, and a salesman second. I provide services and a level of understanding that no other kalimba seller can match.

At Kalimba Magic, you don't just buy a kalimba - you enter into a relationship with someone who cares deeply about the kalimba and making sure that you are able to get the most out of your kalimba.

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