

MBIRA

traditional music from Zimbabwe

The mbira (or zanza) is a unique, plucked instrument. Flat, metal tongues of different lengths are arranged horizontally on a resonating wooden box or a small hollowed-out pumpkin. The pitch can be altered by pulling the metal slivers in or out. Materials that produce a rustling sound are fastened onto the instrument: shells, stonefruits, seeds, or a very thin metal ribbon. The small noises that are heard are a part of the overall sound. The mbira is native to many African countries, especially to Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) where it can almost be called the national instrument.

Mbira is a very quiet, intimate music, not at all in the same category as the African music of penetrating energy and large dynamics. Actually, it is a transcription because it uses instruments that don't originally play together with the mbira: the marimbula (bass mbira), axatse (rattle) and gankogui (high cowbell).