Mbiras, Marimbas, and You: Zimbabwean Music for the General Music Classroom
A Smithsonian Folkways Lesson
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Summary:
Learn to play and compose music with the mbira. Explore the use of the instrument in Zimbabwe to understand the relation of music to history and culture and its ability to incite social change. Lesson includes notations, historical background, and recordings and images from Smithsonian Folkways.

Suggested Grade Levels: 3-5, 6-8, 9-12
Country: Zimbabwe
Region: Africa
Culture Group: African
Genre: Mbiri
Instruments: Mbiras, bass, alto, and soprano xylophone
Language: Shona
Co-Curricular Areas: Social Studies
National Standards: 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9

Prerequisites: None

Objectives
- History of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe
- Understanding music as an index of social change
- Life and work of Zimbabwean musicians
- Basic knowledge of language, geography, values, and musical culture of Zimbabwe

Materials:
- “Rungano rgwe rombe”
  http://www.folkways.si.edu/robin-magiriri/rungano-rgwe-rombe/track/smithsonian
  mbira recording, also images of mbira players
- “Zimbige”
  http://www.folkways.si.edu/tawagaza-sibanda/zimbige/track/smithsonian
  mbira recording, also images of mbira players
“Chemtengure”
http://www.folkways.si.edu/lora-chiorah-dye-and-sukutai/chemtengure/world/music/track/smithsonian

“Nyoka Musango”
http://www.folkways.si.edu/lora-chiorah-dye-and-sukutai/nyoka-musango/world/music/track/smithsonian

“Mwari Komborera I Africa”
http://www.folkways.si.edu/lora-chiorah-dye-and-sukutai/mwari-komborera-i-africa/world/music/track/smithsonian

“Nkosi Sikeleli Afrika (National Anthem of South Africa)”
http://www.folkways.si.edu/nkosi-sikeleli-afrika-lord-bless-africa/amandla-awethu-strength-is-ours-medley/historical-song-struggle-protest-world/music/track/smithsonian


Maps of Zimbabwe and Southern Africa

Pictures of varying types of Mbiras, from SFW, internet, Berliner books, liner notes

Lesson Segments:

1. **An Introduction to the Mbira** (National Standards 2, 5, 6, 8, 9)

2. **Music and Social Change in Zimbabwe: The Cimurenga Songs** (National Standards 4, 6, 8, 9)

3. **Children’s Culture in Zimbabwe** (National Standards 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9)

4. **An Integrative, Performance-Based Extension Project for Choirs – God Bless Africa: An African Anthem** (National Standards 1, 5, 6, 8, 9)

1. **An Introduction to the Mbira**
   a. Play Rungano rgwe rombe or Zimbige:
      i. Rungano rgwe rombe
         http://www.folkways.si.edu/robin-magiriri/rungano-rgwe-rombe/track/smithsonian
      ii. Zimbige
         http://www.folkways.si.edu/tawagaza-sibanda/zimbige/track/smithsonian
      iii. Ask students the following questions before the first listen:
           1. What instruments are being played?
           2. What might those instruments be made of?
           3. How might they be played?
iv. Ask students the following questions and listen again:
   1. What do you notice about the form of the piece being played?
   2. What do you notice about the phrasing of the selection?
   3. Are there any unusual features, particularly regarding use of scale
      or intonation?

b. Zimbabwe and the Mbira
   i. Show maps of Southern Africa and Zimbabwe as an introduction to the unit.
   ii. Show pictures of varying types of mbiras; (Images can be found on the SFW website and also in “The Soul of Mbira” by Paul Berliner)
   iii. Brief discussion of parts of mbira: keys, gourd resonator, something to create buzzing, tuning (For a brief introduction to mbira construction see Berliner, 1978, 9-11)
   iv. Distribute pictures of Mbiras to small groups of students
   v. Have the students note:
      1. The name of the mbira
      2. What it appears to be made of
      3. How many keys it has and how they are organized into rows
      4. What is acting as a resonator
      5. What is used to create the buzzing quality of the mbira
   vi. Have each group briefly present their findings
   vii. If you have an mbira or two, pass them around for student to see, feel, experiment

c. Playing the music of the Mbira
   i. Listen to Chemutengure (SFW recording/Transcriptions)
      http://www.folkways.si.edu/lora-chiorah-dye-and-sukutai/chemtengure/world/music/track/smithsonian
      Read liner notes together
   ii. Transfer to Orff instruments (see accompanying transcriptions)
      1. Read rhythms of each part separately
      2. Divide class into two parts and clap rhythms together
      3. Demonstrate each part on Orff instruments
      4. Select students to play parts, first separately and then together
   iii. Play and explore Chemutengure Variations I, II, III (opportunity to discuss the concept of Variation in music!)

d. Optional Biographical Reading
   i. John Kunaka, Mbira Maker, by Paul Berliner
   ii. Opportunity for written assignment

   i. Each student or pair will need seven tongue depressors and two large, black and silver binding clips (the big ones used to clip larger stacks of paper)
   ii. Instruct students to clamp two tongue depressors across the other five, arranging them so they protrude at different lengths
iii. Experiment with the sounds created and adjust the protruding depressors to adjust the pitch
iv. Opportunity for short compositions for self-constructed instruments
v. Also, opportunity to integrate an art project; see Wiseman and Langstaff for more complicated homemade mbira designs

**Assessment:** Can the students explain and play the mbira?

2. **Music and Social Change in Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga**
   a. A Brief History of Zimbabwe: Colonization through Independence
      i. Read “Music as an Index of Socio-political Change in Zimbabwe” together (included at back of unit)
      ii. Explore time-line
   b. Listening Examples
      i. Safarini in Transit: Nyoka Musango (SFW Recording)
         2. Identify Instruments
         3. Discussion of evolution of Mbira music: similar style, song of Thomas Mapfumo, played by marimba ensemble
      ii. Opportunity for Arranging: Advanced students might arrange Nyoka Musango for Orff Ensemble

**Assessment:** Can students discuss social change in Zimbabwe?

3. **Children’s Culture in Zimbabwe**
   a. Stories and transmission of culture
      i. Read or recall favorite Greek myths or Aesop’s Fables
      ii. Discuss the story as a vehicle for the transmission of cultural values to children
      iii. The Shona Story-Song: The Lion on the Path
         1. Read the Foreword to Hugh Tracey’s “The Lion on the Path”
         2. Teach students the sung portion of the Story Song “The Lion on the Path (Tracey, 1968, p2-3)
         3. Teacher tells story, students perform song at appropriate moments in the story (encourage students to use appropriate dramatic voices: tired voice as the man grows weary, a high squeaky voice for the rabbit)
         4. Develop story into a dramatic re-telling using students as the actors
         5. Add in Orff accompaniment on the Mbira part (see transcription)
   iv. Opportunity for the creation of a new story song based on the transmission of current, American values (i.e. say no to drugs, stay in school, respect your parents and teachers). Alternatively, students might adapt favorite myths or fables into the story song format.
Students can compose a brief musical theme to be interjected into the drama at varying points.

   i. Teach students the basic clapping movements, without a partner
      1. Clap hands, swoop up and out, and clap again
      2. From a clapping position, extend the right hand with the back of the hand facing out; alternate extending and clapping
      3. Approximate clapping a partner's hands, crossing over with the right and then the left and then clapping hands together (R, L, Clap)
   ii. Sing the song and have students count the number of times you sing the whole word “sorida” (4)
   iii. Sing again and have them count the number of times you sing just “rida” (8)
   iv. Sing again and count the number of times you sing da-da-da (4)
   v. Work out the pattern on the board
   vi. Perform song
   vii. Add clapping motions alone
   viii. Create concentric circles of partners
   ix. Work through clapping patterns with the partner
   x. Sing and clap
   xi. Move the outside circle one partner to the left and play again

**Assessment:** Can the students complete the hand-clapping game? Do they understand the children’s cultural tradition of Zimbabwe?

4. An Integrative, Performance-Based Extension Project for Choirs – *God Bless Africa: An African Anthem*
   a. Zimbabwe: Mwari Komborera Africa
      i. Listen to SFW selection
         http://www.folkways.si.edu/lora-chiorah-dye-and-sukutai/mwari-komborera-i-africa/world/music/track smithsonian
      ii. Learn melody and Shona lyric (see transcription)
      iii. Discuss English translation
      iv. Learn and perform with Orff accompaniment (see transcription)
   b. South Africa: Nkosi Sikelele Afrika
      i. Listen to SFW selection
         http://www.folkways.si.edu/nkosi-sikeleli-afrika-lord-bless-africa/amandla-awethu-strength-is-ours-medley/historical-song-struggle-protest-world/music/track smithsonian
      ii. Learn melody and Xhosa lyric
      iii. Read through Sesotho and Afrikaans verses
      iv. Discuss English translation
v. Discuss the role of language in unifying a nation that does not all speak the same language
vi. Compare English translations of Zimbabwe and South African versions: similarities of theme, differences between themes
c. Repeat sequence for Tanzanian and Zambian version of the anthem
   i. Continue to compare themes of freedom, liberty, unity, religion
d. Performance Opportunities
   i. Choral Arrangements: Consider performing one of the choral arrangements included in the resource list. It may be possible to incorporate one or more of the languages discussed in class into the South African arrangements available.
e. Consider performing the Unison and Orff accompaniment arrangement provided here (see transcription). Makes a nice pairing with a full choral arrangement.
f. An opportunity to integrate some of the historical and cultural information covered in class into performances. Teach the audience in the following ways:
   i. Consider having students prepare program notes detailing the history of this African Anthem, its role in the promotion of African Nationalism, its use in many countries, in different languages.
   ii. Consider having students introduce the piece, its historical and cultural context, and identify the languages and verses being performed.
   iii. Consider having students explain the use of Orff accompaniment to approximate the traditional Zimbabwe instrument, the Mbira. Students could also prepare a brief demonstration/presentation on the Mbira

Assessment: Can the students sing the tine with Orff accompaniment?

Extensions:
- Walt Hampton books, Hot marimba and Marimba Mojo, Collections of Zimbabwean-style music for Orff Instruments
- Consider bringing in culture bearers from the community: a local marimba ensemble, an mbira player, a visiting artist from Zimbabwe, a musician originally from Zimbabwe, or a person who has studied or lived in Zimbabwe.
- Opportunities for in-depth discussion about South Africa, colonization, apartheid, issues of race and oppression
- Parallels in political theater (See extended reading list for readings on the nature and role of political theater in Zimbabwe.)