

FALLING IN LOVE WITH THE KALIMBA

**CHAPTER 1**

**UNDERSTANDING THE KALIMBA – HISTORY, PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION, HOW IT’S PLAYED**

If you have been searching for tranquility and enchantment all wrapped up in an instrument, you have probably been searching for the Kalimba without knowing it. This is an instrument that produces the most fluid and most haunting of percussive sounds and one that touches the soul of both player and listener.

A brief history

The Kalimba is an updated version of the African mbira and began from very humble beginnings. Hugh Tracey, the man who made the instrument wildly popular took a trip from England to modern day Zimbabwe (formerly called Rhodesia) in the 1920s in a bid to help his older brother cultivate his tobacco farm. While in Rhodesia, Tracey was fascinated by the local music culture, so much so that he undertook a study of African music, encouraged to do so by Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams, two prominent composers of those times.

Tracey would go on to create the International Library of African Music. He was interested in the mbira, and he created the Kalimba based on the African mbira. The idea was to create an adaptation of the mbira that was better suited for Western music.

He registered the Kalimba in the early 1960's, and this diatonic instrument would soon become popular all around the world.

What does it mean?

The word Kalimba can be translated to literarily mean “little music”.

One instrument, several names

The name Kalimba is known throughout much of Africa, but the name of “mbira” is more commonly used in Zimbabwe. In Kenya, it is called Kalimba, while it is called likembe in Congo, and ikembe in Rwanda.

Other regional names that are associated with the Kalimba are marimbula, marimba, sansa, and sanza.

In the western world, more generic names such as the thumb piano, gourd piano, or finger harp are used to represent the Kalimba.

Physical description

The basic Kalimba has a sound box with tongues (called lamellas) or metal keys affixed on the top. While the tongues or keys can be made from cane, they are often fashioned out of European spring steel. On the other hand, the sound box is almost always made of an African hardwood called Kyatt wood.

There are however homemade versions of the Kalimba, fashioned from bicycle spokes, spring wire (cut and hammered to the desired shape), and old spoon handles.

To play the Kalimba, the player has to pluck the tongues or keys with a combination of his fingers and thumbs. These keys are usually between 20 and 24 metal tongues and are mounted across two bars at one end, and attached to the sound box with a wooden dowel holding them in place.

The bar closest to the sound hole serves as the bridge, while the other one provides a means for the dowel to hold the keys in place.

The tongues’ free ends are positioned at different lengths, and this is what allows them to produce the variety of pitches that the Kalimba is renowned for. A longer tongue or key produces a lower pitch while a shorter tongue or key produces a higher pitch.

How it’s played

The Kalimba can be played by either alternating between both thumbs or using both thumbs simultaneously, and this is why it produces such rhythmic and harmonic effects.

While Tracey created the Kalimba to offer the mbira to the Western world and to appeal to their music sensibilities, most African musicians add a special buzz effect to the instrument, an effect that they create by adding a mirliton device to the Kalimba or by wrapping the tongues with wire.

This adds a supplemental humming or buzzing character to the sound of the instrument, and this is a very crucial sound in many African tribal cultures. Sometimes, musicians attach metal bottle caps or snail shells to the sound box or the soundboard to either create or to enhance the buzzing sound.

It is said that this buzzing sound helps to clear the mind and focus it fully on the music.

Outside of Africa, the buzzing effect is not as commonly used. In the western world particularly, the Kalimba is often played simply so as to intensify the pure sounds of the instrument. In fact, the Kalimba is so well suited for Western music, and is made easy for the performer to play in harmony by using both thumbs.

The Kalimba is classified as a plucked idiophone, and the lamellas (another name for tongues) are depressed and released with the fingers and thumbs of the player. This depression and release creates the same effect as if the tongues are being plucked. Alternatively, the lamellas can be plucked as another type of performance effect.

The Kalimba can be played either as a solo instrument or as an accompaniment to singers, musicians, or dancers.

The difference between a Kalimba and an Mbira

Yes, the Kalimba originated from the mbira, yet they are not one and the same thing, this despite the fact that they are often used interchangeably to describe either of both instruments.

This can however be pretty confusing when someone is learning newly about either of these instruments and even more confusing when that person is trying to purchase one or the other.

The similarities between the Kalimba and the mbira are quite many. Both of them consist of a wooden soundboard with steel keys that players depress and release with their fingers to create a haunting, bell-like sound.

Despite the similarities, the Kalimba is actually a smaller, modern version of the mbira. The mbira on the other hand dates back more than 1,000 years in Zimbabwe.

While the mbira has a double row of keys, the Kalimba has only one. They also differ in their scales. They both feature a seven-note scale, but these are not arranged in the same order.

In the case of the Kalimba, it is possible to create deeper harmonies because of its diatonic scale, which allows every two-note combination to create a diatonic interval.

Both instruments also feature different percussive elements; while the mbira has buzzers, the traditional Kalimba has two holes at the bottom of the sound board that give you a “wa-wa” effect when you wave your fingers in and out of the holes.

**CHAPTER 2**

**WHY THE KALIMBA IS SUCH A GREAT INSTRUMENT TO PLAY**

There are so many reasons that the Kalimba is an excellent instrument to play.

It is fun

The first reason you should learn to play the Kalimba is that it is extremely fun to play, especially when you are hitting the right notes. When you just start playing the instrument, the thrill of hearing the melodic sounds emanating from the box is such an unforgettable one, and this is a thrill you never outgrow. Every time you pick up the Kalimba, and as you get better day by day, you fall in love with it again and again.

The simplicity of it all

There is a simplicity to the Kalimba that allows your spirit to connect with and be one with the spirit of the instrument. I personally make myself open, receptive, and soft when I hold a Kalimba in my hands, after having learnt that approaching the Kalimba with brute strength doesn’t allow one to connect with it.

This gift of being able to connect with the instrument makes playing it like a form of meditation. This being said, its meditative powers transform us, and helps us to reflect on our life journeys. The Kalimba thus gives insights and guidance to become the person we ought to be.

The ability to make complex music

They way that the notes are arranged on the Kalimba helps the player not just play the melody lines, but also accompany the basic melody in the way of chords, arpeggios or even counterpoint. This way, you can make much more complex music with the instrument than you can make with most other instruments.

It is however important to note that because it is a diatonic instrument, the Kalimba cannot play general chromatic music such as we see in some kinds of popular music, as well as some classical pieces and jazz.

A deeper understanding of music

Playing the Kalimba helps you to understand music in a much deeper and different way than other instruments do. This is because there is as much mental work as physical work to be done when learning a piece on the Kalimba, When you play the Kalimba, you learn what sort of thumb dancing that it required to play a certain song.

A unique sound you’ve never quite heard before

One other reason that playing the Kalimba is so great is that it produces a unique sound that encourages you to make unique music. Playing the Kalimba pulls music out of us in a unique way, in simple and clear harmonies, beautifully charming melodies.

It helps us build real musical and emotional sensitivity.

A compact instrument

The Kalimba is a very compact instrument, making it easy to hold and to carry. What more, it is also relatively inexpensive, and has a low environmental impact. No need to go about with a car full of instrument anymore.

The Kalimba can be likened to a music box

The Kalimba is more or less a music box that plays not just preprogramed songs but whatever song you ask it to. The beautiful thing about is that it not only brings you the nostalgia of the antique music box, but it also suffuses you with the intense feelings of the songs you play and the way you touch the instrument. This is why it is such a lovable instrument.

I have yet to see someone be introduced to this instrument, play it, and not fall in love with it. For so many, it is love at first touch.

If you were ever lulled to sleep by a lullaby as a child and you can remember the feeling of contentment and peace that filled you, you have very well captured the feeling that the Kalimba evokes on almost all of its players.

**CHAPTER 3**

**WHY THIS IS A GOOD TIME TO LEARN AN INSTRUMENT**

As at the time of writing this book, the world was heaving under the weight of a global pandemic that took many lives and forced us all to stay at home in quarantine. Quarantine can be very isolating, even if you do not live alone and are quarantined with people you love.

What a perfect time to pick up the Kalimba. What a perfect time to learn a new instrument to give you hope and peace in a world filled with uncertainty and fear.

Even without the global pandemic, we live in a fast paced world that is more often than not not healthy for our minds and total wellbeing.

The Kalimba is like an oasis in the middle of it all. It gives you the power to create beauty and to foster a deep sense of peace that allows you to confidently face the rest of your life. This is because the Kalimba attracts you into the now and invites you to focus inwards as deeply as you can.

Whether you have a demanding and important job that stresses you out or you have so much free time on your hands, the Kalimba is a great instrument to help you deal with your reality as it is.

So, why is this a great time to learn an instrument, particularly the Kalimba?

It is an escape

Playing the Kalimba allows you to escape from reality for a while, as you get yourself lost and disappeared into the instrument as you play away. The truth is that we all need to escape real life from time to time. Perhaps you are depressed, mourning, anxious, sad, alone, scared, or you just feel lost in a big, big world.

Whatever you are feeling and whatever your situation, you need to know that all of us have our own issues that we struggle with, and we can never fully understand what each of us feel individually.

I however urge you to take a moment to escape, whatever your own personal issues may be. What makes the Kalimba a great means of escape is that it doesn’t affect work hours, if you are employed. Just thirty minutes on the Kalimba and you feel refreshed and ready to face another day of work, filled with a deep sense of peace and accomplishment that puts you in a good place.

A sense of purpose

We live in a world where we often question the purpose of our existence. Playing an instrument gives us a sense of purpose, and if there is a time to feel purposeful, it is now.

When you pick up the Kalimba to play, you are filled with a sense of purpose to become better and create something worthwhile. We then begin to push ourselves in order to create ever better music. And as we get better and better, we feel less purposeless than we once did.

A little bit of control

In the beginning paragraphs of this chapter, we briefly discussed how the global Covid 19 pandemic isolated the entire world. In the beginning days of the mandatory lockdown that followed the spread of the virus, I felt a bit out of control, out of sorts. Major decisions such as going to work, going to the grocery, visiting friends etc., were suddenly taken out of my hands, just like I am sure they were taken out of yours too.

For me, the Kalimba became a tiny little universe of music that I could control. I could choose new songs to learn, what music to play. And most importantly I could master my feelings while playing.

With 10, 15, 17 notes, the musical possibilities of the Kalimba seems small enough that you might actually be able to touch mastery. And this possibility of attaining perfection envelopes you in a sense of meaning, even if we question the meaning of events outside of ourselves.

Personal transformation

The global crisis forced all of us to practice mindfulness. We were forced to slow down, to look within, to rediscover a child-like sense of wonder, to be present. This is the beginning of personal transformation for us all.

A bonding experience for families

The pandemic also mandated home schooling for people with young children. For those who did not have young children underfoot, you probably had other household members in closer proximity than ever before. This was a great time to learn a new instrument together, a great opportunity to spend one on one time with each other while creating something beautiful in unison.

**Learning the Kalimba as an adult**

I believe that many of us reading this book are grownups, and you are probably wondering why take on something new as an adult with your life already set out ahead of you.

I want to assure you that you are never too old to learn music. While it might be true that children have an easier time learning music, we must remember that the second best time to plant that tree is now.

If you must know, there are several advantages to learning music as an adult rather than as a child. Here are some of these advantages:

A deeper understanding of music

Your maturity as an adult means that you get to enjoy the music more, emotionally and analytically. It is much easier to understand music theory than you would have as a child. For example, children with no life experience might have a problem recognizing chord progressions and common motifs. However, adults who have spent their lives listening to a variety of music will find these easier to recognize.

As grownups, it is easier for us to relate to the feelings that underlie music compositions because we have the relevant life experiences and required maturity to empathize with the thoughts and feelings that songwriters want to convey.

Yes, children may possess better technical ability than adults, but there are often unable to understand the emotions that abound in classical music. They’re also unable to understand the deep passion and longing that underlies some very beautiful songs, i.e. George Michael’s Careless Whisper.

A greater drive to learn music

You must have heard it said that we need about 10,000 hours of practice in order to master any talent. This is so very true when it comes to music. If you want to learn music, you will need lots of patience, immense discipline, and the ability to sustain your interest for a long, long time. Adults usually have a greater drive to learn music than children because the odds are that you chose to learn this instrument all by yourself, and were not forced (or at least compelled) to do so, as is the case with many children. With this motivation and fire in your belly, it is easier to stay committed to practicing and to becoming a master at the Kalimba.

Children absolutely welcome

After all is said and done, I have only outlined in the above paragraphs why you should not be discouraged to pick up the Kalimba and learn a new instrument as an adult. I am in no way discounting the fact that the Kalimba (as well as other musical instruments) are also made for children.

In fact, the Kalimba is an instrument that children enjoy learning as well. However, many Kalimba experts recommend making children wait till they are about five before they start to learn the Kalimba. This is because the Kalimba requires so much thumb action and very young children tend to have soft thumb nails.

**CHAPTER 4**

**GETTING THE BEST OUT OF YOUR KALIMBA MUSIC TRAINING**

If you are new to learning the Kalimba, here are some tips that will allow you get the very best out of learning the instrument:

Identify the types of music that you like

We often gravitate towards playing the kind of music that we already enjoy listening to, and you most likely have developed clear music preferences by now. Because we are not all the same, we find that some kinds of music engage us more emotionally than it does others. When you identify the kind of music you love and focus on that first while learning to play the Kalimba, you dramatically increase your chances of sticking with your learning.

I encourage you to go through your music library to identify the your preference in music, if this doesn’t jump out at you immediately. You might want to begin from a particular genre, composer, or artist. To build up your repertoire, you can also search for song covers on YouTube.

While at it, you should be able to pinpoint what exactly it is that you like about the kind of music that you do. For example, is it Slash’s guitar solos that you love or is it Axl Rose’s melodic singing, if you are a fan of Guns and Roses?

Be open minded

Yes, we all have our preferred style of music, but I believe that it is important to keep an open mind to new types of music. This allows us to gain new insight and get better ideas. So, while it is important to begin with the music you love, you also must not limit yourself to this kind of music alone. There is a whole world of music out there to enjoy.

Get rid of distractions

You should hold your practice time as absolutely sacred, with no allowance for distractions. This means that the time to practice Kalimba shouldn’t also be the time to be on a Zoom call or to be baking or helping the kids with a project. You should be entirely focused on the Kalimba when you practice. This will require you to self-discipline.

When I first started playing the Kalimba, I would place a timer in front of me as I practiced, and I’d make sure that I kept practicing until the entire time had elapsed.

I also found it helping to practice in a quiet and conducive environment. So, you might want to do the same by practicing where there is less distraction, maybe in a music room (if you have one) or in a corner of your room. And don’t forget to practice in a place that has no mobile phones, dinging laptops or crying children.

Set a schedule but be open

If you are serious about learning the Kalimba, I want to encourage you not to adopt the “practice when it’s convenient” stance. If you want to master the instrument, it is important to set a practice schedule. The sessions should be timed and regular, even if they are not long.

I find that even 30 minutes of practice every day helps and moves you towards mastery. However, if this 30 minutes seems too long for you to carve out of your day all at once, you can schedule 2 or 3 music breaks during the course of the day.

Be flexible though. There may be times when something else will come up that will require your absolute attention. Don’t be averse to putting the Kalimba down and getting on with real life as demanded. What you may want to do in such a case is to schedule a longer practice session the next time to meet up with session you didn’t finish.

Be patient

Musicians and instrument players are not made overnight, so be patient with yourself. Just commit yourself to regular practice and you will soon get to a respectable level of competency.

Take advantage of the internet and other technology

Learning music and learning to play the Kalimba has never been easier. There are so many resources on the web as well as so many apps that will make it easy for you to learn the Kalimba. I will share some of these resources in another chapter.

**CHAPTER 5**

**HOW THE KALIMBA HELPS YOU**

Kalimbas have an undeniable impact in the field of music therapy today.

It’s been found to provide wellness and health benefits to people with depression, hearing impairments, and brain injuries. It also helps people with physical disabilities, as well as those diagnosed with autism.

It has also been found to help soothe and calm babies, also helping new mothers to create a lasting connection with their children due to the fact that it makes them feel less overwhelmed by their new responsibilities.

The simple Kalimba is doing so much for so many people.

Here are the specific ways in which it helps different categories of people:

Mobility issues

People suffering from arthritis, mobility issues, gait and other physical disabilities involving their muscles find the Kalimba to be healing because this musical instrument, by its very design, creates music with only the smallest movements of the thumbs. Also, the vibrations produced from the Kalimba relaxes different muscle groups.

Hearing impairments

The same way the vibration produced from the Kalimba helps to relax the muscle groups of people suffering from mobility issues is the same way that the vibrations allows those with hearing impairments to experience music through their sense of touch.

Stress relief and the management of depression

The simple act of creating music is in itself a vital therapeutic tool. The Kalimba takes this a step further though, creating a sound that is light and whimsical. This triggers and enables positive mood changes. Playing Kalimba music also requires that the player puts his or her energy and focus on the positive activity, and this helps to alleviate stress. A reduced stress level will then help to reduce heart rate and blood pressure until it is at a healthy rate.

Deep breathing

We often breathe more shallowly than we should when we are involved in our daily activities. An activity such as singing, which often accompanies the Kalimba, requires us to breathe deeply from the diaphragm. This helps to strengthen our lungs and respiratory system.

Alzheimer’s

The Kalimba stimulates the player mentally as he or she plays and listens to the music being played. This promotes better memory in people with Alzheimer’s disease. A recent study shows that Alzheimer’s patients often retain music memory better than they retain the spoken word due to the heightened arousal caused by the music.

One of the other reasons that the Kalimba is good for Alzheimer patients is that it requires little or no skill to play, and still packs all the benefits of memory retention.

The Kalimba in fact helps everyone, not just people suffering from Alzheimer’s, to improve their mental performance and memory. This is because playing music is a lot like doing a workout for every part of your brain.

Better coordination

Using the fingers and thumbs in a rhythmic manner for a prolonged amount of time, while also being conscious of playing the correct tones, helps us develop better coordination. This better coordination can translate into better performances as artists, surgeons and into other professions where there is a need for good motor skills and excellent body coordination.

Strengthens your muscles

While some instruments use more muscles than others, all instruments, the Kalimba included, help you use and strengthen some fine muscles in your body that you wouldn’t otherwise have strengthened. Playing an instrument naturally leads to increased physical activity.

Builds the immune system

We are often inspired to create music of our own when we learn to play the Kalimba. Meanwhile, research shows that creating and music of your own often enhances your immunological response, which helps you to fight off viruses.

Improves posture

Holding the Kalimba and any other kind of musical instrument often forces us to sit up straight and have proper alignment. This good posture is good for us all, and is an easy way to relieve neck and back pain.

Other benefits

There are several other benefits to learning to play the Kalimba that goes beyond health benefits. Here are some of them:

Mathematics: When we learn music, we also learn pattern recognition by default. This is in itself mathematical. Beyond that, learning the Kalimba means learning about how music is divided into equal beats and measures, and this will help you become better at mathematics.

Better reading and listening skills: Reading music will create new connections between the synapses in your brain and thus helps to improve your ability to process information by. As a result, reading and retaining info from other sources becomes a lot easier. This is the same way that learning the Kalimba makes you better at listening. It doesn’t matter if you are playing solo or accompanying others, you have to listen for expression, timing, and check if you are in tune. This will carry over into your everyday life to make you a better listener.

Concentration: Learning how to focus is a requisite for learning a new instrument, the Kalimba included. To improve, you must concentrate, and this concentration helps you in other areas of life. This is one of the reasons that music improves the concentration of people with ADD.

Time management: If you want to learn the Kalimba, you must have some patience. Better still, you must be able to manage your time, as mastery requires routine and consistency. The process of figuring out how to fit your Kalimba practice into your busy schedule and adhere by it will help you develop better time management skills that will carry over into other aspects of your life.

A way for you to express yourself: Playing the Kalimba will encourage you to write your own music. Now, whether you do this or not, playing music on the Kalimba gives you a freedom of expression few other activities can. This is a great outlet for self-expression.

A whole new level of happiness: McMaster University did a research and found that playing music makes people happy.  The research discovered that musicians tend to smile more.

An ability to process many things at once: This is an advantage that most musicians have over non-musicians. Because playing music forces people to process multiple senses at once, they often have superior multisensory skills when compared to others.

You gain a whole new community of friends: There is a great community of Kalimba players all over the world, and I assure you that we are all passionate about this instrument. Becoming a Kalimba player is like gaining a whole band of new friends who love the same thing that you do. In the next chapter, I will share some resources that will help you fall in love even more with the Kalimba.

A sense of accomplishment: Yes, you did it. You stuck by it even when it seemed you couldn’t. Because the process of learning how to play an instrument can sometimes by overwhelming, being able to listen to yourself play the Kalimba after hours of practicing directly results in a sense of pride and achievement.

**CHAPTER 6**

**SOME RESOURCES TO EXPAND YOUR LEARNING**

In this chapter, I will take you through some resources to expand your Kalimba learning. I share these resources under four categories; blogs, groups, books, songs.

Blogs

Kalimba Magic – Kalimbamagic.com

This blog has the aim of inspiring the community of Kalimba players worldwide. It offers expert advice on everything Kalimba, from your choice of the instrument to how you can play it, and to what instrument is best for you.

It is a very comprehensive blog that covers everything (and by everything, I mean everything) there is to know about the Kalimba, You can also find links to others Kalimba resources from here.

Kalimba Shop – kalimbashop.com

While the primary aim of this blog is to support the sales of Kalimba, there is good information about the origin of Kalimba on this blog, as well as information on how to play this incredible instrument.

Les kalimbas du Ventoux - http://english-kalimba.leskalimbasduventoux.com/

Les kalimbas du Ventoux is originally a small craft business dealing exclusively in the manufacture of Kalimbas. It created an e-shop in order to serve the growing needs of its customers. The blog now covers information about the Kalimba. There are also video tutorials of how to play the instrument on this blog.

Facebook groups

You can join these Facebook groups to commune with others who are Kalimba enthusiasts just like yourself!

Kalimba Instrument Lovers - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/36702419239>

All About Kalimba--- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/542736093086908>

Kalimba and Sansula Instrument Lovers - <https://web.facebook.com/groups/36702419239/>

Kalimba Club - <https://web.facebook.com/groups/512563525866144/>

A great place to learn new songs

While there are many YouTube tutorials on the Kalimba, I believe that Larry Maluma has the best YouTube tutorials.

He is an Australian-based Zambian reggae artist who left Zambia in 1985, and is now an accomplished musician, composer and singer. He sings in a combination of English and Zambian languages including Tonga, Nyanja, and Bemba.

He adopts styles that allow him to blend his own brand of roots music, and the resulting unique sound has put some of his songs at the top of the Zambian charts.

You can find some of his music through these links:

Under the Sea- <https://youtu.be/1FBNDrMLaos>

Imagine- <https://youtu.be/5pMfPrV1P3Y>

Pirates of the Caribbean - <https://youtu.be/4SB-hPfp2l0> (more advanced)

Amazon Books to help you

The Big Alto Kalimba Songbook: 100+ Songs for Kalimba in G (15 keys) Paperback – August 6, 2019

This book features more than 100 popular songs in easy arrangements for 15 key Hugh Tracey Alto Kalimba (mbira, marimba) in G tuning. This book features large notation and special Kalimba tablature to make playing as easy as possible. It also features tips on playing position, care and maintenance and tuning your Kalimba.

The Big Kalimba Songbook: 100+ Songs for Kalimba in C (10 and 17 key) Paperback – June 28, 2019

This collection of more than 100 famous songs is guaranteed to contain lots of popular favorites you’ll just love playing. It is written for the beginner and features easy arrangements, large notation and an extra line of Kalimba tablature to make playing as easy as possible. It also has short sections on tuning your Kalimba and the playing basics to get you playing as fast as possible. All songs have been arranged for easy playing on either a 10 key or a 17 key Kalimba (mbira, marimba) in C tuning.

Kalimba goes Classical: Melodies of the Great Masters for Kalimba in C Paperback – February 25, 2020

This book contains popular classical melodies, arranged for easy Kalimba in C (10 key and 17 key models). This was also written for the beginning player. It includes tips on tuning your Kalimba, the playing basics, Kalimba care and a short introduction to the basics of reading music.  
  
Featured songs include Air (Georg Frideric Handel), Andante grazioso (Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart), Barcarole (Jacques Offenbach), Bridal Chorus (Richard Wagner), Clair de la lune (Claude Debussy)and many more.

In conclusion

All I have done is share resources that I think will be beneficial to you. There is however, a whole world of other resources on the Kalimba out there. I encourage you to go explore, explore, and explore. You will be glad you did.

I am honored to welcome you to the family of Kalimba players.

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