

Music of West Africa

Music in West Africa has two main aspects: rhythm and melody. The rhythm is generally the most important part which might explain why dancing is inseparable from other parts of musical performance.



West Africa is a large place and is full of musical traditions but there are characteristics which define the music of the region.



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Rhythm: a repeated pattern

Polyrhythmic: two or more conflicting rhythms creating layers on top of each other.

To create these layers the use of percussion instruments is very important. Shakers, sticks and of course drums are used. A traditional instrument is called the balafon which is like a xylophone and is made of wooden bars which can be made from logs or bamboo laid across a frame. The player strikes the bars with a mallet or hammer to play a tune. The ball-like shapes you can see are gourds which are a vegetable that has been dried in the sun. They are hollow which helps the sound to amplify.



There are two main types of drums, the djembe and talking drum. Clapping and stepping are often used to create one or more layers of rhythm.

If there is a pattern of three beats over two, traditionally the feet are used to keep the main beat while the hands play the secondary beat on an instrument. This is where dance is inseparable from music.





Melody:

a simple tune

The melodies are intentionally simple because of the structure of West African songs. It is very common for the structure of a song to be 'call and response'. This means that the leader creates a melody (call) and everyone repeats it (response). The melody is not normally written down but passed on through oral tradition. This also applies to many of the rhythms used. They are also passed from generation to generation through oral tradition.

Dance: In West Africa, dance is as much a part of life as singing and drumming are. Traditional West African dances are still performed in Africa and around the world. West Africans perform dances for all kinds of occasions. They dance during rituals and during ceremonies that mark important events in people's lives. West Africans also perform dances to seek the help of spirits and to connect with dead ancestors. Dance movements often reflect the conditions people live in. Among forest-dwelling people, for example, dancers move as if they are finding their way through forest undergrowth. Some dancers wear elaborate masks that represent the spirits of traditional West African religion. For example, to ask the spirits for good hunting for their community, dancers may wear masks of wild animals and imitate their movements.





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Here is a drawing of a typical African mask. You can colour this in any way you like. The horns are like the animal horns on the photographs. Make it nice and colourful.

