Your notes

GCSE Music: revision notes

Rhythms of the World: Africa

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African drumming

- West African drum ensembles are led by a **master drummer**, who plays calls that the group answers, signals changes, and improvises.
- The other drummers play repeating **ostinato** patterns. Layered together, these make **polyrhythms** and **cross-rhythms**.
- A bell (such as the gankogui or agogô) often plays a **timeline** pattern that holds everyone together.
- The music is learned by ear and copied (the oral tradition), and it is part of everyday life: celebrations, ceremonies and storytelling.

The instruments

- **Djembe**: a goblet-shaped hand drum with three main sounds: bass (centre), tone (edge) and slap (sharp, at the edge).
- Dundun: a set of cylindrical bass drums played with sticks.
- **Talking drum**: an hourglass-shaped drum whose pitch changes when the player squeezes its strings, so it can copy speech.
- Shekere (a gourd shaker), kora (a 21-string harp) and balafon (a wooden xylophone) are also common.

African singing

- Call and response: a leader sings a line and the group answers.
- In South Africa, choral styles such as mbube and isicathamiya are sung **a cappella** (unaccompanied) in close harmony, with a lead singer and a low bass part. Ladysmith Black Mambazo is a famous group.
- A typical drumming piece: a signal from the **master drummer** starts it; layers are added one by one; the **master drummer** improvises over the patterns; the tempo may speed up; a signal ends it together.

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Key terms

Master drummer	The lead drummer, who plays calls, signals changes and improvises.
Ostinato	A short pattern repeated over and over.
Polyrhythm	Several different rhythms played at the same time.
Cross-rhythm	A rhythm that clashes against the main beat.
Timeline	A repeating bell pattern that holds the group together.
Djembe	A West African goblet-shaped hand drum.
Talking drum	An hourglass drum whose pitch changes when its strings are squeezed.
A cappella	Singing with no instruments.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What does the master drummer do?
2. What is a polyrhythm?
3. What is a timeline in African drumming?
4. Which three main sounds does a djembe make?
5. How does a talking drum change pitch?
6. What is a dundun?
7. How is African drumming traditionally learned?
8. What does a cappella mean?

Answers

1. Plays calls, signals changes and improvises
2. Several different rhythms played at the same time
3. A repeating bell pattern that holds the group together
4. Bass, tone and slap
5. The player squeezes the strings on its sides
6. A set of bass drums played with sticks
7. By ear, by listening and copying
8. Singing with no instruments

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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